

A case for the preservation of industrial worksites.

**‘It’s more than just the buildings; it’s what they did inside’: a case for the  
preservation of industrial worksites.**

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Dr Bobbie Oliver

School of Social Sciences and Asian Languages,

Curtin University of Technology

GPO BOX U1987

PERTH WA 6845, AUSTRALIA

[Bobbie.Oliver@curtin.edu.au](mailto:Bobbie.Oliver@curtin.edu.au)

Phone: 9266 3215

Fax: 9266 3166

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### Abstract

Industrial worksites are not usually beautiful landscapes. Once closed, many are quickly demolished and the land reclaimed for more aesthetic purposes. Yet to those who worked there, that place is vested with a particular significance. In recent decades, societies around the world have come to recognize the significance of 'place' to individuals and to groups. Using the example of the Western Australian Government Railway [WAGR] Workshops at Midland, now a State heritage icon, this paper argues that there is significant social and historical value in retaining and re-using industrial sites, appropriately and sensitively interpreting their past. As demonstrated by this paper's title, workshop sites signify thousands of working people, shaping their lives and defining their identity. Taking Aplin's (2002) observation that European Gothic cathedrals are part the collective heritage of western civilization, this paper argues that 'cathedrals of industry' should be similarly treasured. The Midland Workshops, therefore, is part of Perth's, Western Australia's, and Australia's collective heritage.

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## Introduction

Industrial worksites are not everyone's idea of a beautiful landscape, which is why, once they cease to function, they are usually demolished and the land reclaimed for more aesthetic purposes. The East Perth (WA) redevelopment is one example of a landscape from which the industrial past has been obliterated (Gregory, 2008). Yet to those who worked there, that place is vested with a particular significance. In recent decades, societies around the world have come to recognize the significance of 'place' to individuals and to groups. The *Burra Charter* states: 'Many places are important to us because they tell us about who we are and the past that has formed us'.

Using the example of the Western Australian Government Railway [WAGR] Workshops, located in the Perth suburb of Midland – since 2004 a State Heritage icon – this paper argues that there is significant social and historical value in retaining and re-using industrial sites, while appropriately and sensitively interpreting their past. Industrial sites often contain substantial brick buildings, exemplified by the three main blocks at Midland, and the sites are testimony to an era when thousands of workers produced manufactured goods for domestic use and export. In the pre-diesel era, the Workshops manufactured all the components for an entire state railway system, including locomotives and rolling stock.

The paper's title is taken from a song that local musician and folk singer, Bernard Carney, composed for the Workshops History Project in 2000: 'We talk about our heritage, it cannot be denied. It's more than just the buildings; it's what they did inside' (Carney, 2000). Major workshop sites signify thousands of working people, shaping their lives and defining who individuals were. Arguably, significant industrial heritage might be retained on the grounds that it is 'collective heritage'. Aplin (2002:7-10) asks whether a European Gothic cathedral is part of the collective

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heritage of western civilisation? Should ‘cathedrals of industry’ be similarly treasured? Are the Midland Workshops, therefore, part of Perth’s, Western Australia’s, or even Australia’s collective heritage?

This paper commences with an assessment of the significance of the Midland Workshops in Western Australia’s industrial history. It then discusses the closure of the Workshops, and the research project established in 1998 to record the site’s history. Using examples of workshop interpretation from elsewhere in Australia and the United Kingdom, the paper compares these with what has been done at Midland up to 2009. It concludes that the Midland Workshops are of sufficient social and industrial value to be regarded as a part of Perth’s, Western Australia’s, and Australia’s ‘collective heritage’, and suggests that major industrial sites in other locations could be imbued with similar significance.

Significance.

Article 6 of the *Burra Charter* states that ‘Understanding the *cultural significance* of a place is the first major stage of a conservation project’ (ICOMOS, 1992, 34). The Western Australian Government Railway Workshops were moved from the port of Fremantle to a 260-acre (105.2 hectare) site at Midland Junction, 19 kilometres east of Perth, in 1904. Midland was the location of the junction of the private railways of the Midland Railway Company and the Canning Timber Company with the government railway system. Already the site of several government instrumentalities and small industries, Midland enjoyed a brief boom after the Government Workshops was established, after which the population settled at around 5,000 for much of the first half of the twentieth century. Further commercial and industrial development occurred in the 1950s and ‘60s, but Midland was not a desirable residential address

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because of the presence of heavy industry and its image as a 'railway town' (Highfield, 2006, 39-57). For much of its 90-year history (1904 to 1994) the Midland WAGR Workshops was the largest industrial workshops in Western Australia, with a workforce of between 1,000 and 3,500, including up to 500 trades apprentices. Employees proudly boasted that the Workshops manufactured everything required to maintain and run the State's rail network. As rail historian Philippa Rogers (2006, 37) has stated:

From the smallest split pin to the largest locomotive, from the window blinds to the full carriage, from a dogspike to a compound turnout, from a brake block to a modern, aluminium wagon ... from a cupboard to a fully equipped trainmen's barracks and so much more, the Midland Workshops were an integral part of the WAGR rail system ... Without the railway system, the Workshops would have had little reason for being, but *without the Workshops, the railway system could not have existed* (my emphasis).

Apart from manufacturing and repairing railway engines and rolling stock, the Workshops made munitions during World War II (Batterham, 2006, 128-143). A thorough apprenticeship training equipped graduating tradesmen for work in many industries around Australia and beyond, including the railways, power stations, carpentry, marine engineering, mining and lecturing in Technical Colleges. Three former junior workers rose through the ranks to become Chief Mechanical Engineer, thus demonstrating the value the WAGR placed on shop floor training as a basis for an engineering career. Many recalled their apprenticeship days with pride (Oliver 2006, 66-67). By the 1980s, however, changes in technology combined with the increased use of road transport, and privatization, led to a reduction in the workforce and the Workshops closed in March 1994 (Fox, 2006, 81-2; Elliott, 2006, 235-42).

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Since 2000, the Workshops site has been managed by the Midland Redevelopment Authority (MRA), a government authority, which has a 15-year tenure to redevelop the area. The site has been assessed by the Heritage Council of Western Australia as 'represent[ing] the most significant example of an early twentieth century railway Workshop in Australia'; it was 'the most substantial industrial complex established by the WA Government at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century'; the Workshops 'played a major role in the economy, development and daily life of Western Australians for 90 years, including training thousands of apprentices in a wide range of trades'; many of the buildings have individual value, and the site 'contains a wide range of significant machinery, much of which remains operable, and collections of tools, equipment, furniture and fittings' (cited in Heritage and Conservation Professionals, 2001, Strategy Paper 1).

Eight buildings, all constructed by 1904, were identified as having exceptional heritage significance: the three main blocks, and additions such as the flagpole and the Peace Memorial; the Chief Mechanical Engineer's Office, (currently occupied by Swan TAFE); the Railway Institute Building, (currently occupied by the MRA); the Pattern Shop; the Power House, and the Old Tarpaulin Shop. Other buildings, including the Foundry and the Gate Keeper's Office (built 1924), are regarded as being of 'considerable significance'. In addition, the heritage architects recommended the Pattern Shop, the Power House, the Gatekeeper's Office and Block 1 for reuse as a Rail Heritage Centre (Heritage and Conservation Professionals, 2001, Strategy Papers 2 & 3).

Prior to this assessment, however, moves began to record the site's history. The Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Perth Branch (ASSLH), organized the site's first Open Day on 21 March 1999. It had taken months to obtain

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government permission to enter the site, with the authorities claiming that it was too dangerous. The ASSLH held a photographic exhibition in the former CME's Office and arranged strictly-supervised tours, conducted by former Workshops employees around parts of Blocks 1, 2 and 3. The restrictions included refusing people entry to the site if they were not wearing covered footwear; many disappointed people were turned away, as they were wearing sandals.<sup>i</sup>

At that first Open Day, the organizers expected a few hundred people; three thousand came. This pattern continued throughout the early 2000s, when the MRA held an annual Open Day, at which the ASSLH staged exhibitions of the work of the History project (discussed below) and signed up past employees of the Workshops for interviews. The site continued to attract and fascinate not only past employees but their children and grand children. In 2002, when Open Day was combined with Labor Premier Geoff Gallop opening the new Helena Street level crossing linking the Workshops site to the Midland city centre, an estimated 80,000 people came to the city centre and the Workshops (MRA, 2005).

### The Workshops History Project

From 1998, the Workshops was the subject of an extensive history project, begun by the ASSLH. The History Project was developed on seven principles. There would be collaboration between trained academic historians, union officials, and past employees. The interviews, ephemera, documents, and photographs collected would be lodged in archives, so as to be accessible to researchers. Appropriate collecting and documentation protocols would be established. Priority was given to workers' own stories, but the project aimed to educate the wider public about factory working conditions and processes, the skills required by trades people and the objects of their

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production, as well as social aspects of the lives of factory workers and their families. Although employing some paid staff, the project would depend upon volunteers, who would be adequately trained and supported in their tasks of interviewing, transcribing tapes, and collecting material. Thus the project would impart skills to members of the community. Lastly – and most importantly for the purposes of this particular paper – the project would be a vehicle for informed debate about the preservation of the site and of industrial heritage in general.

In 2000, Curtin University historians Patrick Bertola and Bobbie Oliver obtained an Australia Research Council [ARC] grant for \$80,000 over two years, matched with \$80,000 cash and in-kind from six industry partners.<sup>ii</sup> The Project employed a Manger, Ric McCracken, to contact past employees of the Workshops, and embark on a program of training volunteers. The Battye Library assisted with setting up collecting protocols and documentation for collecting and cataloguing taped interviews, photographs and private papers. Together with Murdoch media lecturers, Mia Lindgren and Brogan Bunt, and a further five industry partners added to the original six,<sup>iii</sup> Bertola and Oliver obtained a further grant in 2001, to collect more research material and to publish a major history and electronic resources about the Workshops.

By mid 2002, when the first grant was acquitted, the project had compiled a register of over 200 past employees who were willing to be interviewed. A survey form, filled out by the contributors, provided a source of information upon which to base relevant interview questions. McCracken's team of six volunteers proved to be excellent interviewers, transcribers and researchers. They undertook the major share of the 200 plus hours of taped interviews that were lodged with the Battye Library by the project's completion in December 2004. Interviewees also loaned or donated photographs, documents such as trade certificates and union books, and objects (tool boxes, a

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typewriter, 'foreigners' – objects that workers made 'unofficially' in the Workshops and secreted off the premises – sports shields, badges and so forth). These contributed to exhibitions on Workshops Open Days and in the Midland Library. The most successful, *Under the Lap; over the fence* exhibition of foreigners was staged at the 2004 Open Day (Harris, 2009, 7-9). These displays informed people about the project and disseminated in the community information about the people, the skills and processes of the Workshops. By mid 2009, the Project had produced archives of documents and photographs, oral history collections housed at the Battye and Midland Local History libraries, a collection of tools and other objects, a DVD (Lindgren, 2004), a web page (Bunt, 2004), a major researched history of the Workshops (Bertola & Oliver, 2006), which won the 2006 Premier's Literary Award for Western Australian History; two other published books (Ellis & Smyth, 2004; Harris, 2009) and numerous conference papers, chapters and electronic media (for example, Bunt, 2002; Oliver, 2003; Oliver & Reeves, 2003; Oliver, 2004, 2005, 2007; Bertola, 2009). Simone McGurk won the Best Radio Feature Award at Murdoch University's Radio and Film Awards, 2002, for her program on the visit of American singer Paul Robeson to the Midland Workshops in December 1960.

### Preserving the Site

To return to the last of project principles, or aims, mentioned above – viz. a vehicle for informed debate about the preservation of the site and of industrial heritage in general – was this aim also met? From the beginning of the second stage in February 2002, the project worked closely with the MRA, and in particular CEO Kieran Kinsella, to achieve the preservation and appropriate interpretation of the site, so that the industrial heritage would not be lost. The research and published outcomes of

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project were made available to the MRA as part of the partnership agreement, and were used in the Interpretive Centre from 2005.

The Project also undertook active lobbying, in February 2001, hosting a visit by Associate Professor Lucy Taksa, of the University of New South Wales, who addressed a public gathering of almost 100 people at the Midland Town Hall, and met with project volunteers and members of the MRA. In her address at Midland, Taksa (2001) warned:

Efforts to preserve our industrial past and our railway history and to celebrate them have been extremely limited. We have no equivalent to the Ironbridge Gorge museum in the United Kingdom or the Boot Cotton Mills at the Lowell Historical National Park in the United States. Nor do we have railway museums like the ones in York and Swindon in the United Kingdom ... While we still have our major railway workshops, at least in Midland, Sydney, Launceston and Ipswich, relatively few people have recognised their significance. At present all are facing varying degrees of redevelopment and reuse.

Taksa's recommendations for establishing a successful heritage centre at the Workshops served as useful guidelines at Midland, and they were in sync with the Project's principles. She advocated the active involvement of members of the community, particularly ex-employees, and their 'visible presence' in the site's redevelopment and reuse. The importance of this type of collaboration could not be over-emphasized in a project that depended upon strong community support. Past employees contributed an impressive range of skills and knowledge about process and machinery at the Workshops, as well as a fund of stories that re-created the human

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dimensions of working there. Taksa compared institutions such as the Altoona (Pennsylvania) Railroaders Memorial Museum, which concentrated on ‘collecting, preserving and interpreting *objects*’ (my emphasis), and Swindon’s STEAM Museum, which identifies the workers instead of celebrating their achievements in an anonymous, unacknowledged manner. The History Project aimed to guide any museum or heritage centre developed at Midland into the latter category.

A method employed at Swindon, a Wall of Names, has inspired similar projects at Eveleigh Workshops in Sydney and at Midland. The MRA enthusiastically embraced the idea of a Workers’ Wall, soon building a series of impressive brick and iron panels, standing in front of Block 1, on Yelverton Street. For a twenty-five dollar fee, past employees, or their relatives, could purchase a brick inscribed with the employee’s name, occupation and employment dates, which was then placed in one of the panels. The project was immediately popular with the public; however, this type of memorial should not be seen as a substitute for the appropriate restoration and use of buildings. The Workers’ Wall in isolation means very little; surrounded by buildings and objects that still retain evidence of their original use, it has great significance. The *Heritage Strategy* (Heritage and Conservation Professionals, 2001, Principles 3 and 6) states that:

- all site features of exceptional significance and considerable significance [should] be retained and preserved, and
- areas of exceptional or considerable significance should be retained as open space.

It should be possible to walk through the re-developed site and recognize the former use of the buildings; the ‘streetscape’ should not be significantly altered.

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Interpreting the site.

The site is a place of many stories. How can those stories be preserved in the public domain, so that they remain evident in the fabric and purposes of the site? A few examples are used here to demonstrate the point. An area in Block 3, where a row of lathes used to stand, was called 'Red Square'; active Communist Jack Marks and some fellow Party members occupied a group of lathes in full view of the foreman's office. There, during the lunch breaks, they used to disseminate Communist propaganda to anyone who was interested. Linked to the political activity of Red Square was the flagpole outside Block 1, famed as a gathering point for workers. Stop work meetings took place and political and industrial speeches were made at the flagpole, overlooked by the CME's office – referred to by the workers as 'bullshit castle'. In the minds of many employees, the flagpole was *the* focal point of the Workshops; while it had nothing to do with the technological processes of the site – it was built simply as a staff on which to fly the flag – it became central to issues of industrial management and conciliation and arbitration. It was also a space that the workers claimed for themselves – their gathering point where they exercised the rights won for them by their unions; where they defied the employer and discussed their grievances in his time, and where, in April 1993, the workers learned of the Workshops' closure. So, the flagpole and the space surrounding it have developed many layers of meaning over the years, and these should be conveyed in any future interpretation of the site. Thus the project's aim of letting the workers tell their own stories could be realised in an interpretation of the flagpole and its vicinity.

Taksa (2001) also recommended that historians, especially labour historians, should play a central role in the planning of a Heritage Centre, to ensure effective presentation and interpretation of the relationship between history and heritage. Other

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professionals have important roles to play, too. A State Rail Heritage Forum, hosted by the MRA on 8 June 2002, brought together key groups interested in the site from labour history, machinery preservation and railway heritage perspectives. Discussions at the Forum indicated the extent to which many groups wanted a rail heritage centre on the Workshops site; their preparedness to work together to achieve joint aims, and the need for a strategy, outlining feasibility and funding options, to put before the State Government. It was widely felt that there would never be a more propitious time for doing this, as the State branch of the Australian Labor Party had gained office the previous year, and the Gallop Government's attitudes to the site's preservation were positive – unlike those of its predecessor.

Late in 2002, the MRA funded a Concept Planning and Business Feasibility Study for a proposed State Rail Heritage Centre. The MRA formed a Steering Committee to put together a Tender Brief. Membership included representatives from the City of Swan, the Swan Chamber of Commerce, the WA Tourism Commission, the Australian Rail Heritage WA, the Heritage Council and the WA Museum, the ASSLH and the Workshops History Project. The MRA's (2003, 2) vision for the site was to 'create a distinctive place where educational, cultural and rail heritage facilities and activities co-exist and overlap in a unique way that recalls the past and looks to the future'. Farr's *Feasibility Study* (2003, 146-61) included a market analysis, an investigation of commercial opportunities and a Business Feasibility assessment. While Farr (2003, 118 ff) recommended devoting large sections of Blocks 1, 2 and 3 to a Rail Heritage Centre, at an estimated cost of \$24 million, he did not identify sources of potential funding. A second report by Sanmor Consulting (2006) disagreed with Farr's recommendation and advocated a quite different approach; however, a

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third report by Forrest and Spiers (2008) returned to the concept of a Rail Heritage Centre occupying some portion of Block 1.

In 2005, a Rail Heritage Interpretive Centre opened in the refurbished Time Keeper's Office at the site's main gate. The Centre contained displays, ephemera and electronic media generated by the Project to educate the general public and school parties about the people, the skills and the products of the Midland Government Railway Workshops (Bertola and Oliver, 2006, 13-14). The Centre was staffed by part-time paid Coordinator and volunteers, whose duties included conducting tours of portions of the site. The Interpretive Centre was intended to be only a temporary repository for a small portion of the collection, however. The planned Rail Heritage Centre would serve as a purpose-built repository for union records, private collections of papers and ephemera, initially gathered by the History Project, but which could have a provenance broader than the Workshops site. Displayed in situ, the creative artifacts of the workers would have greater significance and relevance than removed to another context. Not only had the project collected smaller items including a typewriter, a union ballot box, sporting shields, models of engines and of the Workshops site, and 'foreigners', but the Workshops also contained huge, beautifully crafted honour boards from the World Wars, awaiting restoration and adequate display, a room full of photographs, and many other objects.

Regrettably, after only four years of operation, the Centre closed at the end of March 2009. Site works had resulted in the cancellation of the popular heritage tours and the reduction of the hours that the Centre was open, and eventually forced closure. At the time of writing, a date has not been set for the Centre to re-open. Given the difficulties in maintaining what was a very modest museum display on site, one could easily be skeptical about the prospect of achieving a more comprehensive

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Rail Heritage Centre. Plans for a museum, which could hold large permanent displays, comprising railway rolling stock; temporary exhibitions, and an archive of material related to the project including the oral history collection, as recommended by Farr (2003) and Forrest and Spiers (2008) are presently stalled. The MRA's website (2009), however, still maintains that:

The Railway Workshops buildings will be adapted for residential and commercial uses, with Block 1 housing the proposed rail heritage centre. The Power House, Copper Shop and Pattern Shop will have heritage activities of interest to visitors and may include creative industries and educational opportunities. A walk trail links buildings, equipment and sites, interpreting the former use of the area and recognising the heritage value of the Workshops.

To succeed, however, the proposal requires a working partnership between government and private enterprise, and a capacity to generate income as well as spending it. It is here that the future of a Rail Heritage Centre on the Midland site remains the most vulnerable, some six years after the completion of Farr's report.

Opportunities exist for generating funds. Rail Heritage WA requires a site with the space to restore locomotives, rolling stock and fittings, and operate steam trains for tourists. The Machinery Preservation Society needs space to demonstrate machinery in operation as well as static displays. These and other organisations could train apprentices in the skills required for restoration, (copper smithing, moulding, upholstering, blacksmithing, carpentry, moulding, fitting and turning). Although the Foundry and the main Blocks still contain enormous machines in situ, not all of the skills practised on site require large spaces, and not all produce giant objects. Currently, the MRA has begun developing light industries in the Foundry building,

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including ‘glass blowers, sculptors, fine wood craftsmen and an assortment of creative initiatives’ (MRA, 2009). Craft training coincides with the desire expressed by unionists that the site would be used again for industry and skills training.

There are precedents. At the Ipswich Railway Workshops in 2003, about 80 past railways employees were occupied in such skills alongside the new railway museum. The Swindon STEAM Museum also contains a workshop, overlooked by a visitors’ viewing platform. The author visited the STEAM Museum in 2003 and found its displays to be closer to the History Project’s vision for Midland than any other ‘railway’ museum, including the National Rail Museum at York. The displays attempted to create the sights and sounds of the worksite. As the web page states (STEAM Museum, 2009):

Visitors will get a sense of the heat and grime experienced in the Foundry.

Then, passing through the Carriage Body Shop ... the sights and sounds of the Machine Shop are evoked. Lathes, drills and slotters were used to manufacture parts to the highest standards. Visitors complete this part of their journey in the Boiler Shop – where the noise endured by the workers meant that many were deaf by the age of 30 – and the Erecting Shop.

The Museum was refurbished with the assistance of English Heritage and the Swindon Borough Council’s Heritage Advisor, to ensure the retention of as much as possible of the original fabric of the buildings.

At Midland, too, there is the option of establishing partnerships between private industry, the local council, heritage groups such as the Rail Heritage WA and the Machinery Preservation Society, and educational institutions to develop training programmes in the classic railway trades – although the call for these will always be limited. Midland has the facilities to re-establish a workshop for the re-building of

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steam locomotives and accompanying rolling stock. Oliver and Reeves (2003, 5)

suggested that Midland could become:

...the national rail and tramway restoration workshops, a centre of excellence, undertaking work at Midland or in situ for the myriad of rail and tram societies that are now seeking to restore or refurbish engines and rolling stock for the community, tourist and heritage railways’.

This work would complement training programs. The Pattern Shop, for example, still contains hundreds of patterns for locomotive parts, and the site retains some of the largest cranes in the State. But the vision for Midland is not an industrial future. In June 2009 the possibility of establishing a Heritage Centre seemed more remote than it was in 2005, because Rail Heritage WA, which aimed to maintain and operate historic locomotives and rolling stock out of Block 1, has since been obliged to vacate the premises, and the Interpretive Centre was closed, as the Workshops site was still undergoing a lengthy clean up to remove pollutants from the soil as well as acres of asbestos roofing and other materials.

Conclusion.

The Midland Workshops in its heyday was the State’s largest employer; reputedly, almost everyone in Perth worked there, or was related to or knew someone who worked there. Its workforce included local councilors and future members of the State government. Its social, economic and political impact upon Western Australia has rightly been acknowledged with the 2004 announcement of the site as a heritage icon. Beyond this, the Workshops had a role in Australia’s national rail network. Internationally, as part of the British Empire’s industrial system, it was a destination for skilled British migrants until the 1970s (Bell, 1991; Oliver, 2004). Despite its

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relatively small size, Midland – as the State’s only railway workshops – should rank in importance alongside Swindon as a major industrial workplace and training site. Railway workshops, and the rail networks they served, are as much a part of the former British Empire’s collective heritage as are European cathedrals; to many people they would be imbued with far more meaning and significance. Yet, so few of these workshops have been retained and interpreted in any meaningful way. In Australia, while Ipswich and Launceston have successful rail museums in operation, this has not happened at Eveleigh (NSW). At Midland, a major difficulty in establishing a Rail Heritage Centre has been the inability or reluctance of those charged with the feasibility studies to provide realistic guidelines or imaginative suggestions for funding such an enterprise. It is to be hoped that the time for establishing a Rail Heritage Centre at Midland is not yet past; if it is, we shall all be the poorer.

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<sup>i</sup> These details are from the recollection of the author, who is a member of the ASSLH.

<sup>ii</sup> The partners were: the ASSLH; the J.S. Battye Library of Western Australian History, and the Western Australian Branches of four trade unions: the Communications, Electrical, Engineering and Plumbing Union; the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, the Australian Services Union and the Rail, Tram and Bus Industry Union.

<sup>iii</sup> The new partners were: the State Record Office of Western Australia, the Museum of Western Australia; Unions WA, the Midland Redevelopment Authority and the City of Swan.