Lost [in] Arcadia: Regenerating Melbourne’s Nineteenth-Century Shopping Arcades Since the 1950s

Ms James Lesh
Melbourne School of Design
University of Melbourne
Victoria, Australia
j.lesh@unimelb.edu.au

Ms Nicole Davis
School of Historical and Philosophical Studies
University of Melbourne
Victoria, Australia
davis.nicole@unimelb.edu.au

Nineteenth-century shopping arcades are woven into Melbourne’s urban fabric. Images of the Block and Royal Arcades adorn social media and other websites and during the day, they are thronged by both locals and tourists. On the ground level, boutique stores and eateries display their goods, while on the upper floors, a variety of businesses occupy sought-after office space. Since the twentieth century, few extant built spaces have exemplified the opportunity and optimism of the Victorian era like shopping arcades. Competing against motor-centre suburban shopping centres, these spaces reflected a quieter, older and urbaner vision for leisure, which many postwar Melburnians and tourists appreciated. During the postwar period, however, when much of Melbourne’s Victorian-era fabric was destined for the wrecking ball, the arcades were equally threatened. Their seemingly faded grandeur and ostensible functional obsolescence meant their destruction seemed imminent, and many were demolished. But, the rejuvenation of the Melbourne CBD over the past three decades has led their owners to maximise and capitalise on the potential of these architectural, social and economic assets. Concomitantly, the growing consciousness of the historic environment intersected with these privately-owned spaces of consumption and recreation. Examining periodicals, ephemera, and conservation archives from the 1950s onwards that speak to broader debates around heritage and regeneration, this paper argues that the re-making of Melbourne’s arcades exemplifies the extent to which developers, policymakers, residents and tourists rediscovered this city and its nineteenth-century shopping heritage, with present-day implications for heritage management.

Keywords — nineteenth-century arcades; postwar Melbourne; urban heritage; heritage conservation; urban regeneration.

INTRODUCTION

Nineteenth-century shopping arcades hold a prominent place in Melbourne’s urban imaginary. Their evolution from postwar historical relic to post-1970s protected heritage is examined in this paper. While the Block and Royal Arcades might play a significant role in contemporary representations of Melbourne’s heritage, and losing these iconic sites of consumption seem unimaginable, this apparent permanency is a relatively recent phenomenon. The rejuvenation of the Melbourne CBD over past decades has capitalised on many of these architectural, social and economic assets. Nevertheless, lesser-known nineteenth-century arcades have been demolished during this time.

We argue that Melbourne’s surviving nineteenth-century shopping arcades are a phenomenon that continues to demand conservation. In the current environment of mass urban redevelopment in Melbourne—amid a heritage system that often emphasises exterior architectural fabric over interior social narratives—conservation cannot necessarily be assured, as evidenced by the 2008 demolition of the Eastern Arcade. Much heritage activism is reactive, seeking to protect places that are threatened by demolition; instead, this paper is proactive, making a contemporary case for the continued conservation of arcades, in the context of their historical typology. This speculative argument is part of our broader research into the changing relationship between cities, heritage and historic environments.

This paper examines community responses towards arcades from heritage activists, regulators, professionals and the public since the postwar period and considers the inter-dependencies between these spaces and their urban and conservation contexts. Unlike a typical heritage report, our approach to the heritage of arcades is less focussed on fabric, restoration or statutory protection, but rather is more concerned with history, people and society (Byrne, Brayshaw, & Ireland, p. 8; Johnston). From this historically-orientated mapping, we seek to (re)generate ideas around how these arcades and other heritage spaces might be conserved for the twenty-first century.

AUSTRALIA’S NINETEENTH-CENTURY SHOPPING ARCades: HISTORY & CONTEXT

The shopping arcade was—and is—an iconic nineteenth-century urban space. Their basic architectural typology is that of glass-roofed promenades lined with shops, that were also spaces of consumption and social engagement. Walter Benjamin wrote in the early twentieth-century that arcades exemplified the commodity fetish and desire for the new that was central to his conceptualisation of modernity. These “consumer dreamworlds” (Benjamin, L1 3), as he termed them, were for the sale and purchase of luxury wares, from fashion to furniture, which also featured spaces for social interaction, such as promenades, restaurants, tearooms, theatres, ballrooms and saloons. His poetic and oft-quoted definition of arcades, copied from an 1852 Paris guidebook in the Bibliothèque National, captured the multiple purposes and uses of these spaces:

... a recent invention of industrial luxury ... glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings ... Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the arcade is a city, a world in miniature, in which customers will find everything they need ... they offer a secure, if restricted, promenade – one from which merchants also benefit. (Benjamin, p. 31).

Originating in Paris at the close of the eighteenth century, arcades grew in popularity in the early decades of the nineteenth century. By the end of the century, they had spread throughout Europe, England, and the Americas (Geist, 1983).

The first Australian arcade opened in 1853 in Melbourne—the Queen’s Arcade on Lonsdale Street—with another following the next year on Bourke Street. Neither were long-lasting, but in the 1870s more were built in the city, including the still-extant Royal Arcade and the recently demolished 1872 Eastern Arcade, both on Bourke Street. Across Australia, these types of spaces continued to a popular option for new retail spaces into the 1880s. By the close of the nineteenth century, Sydney, Adelaide and Brisbane had followed Melbourne’s lead and boasted numerous arcades. Closer to home, “Marvelous Melbourne” of the 1880s witnessed the construction of the Queens Walk and Prahran Arcades—the latter Australia’s only nineteenth-century suburban shopping arcade. The 1890s saw the construction of the grandest of the Australian arcades – the luxurious Block on Melbourne’s Collins Street and the monumental Queen Victoria Building in Sydney—and also one of its humblest, tiny Metropole Arcade on Bourke Street, Melbourne (Salisbury, 1990, pp. 24-32).

In the early twentieth century, arcades continued to be built in capitals throughout Australia, though often became subsidiary to the larger office buildings for which they supplied ground floor retail space, such as the Cathedral and Centreway Arcades in Melbourne (Victorian Heritage Database, 2007a; Victorian Heritage Database, 2007b). From the
postwar period onwards, shopping arcades were often built in suburban Australia rather than the CBD, although they were often reduced to utilitarian corridors that were far removed from their ornate nineteenth-century predecessors (E.g. In Sunbury: Argus, 15 October 1954; Preston Chamber Arcade (Victorian Heritage Database. N.d.b); Railway (Don) Arcade, Hawthorn (Booroorndara Council, n.d.). Throughout the century the arcade form in all its variations also proved popular in Australia’s regional urban spaces (E.g. Johnstone Court, Terang, Victoria (Victorian Heritage Database, N.d.a). An adaptable and popular form, heritage and new-build arcades continue in the twenty-first century to be popular across Australia as options for shopping infrastructure.1

THE PLACE OF ARCADES IN THE LITERATURE

While British and European arcades have been subject to much scholarship that considers their social history and heritage, the Australian examples, and their role in the Australian city, have not been substantially examined (Geist, 1983; Mackeith, 1985; Mackeith, 1986; Lemoine, 1989; de Moncan, 2003). The scholarship that exists mostly derives from the 1970s to 1990s, a period that was marked by the Australian heritage movement and the emergence of a heritage industry of consultants and policymakers.

It was a spectacular moment of scholarly, professional and popular interest in the Australian urban environment and its conservation. The arcades of the nineteenth century were readily identifiable as representative of that century’s architectural, social and historical significance. Consequently, many fell under the remit of Australian heritage practice, from activism to regulation to management. They were often among the earliest buildings to be identified as significant and listed by both heritage interest groups and regulatory bodies; and some of those threatened with demolition were saved, protected, restored and rejuvenated through their efforts.

Just as the present-day heritage processes that manage, interpret and govern arcades evolved from that period, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit. As with other architectural typologies, the literature similarly emphasises the major concerns of that time. It often de-prioritises the broader social and historical context and is concerned more with typologies and architectural merit.

As with much of the heritage scholarship of that period, for the most part, these publications fall into the following categories:

- Commissioned histories: usually at the instigation of the operators or owners to commemorate anniversaries or conservation efforts. These range from leaflets to more substantial historical works. In general, they tend to be nostalgic eulogies towards the buildings’ history and architecture, although they do often examine the social role of the arcades and the people that inhabited them (Salisbury, 1990; Shaw, 1987).
- Architectural reports and heritage studies. Often commissioned by developers and written by private heritage consultants when a building underwent restoration. Due to their nature, these focus chiefly on the architectural aspects (and merits) of the arcades (Allom Lovell & Associates Pty Ltd; Clive Lucas, Stapleton & Partners Pty Ltd.).
- Academic theses concentrating on heritage fabric (E.g.: Kaufman, 1974).
- Reports by government—statutory federal, state and municipal heritage officers—and activists—as such as the National Trusts or resident groups. These reports often include statements of significance, and are found in regulatory and activist heritage databases. These types of records are usually brief, but often attempt to consider the buildings’ social and architectural history (E.g.: City of Melbourne, 1989).

More broadly, a scattering of historical studies and exhibitions on shopping in Australia have noted nineteenth-century arcades. Such efforts are necessarily brief, with arcades forming part of a broader story, culminating in the suburban shopping mall (E.g.: Pollon, 1989; Kingston, 1994; Henderson-Smith, 2003). Arcades become a historical relic on the path to the “Americanization” of the Australian retail experience, despite their almost uninterrupted construction to the present day. The majority of publications focus on the surviving Sydney arcades—the Strand and Queen Victoria Building—with less emphasis on the Melbourne exemplars. Such publications are, nevertheless, valuable sources for understanding the motivations and impulses behind the conservation of nineteenth-century Australian shopping arcades.

In many ways, this literature is a historical source in itself. Writing in the late 2010s, the conservation of Australia’s arcades has a history of at least seven decades. Suffice to say, the nineteenth-century arcades that exist to the present day have a twentieth-century urban and planning history that has underpinned their survival. In addition to these various histories, theses and reports from the latter part of the twentieth century, there is an abundance of primary source material to document this process. Print media such as newspapers, magazines and publications illuminate public opinion surrounding these buildings and their place within the city. These also record the heritage practices, ideas and perspectives of planners, architects, developers, heritage activists, and many other stakeholders. Along with government and activist (National Trust) archives, these sources enable us to trace details about the arcades, such as the cycles of popularity, threat, protection and restoration that they underwent. As historians, we employ this powerful archival methodology to reveal some of the stories around and contingencies of Melbourne’s heritage arcades.

ARCADES IN POSTWAR AUSTRALIA

Nineteenth-century shopping arcades are woven into Melbourne’s urban fabric. Images of the Block and Royal Arcades adorn social media, websites and tourist brochures and, during the day, both locals and tourists throng their promenades. On the ground level, boutique stores display their goods and eateries entice the visitor. On the upper floors, small businesses, NGOs and other organisations enjoy this sought-after office space. As walkable and enclosed pathways through the city, foot traffic delivers custom to the businesses and safety to traversers, customers and tourists, while adding to the urban street-life experience.

During the postwar period, from the mid-1940s to the 1960s, many Melburnians (and tourists) believed that nineteenth-century arcades contributed character to the city. That they should remain permanent features of the urban landscape, conserved for prosperity by their private owners, was more contested and no regulatory processes existed to ensure their survival. As today, arcades often featured in metropolitan dailies, which regularly romanticised the experience of a visit. The Age, in February 1952, captured the pleasure of strolling through them:

_Somebody has said that one of the most delectable features of life in Melbourne is enjoyed by those who, sauntering the arcades and little streets, inhale the perfumes wafted to them from the small shops. In the course of a short stroll, he declares, one may sniff the tingling scent of red pepper, the warmth of honey, the freshness of butter, the flavor of cheese, the crispness of grain and the pungency of caffeine._ (Age, 21 February 1952: p. 2).

This writer conjures arcades as a feature of urban life, in similar ways to the nineteenth-century guidebook quoted by Benjamin. The poetic of the European-style arcade was indeed a global phenomenon.

These older arcades also regularly graced the pages of other periodicals. Published by the Australian Geographic Society

---

1 The 1999 Sydney Arcade on Pitt and King Streets, Sydney, consciously echoes the design of nearby nineteenth-century arcade spaces and its 1881 namesake, the façade of which was incorporated into its design (Crone Architects, n.d.).

2 These include their own websites and social media presences on Facebook and Instagram, and government tourist sites, and they are regularly featured in online articles and social media posts by members of the public (E.g.: Royal Arcade, 2017; Block Arcade, n.d.)
from 1934, Walkabout was a popular mid-twentieth-century travel magazine (Rolls and Johnson, 2016). Targeted at the expanding middle classes, its impetus was the growing affluence and leisure time of Australians, along with the advent of the motorcar and long-distance transport, opening up the possibility of mass tourism for many Australians. During its postwar heyday, destinations embraced by Walkabout included not only regional towns but also city visits.

In June 1960 the magazine featured the “Arcades of Melbourne”. For its editorial staff, “the true character of Melbourne” was found “in the many small arcades that interlace the major streets” (“Walkabout, June 1960, p. 1). According to photographic journalist Brian McArdle, “There is more to Melbourne than a grid of streets. Threaded unexpected ways through unscen city blocks are a good 20 shopping arcades, all of them having their own charm” (“Walkabout, June 1960, p. 30). The Royal, Block and Queen’s Walk Arcades were included in this feature, with rich illustrations and appealing captions for each. McArdle added: “Despite the rush of demolition and rebuilding now transforming the face of Melbourne, not one arcade has fallen to the wreckers” (“Walkabout, June 1960, p. 31). A couple of months later, reader Alan Schwab wrote a letter to Walkabout about the pleasures of being “Lost in Arcadia”: “There is no doubt these thoroughfares rank as one of Melbourne’s true beauty spots” (“Walkabout, September 1960, p. 5). Walkabout again took the opportunity to publish a photograph of men and women strolling and shopping amid this picturesque heritage grandeur.

Arcades are captured in a similar way by modernist Mark Strizic in his photographs of 1950s and 1960s Melbourne, in a series that included evocative images of the Block and Queens Walk Arcades. His subjects were not only the historic architecture and fixtures of these sites but, equally, those that visited them. His black and white photographs present well-dressed Melburnians strolling their promenades and gazing into shop windows. Along with his images of the “Paris End” of Collins Street and other street scenes, Strizic captured both the historic environments of Melbourne, with its European-style buildings, and its buzzing postwar modernity, inhabited by people clothed in up-to-date fashions moving through the city (Davison, 2016, p. 130; Fox, 2007, p. 139). For Strizic, arcades were not just historic relics but, rather, living parts of a modern city, democratic spaces available to everyone.

In the same year that the arcades featured in Walkabout, Professor of Architecture David Saunders found Melbourne’s arcades characterful yet ambivalent. In the coffee-table book Melbourne: a portrait, Saunders wrote the captions and Strizic provided the photographs. About the early twentieth-century Australia Arcade on Collins Street, Saunders wrote: “To buy, to sell; To Invest, to insure. To Build and to rebuild.” (Strizic and Saunders, 1960). This caption exposed a further reality of these sites: their relationship to economic and business cycles. The small-scale cycle of consumption within their stores was repeated at the larger-scale of the city itself. The uncertain fortunes that faced Melbourne’s historic buildings, including the arcades, was emphasised in a contemporary photograph of a site where a building had recently been demolished, displaying a sign that was synonymous for some with the destruction of the city’s heritage, for others with its progress: “When the Wrecker was here” (Strizic and Saunders, 1960, p. 11).

Saunders knew that the fate of Melbourne’s arcades hung in the balance amid the city’s postwar development boom. Involved with the Victorian National Trust from its founding in 1956, he was instrumental in the organisation’s early listing of heritage places in Melbourne and across Victoria as the first chairman of its classification committee. This committee recommended classification of the Royal Arcade in 1959, the Metropole in 1963 and the Block in 1973 (PROV, VPRS 517), reflecting its perception of the their historical and architectural significance. It discussed shopping arcades every couple of years, corresponding with property owners and members about their conservation. Despite the symbolism of this activity, and the interest of the National Trust in arcades, these classifications lacked regulatory force and, so, developers were still able to demolish them.

A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF POSTWAR ARCades

The future of arcades was threatened by several, mainly economic, factors. First, the shrinking of the CBD and inner-suburban population meant a reduction in evening and weekend patronage for centrally located stores and businesses. As suggested, new opportunities for consumption beckoned in suburbia, whether new modern arcades and shopping strips or American-style shopping centres (E.g. a new arcade in Sunbury, Argus, 15 October 1954, p. 3; Davison, 2006; Bailey, 2010). Shoppers may have liked these spaces, but they had more choice than ever, and the ageing arcades needed to provide an attractive and modern proposition, extending from architecture to windows displays to shelves and merchandise.

The second threat related to the cost of upkeep and the broader desire for modernisation. While displays and public promenades may have been subject to seasonal cosmetic updates, the buildings themselves were ageing. Reports in newspapers record the disrepair that the nineteenth-century buildings of the Melbourne CBD. For visitors, these spaces maintained an air of “gold rush grandeur” (Argus, 15 October 1954, p. 3). Others found them less appealing: “For the customer, they are beautiful; but for the person who works there, they are often disgusting”, reported the Argus in 1951 (Argus, 14 February, p. 3). In 1954, the Age covered the Shop Assistants Union’s blitz on working conditions in the arcades with their “poor ventilation, lack of heating, cooling, and natural lighting” (Age, 31 December, p. 3). Over twenty years later, the same paper, while lauding the Metropole Arcade as “the finest, most intact Victorian shopping arcade left in the city”, also reported that that stucco façade was crumbling, creating a danger to the passerby (Age, 20 April 1977, p. 24). Regardless of the extent to which people appreciated these commercial spaces, the cost of modernisation was substantial, with responsibility lying with arcade owners and shopkeepers.

On the other hand, the slow progress towards modernisation, repair and restoration sometimes offered a lifeline. For the Royal Arcade, postwar material shortages that inhibited redevelopment, and an absentee landlord in England, had protected the building for several decades (Garside and White, 1963, p. 80). The Spensleys, who along with the Stauthorn family, had built it in 1869, 70, attempted to sell the building in 1947 but were stymied by restrictions on transferring money out of Australia, thus conserving “this old landmark, with its lofty, airy roof and old-fashioned ironwork” (Age, 7 January 1950, p. 8). When it was finally sold in 1958 for £541,000, it was to a limited company formed by the shopkeepers in the arcade, concerned with protecting their building and its livelihoods (Garside and White, 1963, p. 80).

Over this period, Melbourne’s premier thoroughfare, Collins Street was a locus of redevelopment in the city (Buckrich, 2005, Davison, 1991b). The street featured several arcades, which were at risk of being snapped up, demolished and built over during this boom. The Queen’s Walk Arcade and the associated Victoria Buildings on the corner of Collins and Swanston Streets changed hands several times, with sale prices reflecting the soaring land values of the postwar economic boom. In 1954 it was sold to ANZ Bank for an almost record price of £660,000 and nine years later fetched £1 million, bought by an English commercial property company, making agressive forays into the Australian market, with the intent to build a multi-storey building (Age, 18 August 1954, p. 8; Canberra Times, 30 July 1963, p. 2).

One of the few published discussions of the architectural heritage of arcades during this period bemoaned their fate but posited it as unavoidable. Adopting a modernist functionalist aesthetic, architect Janet Garside and Deborah White wrote in an article, “Arcades in Australia of June 1963, said of the Melbourne examples: “Those that remain are by no means obsolete and fulfil their purpose as successfully as they did in the past, but from day to day, here as in Sydney, the threat to a three or four storey-building increases in a multi-storey city.” (Garside and White, p. 84). Some were indeed demolished in the name of progress: the Queens Walk in 1965 for “future development” (Age, 4 July 1966, p. 3; Canberra Times, 5 July 1966), and the Metropole Arcade on Bourke Street to make way for the State Savings Bank of Victoria Head Office in 1974 (PROV, VPRS 8935/P1/3/1471, VPRS 8935/P1/3/2083, VPRS 8935/P1/3/2705–2719). The National Trust classification was unable to prevent the Metropole demolition.

Overall, the conservation of nineteenth-century arcades jarred with the dominant postwar notions of urban modernity. In this age of “progress”, suggested the Age in 1950, “nostalgia” for its own sake must not hold back development (Age, 7 January 1950, p. 8). Much appreciated for its architecture and aesthetics, the sizable contribution of arcades to urban modernity was settled. But city tourism and the potential use of arcades for urban imaging was still a relatively minor function for them. For their practical terms, heritage arcades provided only one of many ways to house shops and broader factors impacting Melbourne and its CBD threatened their longevity, desirability and feasibility. Their poetic contribution was
inadequate to ensure their retention. Due to changing consumer desires, shopkeeping practices, and real estate speculation, they struggled to survive. Those arcades that endured the mid-1970s fared much better.

**Arcades under new heritage management since the 1970s**

Despite the efforts of activists, until the early 1970s few statutory measures existed to prevent the demolition of heritage buildings. For privately-owned sites, sympathetic ownership or the absence of the economic imperative was practically the only means of guaranteeing retention. That said, the National Trust was interested in shopping spaces like arcades, as part of its broader concerns with historically and architecturally significant places. Paralleling the National Trust, Saunders and Strizic, along with many other urbanist contemporaries, possessed a strong consciousness of arcades as aspects of the historic environment. Nevertheless, when arcades were demolished, few people or organisations expressed widespread dissatisfaction or anger.

With the rise of Australian heritage movement in the 1970s, the remit of protected heritage expanded and, concurrently, regulations were introduced to protect historic buildings such as arcades (Davison, 1991a). Activists took the view that places of leisure and shopping must be conserved. In 1973, the Carlton Association suggested that the National Trust had done too little in this regard (E.g. NAA, A3956). At that same moment, heritage legislation was passed by the Federal and Victorian Governments. Adopting the older National Trust listings as a template, arcades were swiftly heritage listed by federal, state and local governments. On 9 October 1974—within weeks of the passage of Victoria’s Historic Buildings Act, Australia’s first dedicated heritage legislation—the Block Arcade and Royal Arcade were state-heritage listed. At that same moment, the postwar economic boom ended, inevitably reducing the development pressure on CBD sites, including for heritage places, until the Australian economy picked up in the 1980s (University of Queensland, Australian Studies Centre, 1982; Wagner, 1981, pp. 101–104).

The inclusion of arcades in the Commonwealth Government’s Register of the National Estate—set up by the Whitlam and Fraser governments from 1975 and managed by the Australian Heritage Commission—equally suggested their importance within the new field of heritage management. While the listing of places in the National Estate only served to influence (rather than restrict) private property owners, for the first time Australia’s most important arcades were found in a unified national heritage register. The Block Arcade and the Royal Arcade appeared alongside counterparts in Sydney, Perth, Adelaide and Brisbane. The National Estate also held the promise of potential restoration for these buildings, incentivising property owners to keep, maintain and restore them. In 1982 the Victorian Department of Planning was granted $10,000 and $15,000 for minor restoration work on the Royal Arcade and Block Arcades respectively (Minister for Home Affairs and Environment, 1982). Both buildings subsequently underwent extensive renovations, after heritage consultants prepared conservation reports.

Not every arcade fared as well as the exemplars discussed so far in this article. While it is unrealistic to suggest that every historic arcade must be conserved, some responsibility lies with the methods of the nascent heritage management field. In the 1970s and 1980s, a common approach to heritage reports (leading to protections) was to “windscreen survey” buildings from their exterior (Clinch, 2012, p. 28). Not only did this de-emphasise, even bypass, the physical interior (as well as the social and historical values) of heritage places, but the façade of buildings could also mislead the surveyor. The fate of Bourke Street’s Eastern Arcade was, perhaps, determined by an incorrect “windscreen survey”. Hidden behind the 1940s & 50s façade, it was misidentified as a 1926 building in a 1985 heritage study. Based on these observations, twelve years later the arcade was downgraded and recommended for removal from the municipal heritage list due to new assumptions that its original interior had also been gutted, although some of the interiors remained including original columns and roof arches in the upper storey (Goad, et.al., 1993). The Eastern Arcade on Bourke Street was distinct from the adjacent Eastern Market, which was demolished in 1960 for the Southern Cross Hotel (demolished 1995–2006), although the two were sometimes confused in newspaper reports.

**Conclusion: conserving arcades today**

Our account of the Eastern Arcade affirms the importance of deep historical and social research for the conservation of heritage. It also suggests a proactive approach to heritage listings as more twentieth-century and postwar places enter the heritage canon. Heritage assessments conducted in the 1980s and 1990s often prioritised the architectural merits of places over their social and cultural values, which then guided decisions around conservation. This has changed somewhat in the last two decades with the social and cultural aspects of heritage sites playing a larger role in assessments—in particular, via the application of social significance frameworks and the historic urban landscape (Johnston, 2013; Byrne, Brayshaw and Ireland, 2003, pp. 8ff.; Turner, 2013, pp. 77–87; Bandarin and van Oers, 2012). But the arcades discussed in this article still, largely, rely on those older heritage processes.

By placing nineteenth-century arcades and their twentieth-century evolution in the broader urban history of Melbourne, this paper seeks to renew the discussion about the conservation of arcades in urban and suburban Australia. Only by conducting the necessary typological studies—of arcades, and also pubs and clubs and other leisure and heritage spaces—a cross time and many cities—can any city’s heritage places be adequately conserved. Our approach benefits urbanists by representing how heritage places like arcades have been—and might be—re-utilised during redevelopment. This research might be extended to account for twentieth-century arcades and other kinds of shopping spaces. It also might assist with heritage interpretation activities, which we suggest could incorporate more conservation history, as part of efforts to further sway public opinion in favour of strong heritage controls amid the current development boom.

**References**

**Journal articles**

Fox, Paul. 2007. Stretching the Australian imagination: Melbourne as a conservative city. LaTrobe Journal, 80, 124-142.


**Books**


---

3 The original study was the Central Activities District (CAD) Conservation Study, which is updated periodically (Greene Butler and Associates, 2011).

4 The Eastern Arcade on Bourke Street was distinct from the adjacent Eastern Market, which was demolished in 1960 for the Southern Cross Hotel (demolished 1995–2006), although the two were sometimes confused in newspaper reports.


Book Chapters


Websites


Reports & Papers


Theses


Newspapers & Periodicals

Age

Argus

Canberra Times

Walkabout

Archival Sources

Public Record Office of Victoria (PROV), VPRS 517, National Trust Classification Committee.


National Trust of Australia (Victoria), File B6962, FMR Eastern Arcade 131–135 Bourke Street Melbourne.