The Intangible Endowment of St Kilda's Pier Kiosk

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Abstract. In 2003 fire destroyed a famous Melbourne kiosk. The controversy regarding its possible reconstruction was addressed by a retrospective assessment of its social (intangible) and other heritage values. Thes values echoed those of both ancient and seaside pavilions: it was a place of musing, intimate meetings, and more boisterous gatherings. Its modest ornamental form, its big natural setting, and its affordable refreshment, were important for promenaders. It was determined that the spirit of the place could be transmitted by a high quality reconstruction, reinstatement of the cafe, and interpretation.

1. Background

Early one morning in September 2003 an historic, modest, timber kiosk at the end of the St Kilda pier went up in flames. The city of Melbourne awoke in disbelief. Situated in its most famous suburb, at the end of a pier that pierced deep into Port Phillip Bay, the 1904 timber pavilion was greatly loved by Melburnians. Its destruction triggered an unprecedented outpouring of public grief, and Victoria's Premier quickly announced that it ought be rebuilt.

This commitment was immediately welcomed by the great majority who jammed talkback radio, wrote to newspapers and were sought out for television vox pops. They were enthusiastically supported by the editors of all major newspapers. However a minority of Melburnians were uncomfortable with the idea of reconstruction, thinking it 'fake'. They recommended that it be replaced by a new pavilion of contemporary design. Passionate debates ensued, in the media, about the virtues of the historical and modern architecture, and in the heritage profession, about the validity of reconstruction.

In retrospect, these debates were essentially about authenticity: what was it that we had valued in the kiosk, and wanted either to 'conserve' (by rebuilding), or else to express anew in a contemporary building. The sudden destruction of the building had thrown some critical questions into sharp relief. Two were fundamental: 'What was the spirit, the essence, of the place that had been so important?', and

'how best to transmit this spirit: reconstruction, or contemporary design?'

2. Response to the Controversy

The site owner, Parks Victoria, acted promptly. So that the replacement structure should respond to the community's sense of loss, it determined firstly to define that loss. It commissioned the author to prepare a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) which would identify the Kiosk's historical, social, aesthetic and scientific significance (as per the Burra Charter). The CMP should also advise whether this significance could be recovered by rebuilding the structure (Moloney 2004).

The first task then was to identify the tangible and intangible values of the former place. Tangible values, identified and assessed in terms of the traditional 'aesthetic' (including architectural) and 'historical' criteria, had already been expressed in the citations that accompanied the different heritage listings for the Kiosk. But identification of social (intangible) values was rare in Australia. The Burra Charter had in fact been based on the identification of significance, including 'social' significance: the meaning that a place held to present generations. In practice however identification of social significance had proven very difficult, and had largely been ignored by the profession (Johnston 1994). It was usually thought superfluous, identification of architectural or historical values regarded as sufficient.

The CMP social survey essentially comprised a scrupulous survey of Melbourne media and internet chat commentaries, and interviews with dozens of St Kilda writers, artists, musicians and activists, who were assumed to be informed and articulate representatives of the local community.

Identifying the 'spirit' of the place, its social significance, added immense depth to an understanding of the historical form and purpose of the former Kiosk. Social values complemented and enhanced the aesthetic and historical values deeply. The tangible and intangible were integral.

3. A Grand Web Revealed.

The formal aesthetic qualities of the Kiosk – its Classical and Second Empire style with Oriental touches – had already been recognised. However the nature and importance of its *informal* aesthetic qualities, its relationship with its setting, really only became evident as the social

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investigation progressed. These values became exceedingly important to an articulation in the brief of the type and scale of any replacement building for the site.

The modest scale of the building, which terminated and fitted the pier 'perfectly', was raised repeatedly by respondents to the survey. It had been, probably since it was built, as a lovely ornamental backdrop to the 'timeless pleasure' of a walk along the pier.

While there was less explicit recognition of its cultural setting (its historic seaside precinct), its natural setting was widely appreciated. The Kiosk was described sitting, almost 'floating', serenely in a seascape, isolated from the cares of the city. It's much observed 'lightness' intimates a transcendence befitting its location on the frontier of civilisation. Legions of photographs and paintings depicted another aspect of the natural landscape: the kiosk anchoring a dramatic big sky, Melbourne's inimitable south-western weather quarter, often at sunset. (Situated on a meteorological knife-edge, Melbourne is influenced both by the vast hot continent to its north, and the vast Southern Ocean to its south. It is notorious for its mercurial weather.)

These aesthetic values resonated serendipitously with a history of which modern users of the Kiosk would not have been aware. In the Oriental strand of pavilion history an archetypal, perhaps quintessential, pavilion (known as *ti*, or *xie*, in China, and *jeongsa* in Korea) was a small open sided structure from which to contemplate nature, usually in a grand natural setting, sometimes built onto a lake. The persistence of this theme in China is evident in names such as 'Moon Viewing Pavilion', and 'Clouds Gathering Pavilion' (Zhu 2002). Such origins were unknowingly evoked by the editor of a Melbourne broadsheet, who noted the popularity of the Kiosk for quiet past-times, or simply, 'the kind of musing that is unloosed where-ever there is a rail to lean on and waves to look upon' (The Age 13/9/2008). The social value of the natural setting also resonates with the history of the St Kilda Pier Kiosk itself: in 1903 Francis Parer, a weather enthusiast, had conceived his kiosk as 'an observatory and a refreshment kiosk', providing visitors with daily weather charts and astronomical memoranda, as well as light repasts (Letter. V Lemme for Francis Parer to City of St Kilda, 25/9/1903).

Pavilions were also prominent in Chinese social life. Many were located on town, or property, boundaries, where guests would be farewelled, the occasions of many cherished memories. Other gatherings discussed philosophy, or the state of society, and participants enjoyed banquets, wine and music. Pavilions had names such as 'Harmonious Fragrance', 'Complete Rapport', or perhaps more

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honestly, 'Alone Sober Pavilion'. Similarly, many respondents remembered St Kilda's Kiosk as a place of family celebrations and gatherings of friends.

The social survey also contributed to a deeper appreciation of the Kiosk's more formal architectural qualities. Modest, approachable, with a 'graceful' silhouette, it was described as 'enchanting', 'noble', 'whimsical', 'timeless', 'almost surreal', and even 'like a wedding cake'. Observations that it was delightfully 'frivolous', or a 'fantasy' formed a link with its European antecedents, where such pavilions had become known as 'follies', whose sole purpose was to 'charm us effortlessly' (Dams and Zega 1995). The European word 'pavilion' derives from the words 'butterfly' and 'tent', which suggests a light, ornamental structure partly open to the outdoors. While its origins date back to classical antiquity, it had also been influenced by the legendary Twelve Pole Pavilion (a tent) of Timur, the great mediaeval conqueror of Central Asia, and the equally sumptuously embroidered pavilions of the Persians in the same period. By the seventeenth century, sequestered away as eye-catchers in the landscaped estates of the aristocracy, European pavilions had assumed the eccentric or didactic predilections of their owners and the exotic forms of their times, for example classical, mediaeval, rustic, and oriental (in the successive fashions of Turquerie, Chinoisserie, Mogul and Moor). Notable pavilions, such as those in Villa d'Este garden, the Bosquet de Domes in Versailles ('the ultimate party tents'), the Boycott Pavilions at Stowe, and the Pagoda at Bennelles, display some fundamental features of the St Kilda Kiosk design, including its layered form and its classical and oriental motifs.

Thus the architectural features of the Kiosk design that had been identified as so pleasing to Melburnians had been honed over centuries. This form would need to be taken seriously in any brief for a new building.

4. Local Webs Revealed.

The Kiosk had a chequered history after its appearance as the first 'continental style' pier pavilion in Australia.

It had been conceived by Francis Parer, of an accomplished Catalonian family, at the same time as Italian renaissance man Carlo Catani was implementing his vision of St Kilda as a cosmopolitan open-air resort in the Riviera style, with garden promenades, open lawns, stately palms, ornamental bridges, elevating statuary, and cafés. This contrasted, and co-existed, with, the contemporary development of foreshore light amusements, epitomised by Luna Park, developed by

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American entrepreneurs and modelled on Coney Island. At the same time St Kilda was a hub of the developing Australian cult of swimming, at first in the enclosed Sea Baths, festooned with mogul domes in the manner of an English pleasure pier, and then in the Sea Bathing Pavilions (changing sheds) which represented the achievement of mixed, open sea bathing in the art-deco era. At the same time the Kiosk was deemed a suitable backdrop for the arrival of international dignitaries, who were landed specially on St Kilda Pier.

As the twentieth century progressed promenading declined as electronic entertainment (radio, records, and cinema) burst onto the scene, and as motor cars sped holiday-makers away to more pristine, distant, beaches. The Kiosk remained an emblem of St Kilda, but like the rest of the suburb, it became ragged. Its survival from the mid twentieth century is attributable to the unorthodox, slightly vaudevillian enterprise of its new managers, the Kerby family. They tried anything to make the place pay. They laid a dance floor on which American soldiers showed local girls how to jitterbug, kept performing seals, concocted their own fruit drinks and an (illegal) 'beer on the pier', and secretly kept sheep, said to be part of university research, in a shipping container on the adjacent deck.

By this time the Kiosk had sprouted many additions and modifications to accommodate its residents, and was essentially an ice-cream and cheap take-away shop. Its clientelle had changed radically too, notably the bohemian set who had taken up residence in St Kilda, which was then offering the cheapest lodgings in Melbourne. They were the likely genesis of the spate of journal and newspaper articles on the quaint building and its occupants that suddenly appeared in the 1980s. By this time represented in the media and local government, they tried unsuccessfully to defend the Kerbys tenancy when, in line with the gentrification of St Kilda and revival of promenading, plans for the Kiosk's restoration were eventually set in place. Its many accretions were stripped, cladding was renewed, and the building restored to near its original form.

The fortunes, and users, of the Kiosk had changed greatly over its 100 year history. Most of the people who had grieved its passing in 2003 had never known it before its restoration and reinstatement as a popular café in the 1980s. But some who could recount its colourful bohemian or its wartime histories were given enraptured hearings on talkback radio, and were sought out by newspapers. A few local historians, in their briefly elevated standing, articulated its early life in Melbourne's Edwardian playground.

In short, people were talking about, and listening to, histories of their city. This was rare in Melbourne, and in itself an expression of

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the social significance of the Kiosk. Out of it came agreement that the Kiosk was 'part of Melbourne', and an irresistable momentum for its reconstruction. There were even calls to reinstall the Kerbys' 'giant telescope' in the rebuilt Kiosk.

Probing the social value more deeply also revealed the overwhelming view that the affordable café function was a key part of the its popularity, and that a reconstructed Kiosk should remain a casual and accessible place of refreshment. Again, serendipitously, the modern popularity of the place equated to the reinstatement of its original function, seemingly another reason to rebuild its original form.

5. The Public and Professional Debates

While the CMP identified support for reconstruction running at about 4 to 1, there was not however complete concord, and the passionate public debate continued. There were slights about 'nostalgia' on the one hand, and some of the 'contemporary design' lobby were driven to psychosocial analysis in an attempt to understand the pathology of the heritage impulse, and modern society's crisis of confidence. On the other hand there was lots of populist criticism of modern architecture, and the occasional caustic reference to architectural hubris.

Most thought that only an international 'masterpiece' would be a suitable replacement for the spectacularly successful building that had been snatched from them. But numerous 'rebuilders' declared that there were any number of new city development sites at which the architects could build a dazzling modern masterpiece (leaving unspoken an insinuation that such had not materialised thus far).

The debate in the heritage profession had a different focus: the question of whether the significance of the place could be legitimately recovered by a reconstruction. While there was in the heritage charters a presumption against reconstruction, the possibility was also allowed if it did not rely on conjecture.

Traditional heritage practitioners, fixed on the authenticity of fabric, had raised the spectre of mock historicism, citing the pseudo Edwardian housing that was spreading across the outer suburbs, without bothering to distinguish an authentic reconstruction of an extensively documented building from the inaccurate featurism of neo period-housing (*The Age*, 30/6/2004). Similarly the CMP's 'Proustian' documentation of the social significance of the Kiosk was derided.

The new ways prevailed however. A significant majority of heritage professionals thought reconstruction valid. Time had moved on since the Venice Charter, and issues of history and associations, of processes and meaning, were restlessly struggling to the surface.

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Successful community heritage activism, the rise of post-modern relativism, and Asian heritage philosophy and practice had made their presence felt. Even in Western heritage practice fabric no longer enjoyed the absolute reverence that it had had in the past. The changing perspectives were formalised in the Nara Document, which recognised that fabric was only one basis of authenticity amongst a suite of others, including form and design, use and function, location and setting, and spirit and feeling (Moloney 2004).

This ponderous turning around of *SS Heritage* coincided with a tide of popular support. The Kiosk had been a place with intense personal associations. This small building had been a casual rendezvous for friends; the backdrop of many a romantic walk at sunset; the scene of special family celebrations; a precious place of quiet, to read or muse; and for many a place to write, or paint, or photograph. 'Heritage' had dramatically broken free of its traditional guardian, the heritage architect, to become personalised and engaged, to encompass the relationship of people to a place, a landscape, their culture and their history.

6. The Resolution

The Kiosk CMP found that the 'design' of the place, and the integrity of its use and setting, had been of greater significance than its fabric. A variety of options, notably a good contemporary 'pavilion', designed with reference to the original structure and the other identified values, would likely recover (or transmit) the significance of the place to different extents. However the values, including the 'spirit' or social value of the place, were most likely to be recovered (transmitted) by a 'high quality' reconstruction.

As a result the original Kiosk was reconstructed, on its original footprint, with a small, visually non-intrusive modern restaurant at the rear. The workmanship is of high quality, with necessary changes including the laying of a concrete slab base for the buildings (only), above a reconstructed timber pier. Accurate copies were cast of metalwork that could not be reused, and the corrugated roof and other flashings were now of durable copper. A few small modifications were required for the stairs to satisfy current building standards.

The owner currently has no plans to re-survey the users of the Kiosk to ascertain to what extent they believe the spirit of the original has been transmitted. It is likely to have been essentially successful, as the original form, the original location and setting, and the original use have all been virtually completely retained. (However the space allocated to the casual café use has been reduced to accommodate a

small restaurant, for reasons of economic viability.) The operator reports that some who were opposed to the reconstruction still make their views known, although others seem mollified by the faithfulness of the design and the quality of the construction. High quality interpretation panels also clarify that the present building is a reconstruction.

7. Discussion

Importantly, it was determined that the values, including the 'spirit', of the Kiosk could be transmitted only after they had been first identified and documented. The CMP subsequently found that the heritage values of the place, including its social values and 'spirit', could best be transmitted by a high quality reconstruction of the original building, by reinstatement of its original function and use, and by interpretation of the new building.

The custodians and mediators of the place probably accomplished both the transmission and the transformation of the spirit of the Kiosk. The owner promptly instigated a genuine and competent process to determine how best to transform the spirit. But the project also provided the occasion to review operational factors. While suggestions that the footprint of the buildings should be enlarged to increase the café's viability and efficiency were resisted (in response to the identified value of a modest building and the setting), the inexpensive café has been reduced in size to accommodate the incorporation of a small restaurant, for financial reasons.

In the case of the St Kilda Kiosk, the users articulated what was important about the place, and the owner listened, so both contributed to the transmission of its spirit. However, during the previous major change to the Kiosk (its 1980s restoration), the owner did not listen to the articulate local voices, who argued to keep the place and its operators as they were. This was an 'appropriation' and 'cultural recontextualisation', but it was successful, and in keeping with the original purpose of the place.

Transmission has no doubt transformed the spirit of the Kiosk, but perhaps only marginally. Only a small amount of fabric was retained (ornamental cast iron posts, and some exterior timber slabs that had been charred by the fire). This loss was most notable in terms of the patina and interior ephemera. Some very minor changes to the design were also necessary, and the modern workmanship is evident.

In regard to how this change affects authenticity, and whether authenticity can accommodate change, an observation by one of the respondents to the social survey, accomplished artist Jon Cattapan, is

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relevant. He observed that 'the contemporary milieu will always paint its authentic patina, and new meanings, on our historical landscape and buildings'.

In other words, change is inevitable, and can be authentic. But perhaps there are limits on authenticity. The experience of the Kiosk might suggest that it depends on whether the place (or perhaps the traditional custom) that is being handed along has been properly understood by the new generation. And so, is it really just a new 'patina' that is being conferred by the inheritors of the transmitted place, or is it a much more fundamental change?

The transmission of an authentic spirit of place should affect its inheritors, and its inheritors will inevitably affect the spirit. The case of the St Kilda Pier Kiosk, in which the present generation used and reacted to the place apparently in a similar manner as had occurred in similar places hundreds if not thousands of years beforehand, strongly suggests that the spirit of a place, and its inheritors, can been revitalised. This might apply however only, or especially, to those places, or customs, which are hundreds, or thousands of years old, and are transmitted in essentially their authentic form. Keeping some basics, for example the conventions of traditional design and location, is probably critical.

Similar experiences of revitalisation have been observed in traditional cultures, where it is said that sensitive individuals can regenerate a community's forgotten customs (Builth 2008).i The doing, the living of culture, the knowing and passing on of its spirit, is inseparable from our tangible heritage. 'We breathe meaning and purpose. We are part of the ongoing creation process, if we so choose.' (Magowan 2008)

8. Conclusion

The intangible values of the Kiosk appear to have been remarkably consistent historically. It has been a place of musing, writing, intimate meetings, and more boisterous social gatherings. With its grand setting, fine proportions and unique detailing, it has been a perennial favourite of artists. For promenaders it has provided an ornamental destination and accessible, casual refreshment.

The identification of social significance contributed greatly to our understanding of the spirit of the Kiosk, and enabled a clear understanding of the value of, and preference for, its reconstruction. It has contributed to the soul-searching within the heritage profession, and the broadening understanding of heritage practice. In its reconstructed, 'transmitted', form the Kiosk remains a fanciful and

accessible gathering place with deep local and international historical associations.
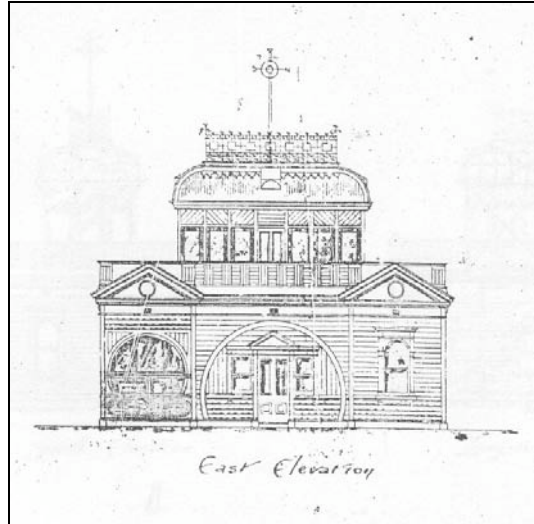

Figure 1. Public Works Department, 'Pavilion, St Kilda Pier'. c.1904.

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