

The Commercial Project



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Beyond the Façade— Negotiating Heritage in a Development Context

Words by Aimee O'Keefe • Photography by Nicole England, Timothy Kaye and Christopher Morrison

Urban architecture exists within an ever-evolving built ecosystem where development is a constant. Though vested in a seemingly apparent polarity, an open dialogue between the heritage and the contemporary may lead to a richness, greater depth and, ultimately, cohesion without uniformity – the challenge lies in how to preserve and renew with a sense of continuing momentum, creating a rich and layered environment.

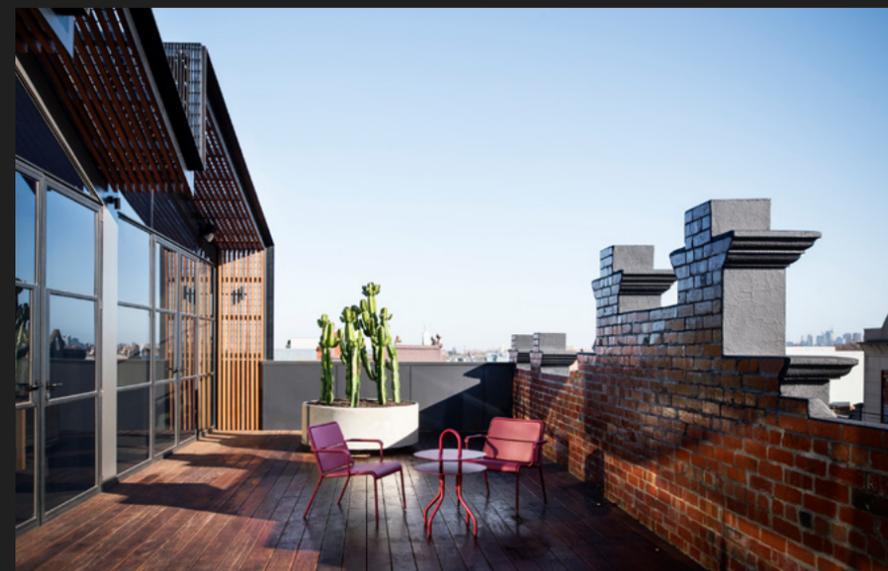
Recognising the importance of heritage buildings, their historic value and the story they tell of an area's past is integral to positively shaping the built environment of today – and tomorrow. Ben Roberston, Architect and Director at Melbourne-based architecture firm Tecture, reflects, "heritage buildings are the eye into the cultural history of our built environment. They enrich the urban fabric with a stronger narrative of what was and, when contrasted with contemporary dwellings, how we have evolved." David Burton, Director of Adelaide-based architecture firm Williams Burton Leopardi, agrees. "This narrative layer can add a wonderful sense of place and embed a feeling within a space that maintains the original character."

Architecture sits within a broader context that values familiarity on the one hand and novelty on the other. Thus the crafted detail of older buildings and the feelings of comfort and nostalgia they evoke are not to be underestimated. For Tim Jackson, Director of Melbourne-based architecture, interior and urban design studio Jackson Clements Burrows Architects, "heritage buildings contribute to the complexity and depth of meaning that built form brings to any given context." Therefore, central to negotiating heritage in a development context is a considered design approach that identifies, interprets and sustains. Indeed, David points out that "a heritage building adds a layer of richness and texture that can otherwise be costly to achieve from new."



For example, Williams Burton Leopardi's own top-floor studio in Adelaide eloquently realises the historical value of the Darling Building, a heritage-listed 1916 building the studio has thoughtfully rejuvenated. Many of the aged and patinaed virtues of the building are kept, as well as the original timber flooring. The walls are painted afresh with greys and chalky greens, colours inspired by the building's original palette.

While a building's heritage can make a powerful contribution to a project in development, navigating it can be undoubtedly complex. "In some instances, heritage overlays try to suggest formal outcomes that are overly restrictive and forgo a creative process that may actually be a celebration of difference," says Tim, reflecting that heritage overlays can be somewhat rigid rather than encouraging of innovative solutions. The planning process has to consider what constitutes an appropriate development within a heritage context, taking the cohesion of scale, form and materials into account. "It is the architects' role to find the balance of sympathetic yet empathetic – to undergo a strong analysis of the typology the proposal may connect or sit adjacent to and the principal design ethos of the era," argues Ben.



Make HQ by Tecture in Windsor, for example, demonstrates how the contemporary and historic can stand alone in their own right while their differences reinforce one another. The space holds on to existing granite and brick elements, just one of the ways materials merge the old and the new. As Ben comments, "the contemporary dwelling is used to amplify the heritage components."

When comparing the meeting of heritage and contemporary architecture to a conversation, it sometimes flows and feels easy or natural. At other times, it may feel forced, reductive and lacking depth and understanding. The latter may arise when a façadist approach is taken. Or, as Tim articulates, "if a new architectural proposition mimics a heritage proposal in an overly literal way, we believe such an approach undermines the past."

Ben offers a different perspective: "often, the most invasive merging of heritage and contemporary architecture is when the additions blur the line, making the viewer unable to differentiate, without knowledge, what is original fabric and what is imitation," he says.

However, the heritage environment can accommodate a rich variety of interpretations and expressions when projects are deeply considered. "Heritage buildings can enhance any new architectural proposition by forming a narrative that understands context as an opportunity for renewal by recognising the past," says Tim. When heritage is maintained in its most authentic sense, the meeting of heritage and contemporary can be seamless, without resulting in pastiche or artifice.

High Street Office by Jackson Clements Burrows Architects is one such example. Designed as a family business headquarters, the alter-

ation and addition to an existing heritage façade on Armadale's High Street, in Melbourne, responds to the street's heritage context. A roof terrace with a new roofline responds to the sawtooth profile reminiscent of traditional warehouses of the era. The original brick front is maintained, and the recessed additional level ensures the original building is preserved as a prominent feature on the street. Contemporary counterparts include opening up the existing plan and the inclusion of glass panels on the roof, also welcoming light inwards.

Ultimately, as architecture navigates preservation with contemporary architectural expression, it should be a case of dialogue – one that aims to achieve balance and cohesion, rather than a case of polarity. "Buildings that can have conversations with each other, rather than shouting at each other, layer a sense of calm and wellbeing," says David. With an open discourse, this relationship is not a constraint but an opportunity, unlocking doors to creativity and enriching the built environment with character, spirit and a greater sense of place. David continues, "preserving and reimagining built form alongside new buildings that are empathetic to their context ensures much more satisfying and sustainable cities are produced."

Negotiating the inevitable need for development with the sensitivities and complexities of heritage may always be a vexed issue. Yet with a unique ability to integrate the past, present and future, successfully achieving a balance between the two nurtures a built environment that will not only be richer but will pave the way for creating the heritage of a sensitive, compassionate and empathetic future.