

## **Revisiting “Living History: The City of Newcastle as a Museum”**

**Revised version of paper presented by Dr Nancy Cushing, University of Newcastle, to Hunter Heritage Network Symposium, 30 September 2011.**

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When Sarah asked me to present at this Workshop, I had to think about what I could say. I am an historian of heritage and of Newcastle rather than a heritage practitioner or activist and could not report from the front lines. I know there are people in the audience today who are much better placed to do that. What I do is observe and reflect and that is what I propose to do in this paper. Specifically, I want to revisit the assertions I made in a paper I wrote back in the mid 1990s at the end of my doctoral studies on the history of Newcastle. As a resident of Cook’s Hill, I was a close observer of the heritage movement in Newcastle in those early post earthquake years. My paper, published in the *Public History Review* in their 1996/97 volume employed the conceit that Newcastle was a museum. I went through the various aspects of a museum – curatorship, collection, visitorship – and applied it to the city.

What I would like to do is offer a 15 year update on the points I made then. How has the past fared in Newcastle since 1996? Has heritage held its own, made great advances or suffered losses? I would like to acknowledge Ann Hardy for sharing her insider’s view with me and I would love to hear the views of others during the discussion.

In the article, I quoted the Group General Manager of BHP’s Rod and Bar Division as having said that Newcastle was in `slow, graceful decline` and while I didn’t totally agree with his perspective, I counted that as a positive for Newcastle as a museum – the limited scale lack

of new development allowed Newcastle to retain a built environment which provided a multisensory experience of the past.<sup>1</sup> Newcastle's cultural and economic marginality, I argued, allowed it to retain a larger presence of older buildings than was found in Australia's capital cities. The settlement at Newcastle was permanently established in 1804 but the convict huts, Government House and even the impressive two-storey stone gaol were effaced long before a heritage movement began. The vernacular brick Toll Cottage behind Bolton Street dating from the late 1820s and buildings at the James Fletcher Hospital site are now the most venerable in the city. The 'Long Boom' led to a flurry of building in the 1880s and BHP propelled a construction boom in the 1920s. World War II was followed by a smaller burst of development. The Newcastle collection provides a record of stagnation punctuated by periods of rapid change. Since I wrote, another of these more dynamic cycles has occurred. Again it has been driven by economic factors as Newcastle restructured from production to reproduction, from steel to services, from being a place where things were made to a node in the twenty first century e-world where economies are based around information and consumption.

I suggested in the 1990s that the best way forward would be to forge relationships between the local past, present and possible futures. There is evidence of this happening in the current wave of renewal. Instead of sweeping the past away as was done in earlier eras, the traces of the past have come to be seen not only for their historical and cultural merits but as a resource and an asset to be capitalised upon.

Taking an example from my earlier paper, the Honeysuckle Development Corporation had been created by the state government only a few years earlier in 1992 to coordinate the redevelopment of 45 hectares of land along the inner harbour. The intention was to recycle

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Kirkby, quoted by Karen McGhee in "Steeled for the Future," Hunter Business

underutilised government land and heritage buildings thereby helping to rejuvenation of Newcastle to encourage future growth.<sup>2</sup> Honeysuckle had a long gestation, but enough is now in place to gain a sense of its implications for heritage. The project has done what it set out to do: it has created new spaces for work and leisure. This has come at some cost to relics of the previous use of the land for rail and water transport - three of five Lee Wharf buildings were demolished, for example. In buildings which survive, the Maritime Museum and the recently opened Newcastle Museum interpret aspects of Newcastle's history while others offer recreation and retail services. Honeysuckle has brought people to the inner harbour to live, work and play in a way which did not occur before. It brings a new focus to the built structures along the waterfront, the working harbour and to the many underutilised sites on the opposite shore, including the 1877 Carrington Hydraulic Power Station. Similarly, new residential unit blocks and hotels have been built in Newcastle East without dramatically changing the nature of the area. The hotel guests, new residents and visitors to the beach can enjoy the remaining streetscapes of terraced houses, the restored façade of the Newcastle Ocean Baths, and the restaurants and cafes in period buildings.

When I was writing in the 1990s, all of these older structures were, of course, already in place in Newcastle, but they were undervalued. Looking at accounts of Newcastle in the national media, it was a place associated with the past, often in a negative way. In 1992, *Australian Business Monthly* surprised itself by finding that Newcastle was Australia's most liveable city. With its advantages of benign climate, clean beaches, low municipal taxation and strong housing prices, Newcastle was christened a 'Provincial Paradise', but the reporter gave

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Supplement, *Newcastle Herald*, 19 June 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Honeysuckle Project Strategy and Business Plan, May 1993, 2.

her opinion that 'it will take some time for the city to lose its stigma'.<sup>3</sup> *Vogue Living* investigated Newcastle in its summer edition of 1993/94. 'Cinderella City' examined Newcastle's recovery from its 1989 earthquake.<sup>4</sup> Copiously illustrated, the article's photographs almost exclusively portrayed heritage buildings and their architectural details, including what it called an intact Victorian townscape crowned by the cathedral'. A *Bulletin* article in 1995 discussing 'Newcastle in the afterlife' (a reference to BHP's plans to curtail its Newcastle operations) included the author's own memories of driving through Newcastle in the 60s and 70s: 'a hamburger stopover and a look at petrol heads, rockers, and surfies, warriors all but extinct up to a decade earlier in the big cities'.<sup>5</sup> In this account and in creative works like Susan Geason's 1990 novel *Shaved Fish*, Newcastle was a place where nothing happens, a city caught in a time warp and a site for nostalgia where a lost world can be regained.

How times have changed. A new image of Newcastle has emerged, one in which the past plays a positive role rather than being a deadweight on the city. There could be few people in the room who don't know that in February of this year, Newcastle was named Lonely Planet's ninth hottest city to visit this year. Lonely Planet stated that "Today's new Newcastle is a unique blend of imagination, sophistication and laid-back surf culture."<sup>6</sup> In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the choice was greeted with surprise (Sydney had never made

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3 Annette Sampson, "Provincial Paradise," *Australian Business Monthly*, February 1992. This quote was taken from an offprint of the article sponsored by several Newcastle organisations. Copies were widely distributed in a campaign to promote Newcastle as "Australia's BEST city on Australia's BEST coast." The offprint does not include page numbers.

4 Jennifer Burns, "Cinderella City," *Vogue Living*, December 1993/January 1994, 24.

5 Damien Murphy, "Newcastle in the afterlife," *Bulletin*, 25 July 1995, 22 – 24.

6 Catherine LeNevez, "Newcastle, Australia," *Lonely Planets's Best in Travel 2011*, 126, <http://media.lonelyplanet.com/shop/pdfs/best-travel-2010.pdf>. Also in the top ten were

the list), but the Herald's travel writer (who hailed originally from Melbourne, it must be admitted) agreed that it was a buzzing, compact and highly liveable city with a vibrant culture of cafes, food and wine, surf, art, theatre, music and fashion. While an edgy industrial feel was praised, the story came back to heritage: "historic neighbourhoods such as Cooks Hill, The Junction and The Hill have graceful terraces, restored workers' cottages, lovely parks and smart boutiques." Elsewhere the writer praised the two historic sea baths, one with a restored art deco facade, and rejuvenated Newcastle East.<sup>7</sup> This new Newcastle is attractive in ways which the tired old Newcastle never was – the stigma has faded. And important in the mix is the appeal of the built heritage.

Of course, the survival of Novocastrian heritage was not merely at the whim of economic forces. As elsewhere, there are individuals and enterprises in Newcastle which are eager to replace old buildings and open spaces with structures which they argue are more suited to current needs, more up to date and progressive and which allow more intensive use available space. In the early 1990s, the task of opposing developments seemed to fall inordinately on the shoulders of a few individuals, people like Margaret Henry, Keith Parsons and Doug Lithgow. These stalwarts continue the good fight, but the number of organisations which has been formed since the 1990s is impressive and helps to some degree to spread the load. The Hunter Heritage Network itself dates from the late 1990s. The Coal River Working Party was formed not long afterward, with involvement from the University of Newcastle. The National Trust and the Northern Parks and Playgrounds Movement continue their long advocacy for heritage in Newcastle, as does the Royal Australian Institute of Architects' through

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New York City, Delhi, Tel Aviv and Wellington.

<sup>7</sup> Sheriden Rhodes, "Hot city, cool life," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 February 2011, <http://www.smh.com.au/travel/holiday-type/beach/hot-city-cool-life-20110218->

their listing of significant buildings of the twentieth century.

With or without this leadership, ordinary citizens become involved in protecting local heritage. I noted back in 1996 that the people of Newcastle were conscious of Newcastle as a dynamic urban area, but also see it in relation to the past. I still believe that there is a strong feeling for the past in Newcastle. Newcastle has not been a place of high in migration (the overseas born population in the Newcastle statistical division was 10% at the 2006 census compared with some 24% for the nation as a whole<sup>8</sup>) and while some young people pursue opportunities elsewhere, many return. This creates a very personal sense of history linked with long associations and a strong attachment to the fabric of what is called 'Our Town'. Like the residents of Darwin, the people of Newcastle had this feeling heightened by a natural disaster. Through the 1989 earthquake itself and the subsequent enthusiastic destruction of buildings deemed to be unsafe or unviable, Novocastrians saw their home transformed.<sup>9</sup> Landmarks that had seemed solid melted into air under the wreckers' ball and the demolition teams' sledge hammers. In less than a minute, the earthquake precipitated the same kind of devastation on Newcastle which decades of development had brought to Sydney, Melbourne and Perth.

A study into Australian attitudes about history conducted by historians at UTS in the late 1990s and early 2000s found that a large percentage of Australians engage in activities related to history on a regular basis. This included visiting museums, watching historical

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<sup>8</sup> See National Regional Profile: Newcastle (Statistical Subdivision) on Australian Bureau of Statistics website: <http://www.abs.gov.au/>.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Henry, "The Battle for Newcastle: Heritage and the Earthquake", in John Rickard and Peter Spearritt (eds), *Packaging the Past? Public Histories* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press and *Australian Historical Studies*, 1991).

documentaries on television and looking at old photographs with family and friends.<sup>10</sup> If the study had singled out Novocastrian informants, I suspect they would have found an even higher rate of participation. In 1996 I gave the examples of reading local history books, listening to history chat shows on the radio and reading the 'History in our Streets' column in the *Newcastle Herald*. Now I would add the success of the *Missing Years* book of press photographs of Newcastle in the 1930s and 40s by Greg and Sylvia Ray produced in 2010. Sales quickly exceeded 10 000 – at \$35 each – sales most academic historians could only dream about. After the first print run sold out, a second was produced with corrections and revisions suggested by readers. The settled population remembers as experience what is now history, and assesses it with a critical eye. A second volume is in production and the Rays have agreed to present the John Turner Memorial Lecture at City Hall on 12 October. Another example about which I have recently become aware as I cautiously venture onto Facebook is Newcastle Ghost tours. This enterprise is based around the supernatural but the setting is the past. Ghost tours both foster and reflect an interest in historic events, people and places. Mentioning Facebook brings up the internet as an entirely new way for historical communities of interest to communicate and share information. The work of Gianni Digravio and his staff in the University Archives is exemplary in making images and documents available and offering informed commentary on them, while sites linked with community groups such as the Newcastle Industrial Heritage Association formed in May 2000 promote the role that all industries have played in Australia's development and to aid the conservation of the Newcastle region's industrial

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<sup>10</sup> Heather Goodall, Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton. *Australians and the Past: A National Study into the ways Australians learn about, value and act on their history*. Publications listed at:

heritage.11

This historically aware population shares an appreciation of Newcastle's low rise form and believe that its aging building stock contributes to its character. They might not chain themselves to a fig tree (and some would), but overall they oppose changes that would make Newcastle more like the capital cities or coastal tourist centres. The Gold Coast is held up as a nightmare future for Newcastle, a shift from the gritty reality of the workers' city to superficiality and pretence. This does not always mean privileging the physical traces of the past, of course. Many people also speak up for continuity in terms of the economic base and see built heritage as potentially in conflict with ensuring employment into the future. When I was writing the article, the fertiliser plants by Greenleaf and ICI (now Orica) on Kooragang Island were only proposals – many welcomed them as creating jobs and would have seen them as continuing a heritage of processing industries. BHP's announced intention of selling off 100 hectares of surplus land from the steelworks site to encourage the development of a modern industrial park and the purchase of blocks by Austral Bricks and High Tensile Steel and Bolt was then met with general approval, even relief. Conservation is viewed not in the limited terms of protecting bricks and mortar or demonstrations of superseded technology, but in protecting the economy which produced both the built form and the community which is Newcastle.

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<http://datasearch2.uts.edu.au/fass/research/projects/detail.cfm?projectId=1998001086>  
11 University of Newcastle Cultural Collections  
<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/library/our-libraries/cultural-collections/>; Newcastle Industrial Heritage Association  
<http://www.niha.org.au/>.

This preference for continuity over dramatic change has had a real impact on how Newcastle has developed since the 1990s. In the mid 1990s, there was a proposal for a restaurant in the gunners' cottage in King Edward Park which could not get through community opposition.<sup>12</sup> Resident action has secured public inquiries which have reduced the height and bulk of proposed developments or led to them not being built. In 2008, the height limits and maximum building size set in the new Local Environment Plan for the City Centre were significantly reduced in response to a wave of opposition. That same year, a proposal to site a restaurant and accommodation on Nobbys was controversially rejected by Peter Garrett, the federal minister for Environment, Heritage and the Arts. This was later partially reversed but the restrictions put in place meant that it did not go ahead, although there are plans to open access to the lighthouse in the Newcastle Coastal Revitalisation Masterplan (2010).<sup>13</sup>

It is one thing to save heritage items from immediate harm, but quite another to ensure their survival into the future. The message that old buildings must be used to be protected is an important one but one over which communities often have little control. The most extreme recent case of this is the oldest of Newcastle institutions, the Royal Newcastle Hospital, most of which has disappeared although its name, story and some physical fragments were built into the hotel and residential development which replaced it. Perhaps the most pathetic saga is that of the Newcastle Post Office, sold off by Australia Post to a private company in 2003, DA approved for a bar and function centre in 2006 and purchased by the NSW State government in 2010.<sup>14</sup> Work has begun on remediation of

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<sup>12</sup> See Jane Worthington, "The fight for the hill," *Newcastle Herald*, 19 August 1995.

<sup>13</sup> *Newcastle Coastal Revitalisation Strategy Masterplan Report*, [http://www.newcastle.nsw.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/123157/Newcastle\\_Coastal\\_Revitalisation\\_Strategy\\_Masterplan\\_Report\\_web\\_version.pdf](http://www.newcastle.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/123157/Newcastle_Coastal_Revitalisation_Strategy_Masterplan_Report_web_version.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> NSW Crown Lands, Newcastle Post Office,

the structure and a scoping study was submitted a year ago with recommendations for how the Post Office building could be used for commercial, retail, hospitality or arts uses, on a long term lease. Depending on one's perspective, the long neglect of the Post Office with its state heritage listing could be counted as a crisis in heritage protection but the purchase of the building by the state government suggests that ultimately, heritage did count for something and this iconic building was not allowed to molder into dust. It can rejoin the three colonial era sandstone buildings on the same block which are now run as the Lock Up Cultural Centre, a mixed use cultural and exhibition space sponsored by the Council, Arts NSW, TAFE and the University. The reuse of the Honeysuckle Railway Workshops by the Newcastle Museum can be seen as a success story, but the move left another heritage building, Wood Bros Brewery, vacant. It is disheartening in this respect that the Newcastle court function is to be moved in 2015 from the current 1890 building to a new nine storey court building at Hunter and Burwood streets, on the site of the New Frederick Ash building next to the City Hall. This proposal is based around the demolition of the distinctive 1925 Frederick Ash warehouse but also leaves the courthouse with a heritage listing and no obvious function. The movement of the courts places under threat dozens of other buildings currently occupied by lawyers and others who are likely to relocate to be close to the new courthouse.

New purposes must be found for these buildings and others or they remain vulnerable. This imperative is becoming more readily met as entrepreneurs come to recognise the attractions of heritage. While they may initially propose to exceed height restrictions and leave only a façade to represent the previous structure on the site, their aims are often tempered in

the face of council restrictions and public protest – and even by their own recognition that there is economic value in the patina of the past. The result is 1890s warehouses, 1920s office buildings and 1940s wool stores of the inner city being converted into cafes, restaurants, flats, reception centres and gymnasia. In many cases, names of buildings which are replaced or partially recycled are used for the new developments: the Metro apartments on the site of the Metropolitan Hotel across from Newcastle Station, the Menkens Apartments on Scott Street for original architect of the warehouses in which they were constructed (omitting the Newcastle Hotel which was demolished for part of the development), the Royal for the apartments which replaced the Royal Newcastle Hospital. The developers' vision is of a Newcastle that becomes attractive and competitive by moving away from the content of its past while retaining favoured elements of its form, and advancing towards a future based on the tertiary sector.

Even when private enterprise does not see such opportunities, Novocastrians have responded with positive action. Faced with the depressing prospect of numerous empty shop fronts along Hunter Street, Marcus Westbury, writer, festival director and television presenter, initiated the Renew Newcastle project to match artists, craftspeople, designers, cultural projects and community groups with vacant city spaces. Building owners are pleased to have the buildings maintained and that people and liveliness return to the CBD.<sup>15</sup> The affinity between the arts and heritage comes through in several recent exhibitions. In July and August last year, the Lock Up Cultural Centre hosted the “Brought to Light” exhibition which drew attention to three little known heritage sites in Newcastle.

“Tracing Site: Culture, identity, site and place”, an exhibit by artists associated with the University of Newcastle, opened at Lock Up before moving to the Newcastle Museum earlier this month. Attention to traces of the past by artists brings new visibility and awareness to Newcastle’s heritage.

Of course, the opinions of Newcastle’s citizenry and local developers are not the only factor in how heritage is managed in the city. They operate in a legislative and administrative context created by Australia’s three tiers of government. Most immediate is Newcastle City Council which runs the Newcastle Region Museum, Fort Scratchley and the Local Studies Collection in the Region Library, owns many heritage listed items and controls development. Newcastle has some 700 items listed on its Local Environmental Plan as well as six conservation areas between Newcastle East and Hamilton. While this offers some protection, it is far from assured and both the council and residents must be vigilant. The priority given to heritage varies over time. Many of the Councillors elected in 1995 had a firm commitment to preserving Newcastle's past, leading to criticism for slow decision making and for trying to prevent change. This council commissioned the city wide heritage study and archaeological management plan produced in 1997 which are still in use. The council has employed a heritage officer in the past but does not do so at present.

While some Councils are more activist than others, they are bound by state legislation. The first NSW Heritage Act was passed in 1977, allowing for Interim or Permanent Conservation Orders to be placed on buildings, generally in response to a threat. Two years later, the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act, 1979, put the onus on Councils to list items of

heritage in the Local Environment Plans and this was made obligatory in 1985. A State Heritage Register was developed from 1999 to list items of state level significance with a view to identifying such elements before they came under threat.<sup>16</sup> There are 37 items in Newcastle listed on the State heritage register. One of the most recent, and the first site to be listed under the current minister, was Christ Church Cathedral. Also newly listed is the James Fletcher Hospital site. It seems extraordinary that these prominent sites could have remained without such protection for so long and the absence of a listing allowed such actions as the demolition of Kirkwood House at James Fletcher site incorporating elements of the first Anglican rectory in Newcastle in 2008.

According to an older brochure on the NSW Heritage office website, listing on the State Heritage Register controls activities such as alteration, damage, demolition and development.<sup>17</sup> I believed this when I wrote my paper all of those years ago, but under the 2009 amendments to the Heritage Act, heritage protection seemed to be watered down while economic factors were allowed more weight. “Heritage Listing Explained: What it means for you”, a Heritage Office brochure revised in 2011, suggests that the features of listing were recognition – a mark of distinction which could be used in marketing for sale or of a business; a continued ability to change a place short of demolition; and lower rates and land tax.<sup>18</sup> The brochure listed as a myth: Myth 9: “Listed places cannot be bulldozed.”

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bszu.html#ixzz1b67mTuUS.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce Baskerville, *Heritage Listings in NSW, A brief history*, Sydney: NSW Heritage Office, 2000, [http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/docs/info\\_listinghistory.pdf](http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/docs/info_listinghistory.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> “Guide to the Heritage System,” Sydney: NSW Heritage Office, revised 2005, 4. [http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/docs/info\\_heritagesystem.pdf](http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/docs/info_heritagesystem.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> “Heritage listing explained: What it mean for you,” Sydney: Heritage Office of NSW, revised 2011, [http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/docs/references/HeritageListing2010FINAL\\_.pdf](http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/docs/references/HeritageListing2010FINAL_.pdf)

The amendments delivered more power over heritage listings to the Minister, reduced the size of the Heritage Council, and reduced the ability of councils to reject DAs on heritage grounds. These changes are in keeping with report of the federal Productivity Commission into Conservation of Historic Heritage Places in 2006 which found that insufficient account being taken of the costs of conserving heritage places when selecting places for listing and that owners should be able to appeal statutory listing on the grounds of cost. At the federal level Heritage no longer warrants mention in the name of a ministry but is now under the very broad umbrella of the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities. How these changes will play out in Newcastle remains to be seen.

I concluded my earlier paper by saying that Newcastle had a great collection, but that it was underinterpreted and listed specific instances. All of the shortcomings I noted have been addressed. There was then no house museum in Newcastle – the generous bequest of her house and its contents by Miss Hazel Porter to the National Trust and the hard work of numerous volunteers has changed that situation. Fort Scratchley was conserved between 2004 and 2008 by the federal government and transferred to the ownership of Newcastle Council. It now has a proper plan of management and is open to the public again through the efforts of committed volunteers. The Lock Up which was then primarily a museum is now a dynamic cultural centre. Newcastle Region Museum has been rehoused and updated and provides an engaging introduction to the city's human history. The Convict Lumber Yard and Stockade site has been interpreted since 1999. 'Newcastle's Famous Tram' was new then and it continues to provide regular guided tours of the city.<sup>28</sup>

Having followed the controversy over the disregard for Indigenous heritage at the KFC

site, I am embarrassed that my former self had no concerns with the total absence of Aboriginal heritage from the scene in the Newcastle of the 1990s. While still undervalued, Indigenous heritage is given attention in more recent listings such as the 2003 Coal River Precinct in Newcastle East and the current controversy shows that it has been added to the agenda of the heritage movement and many people in the public.

One of my criticisms of the time still stands. I was concerned then that while the real strength of the Newcastle collection was from the period of heavy industrialisation post 1910, buildings of the Victorian era were being privileged. I wrote then, “Debates about heritage focus almost exclusively on nineteenth century buildings, the rows of terraces and sandstone public buildings common to many cities, while Newcastle’s unique landscape of heavy industry received little attention. The high cultural value placed on the buildings of the Victorian era by the society at large renders those of the interwar period invisible.” As Peter Spearritt has written, industrial buildings are generally underrepresented because of the persistent belief that heritage should be pleasing, notable or intriguing rather than typical or representative.<sup>19</sup> It may also be that the local ubiquity of items from the interwar period further undermines the cultural value placed on them.

I speculated following David Lowenthal that part of what we value is the unattainability attached to the past, the sheer pastness of the past. While steel continued to be made, rolled and exported from Newcastle, the landscape of heavy industry was expected, necessary and unremarkable. I wondered whether Novocastrians might shift from a casual acceptance of smokestacks and saw tooth rooflines to a high valuation once production has ceased. A dozen years have now passed since the BHP closure and at this early date, I don’t see it happening. I

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Spearritt, “Money, Taste and Industrial Heritage,” in Rickard and Spearritt,

pointed then to the poppet head erected near the Museum on King Street as a sign that once disparaged signs of industry could be redeemed. That poppet head is now gone, as are eighteen buildings from the BHP site which were listed in the Newcastle LEP and now have the annotation “demolished”.<sup>20</sup>

The support for industrial heritage was not strong enough to save these iconic buildings – the blast furnace, rod mills, the Basic Oxygen System plant, the cycle sheds and so many others - what outside commentators said back in 1999 was the heart of Newcastle, what had made it what it was, long its largest employer and the determinant of its image in the rest of the country. BHP paid for a variety of commemorations of its time in Newcastle: large oral history projects were conducted before the closure and a series of books based on them published, films were made of the site and the workers, the Muster Point sculpture and the BHP Gallery, paid for by the company, in the Newcastle Museum. But studying the BHP site on Google Earth is a sobering exercise – it is a moonscape; more dramatic still is watching some of the structures brought down by controlled explosions on Youtube.<sup>21</sup> Every trace of the working lives, the lives lost, the industrial might, the national contribution, the environmental damage has been effaced except, as I predicted in a 1999 article, some administration buildings, and remnants of the No. 1 blast furnace.<sup>22</sup> A comparison between the sites listed as items of local heritage significance and those which appear in Barry Maitland and David Stafford’s 1997 book *Architecture Newcastle* is striking. While almost a third of the notable

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*Packaging the Past?*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> See New South Wales Heritage Database listings for Newcastle Local Government Area, [http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/07\\_subnav\\_04\\_1.cfm](http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/07_subnav_04_1.cfm).

<sup>21</sup> Nihanewcastle, Tribute to Men & Women of Steel, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0yS2zcVyb0&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0yS2zcVyb0&feature=player_embedded).

<sup>22</sup> Nancy Cushing, “Remembering BHP: Memory and Industrial Heritage,” *Workers Online*, 14 May 1999, [http://workers.labor.net.au/13/c\\_historicalfeature\\_bhp.html](http://workers.labor.net.au/13/c_historicalfeature_bhp.html).

buildings chosen from an architectural perspective date from WW2 or later, I was unable to identify any listed items from the past 70 years. The unmaking of the BHP site with the intention of reusing it for a container terminal or coal loader is further evidence that industrial heritage is a poor cousin of the gracious buildings of the Victorian, Edwardian and interwar periods.

I concluded my article on Newcastle as a museum by saying that I didn't really think the city should be regarded as such – that it would not be healthy for Newcastle to become consumed by the past. I suggested that a brighter possibility was the synthesis which can be created through creative use of the elements of the past for the benefit of the present and the future, as was then being done successfully by Fremantle. After fifteen years, on balance, I am very pleased with what has occurred. On my reckoning, there have been more gains than losses. As it moves into a post industrial era, the city has changed in ways which have revitalised many of its heritage places rather than burying them. The appreciation of the past had a good basis but has found ways to expand, through new groups, greater involvement from the arts and communication through the internet. The heritage protection system has worked to enable people to voice their concerns about threats to heritage, to enable governments to intervene to protect conservation values and to provide funding to maintain heritage buildings to a high standard. The future of the past looks bright in Newcastle because heritage is no longer a domain of fringe elements of society but a mainstream concern which is acknowledged as enriching a sense of place, of continuity and belonging.

