

What is heritage? Perspectives from a pandemic.

Felicity Watson M.ICONOS

Presentation following Australia ICONOS AGM, 12 November 2020

After more than 100 days in lockdown due to COVID-19, many Melburnians have become more familiar with their local surroundings than ever before, echoing the experience of many people across Australia, and the world, during a time of global pandemic. How does our local experience of cultural heritage reflect broader themes, and what can we learn from what's in our own backyard?



Wominjeka Marin-Bulluk—Welcome Big River People
Pipemakers Park, Maribyrnong, Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we all meet today. I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which I live and work, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation. I pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and extend my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are here today.

I also acknowledge that this meeting is taking place during NAIDOC Week, a time to celebrate the history, culture and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This year's theme, Always Was, Always Will Be, is particularly relevant to our work as heritage practitioners, and I acknowledge and am grateful for the continuing custodianship by Aboriginal peoples of our lands and waters.

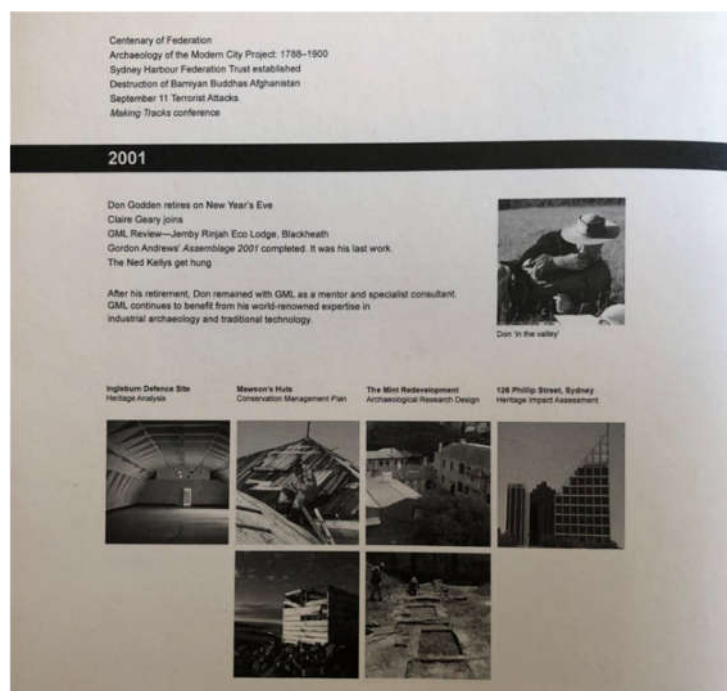
What is heritage?

Radical honesty has always been something I have subscribed to. So I'm just going to put this out there. Recently, I was asked to give a lecture on heritage to planning students at Monash University. The lecturer asked me to start out by defining—what is heritage? Why should planners care about it? The truth is that at first I struggled to articulate an answer. It's embarrassing to admit that, but it's true.

Despite 20 years working in and around the heritage field, including 7 years as a heritage advocate, I struggle to provide a concise and definitive explanation of what heritage is and why it's important—whether it was that time Jon Faine asked me on statewide radio, or every time someone asks me what my job is.

I live and breathe heritage, and my mind is consumed by it, but every time I'm asked to define what it is, I have to re-prosecute it in my mind. And maybe that's a good thing.

We know that heritage is a tangible link to the past. But what does heritage mean? What purpose does it serve? I feel like so often we talk about it like we all agree on what it is, or draw on textbook definitions. We fall into the trap of thinking planners and decision-makers and communities should care about it because the legislation says we should. I have come to realise that as a person and as a professional it's something I need to think more deeply about.



2001—my heritage career begins. *GML: 21 Years of People and Places, 1989-2010*, p 60.

When I first started out as an office junior at GML Heritage (then Godden Mackay Logan) at the age of 17, as a naïve country girl, I was absolutely dazzled by the discovery that there is such a thing as the heritage profession. I worked with historians, architects, archaeologists—industrial archaeologists even—professions I had never really known existed or thought about being career options. I quickly changed tack and began to build a career in heritage, provided with the most amazing opportunities to visit our country's most special heritage places, and surrounded by brilliant and supportive colleagues and mentors that I still have to this day.

For a long time, I think I loved it because it interested me. But over time, I became drawn to the parts of our profession that engage closely with the community. I was drawn to the storytelling opportunities of history and heritage, developed a passion for heritage interpretation. As a heritage advocate the National Trust, I found my ultimate niche, supporting communities to protect the places they care about, and advocating for heritage within the broader planning system.

But my experience has also led me to question what we're doing, and who we're doing it for. I love the challenge of navigating our complex statutory heritage regimes, and finding pathways to achieve protection. But so often our planning policies are blunt instruments, a box-ticking exercise, and can be twisted to serve those with the most resources.

As an advocate, I often I see heritage through the prism of other people's anxieties. My interactions with communities often focuses on resistance to change, and loss, both of place and what they see as important to their way of life. Developers, architects, and planners often see heritage as an obstacle instead of an opportunity. I spend a lot of time dealing with the worst outcomes of the planning system, and the places that fall through the cracks.

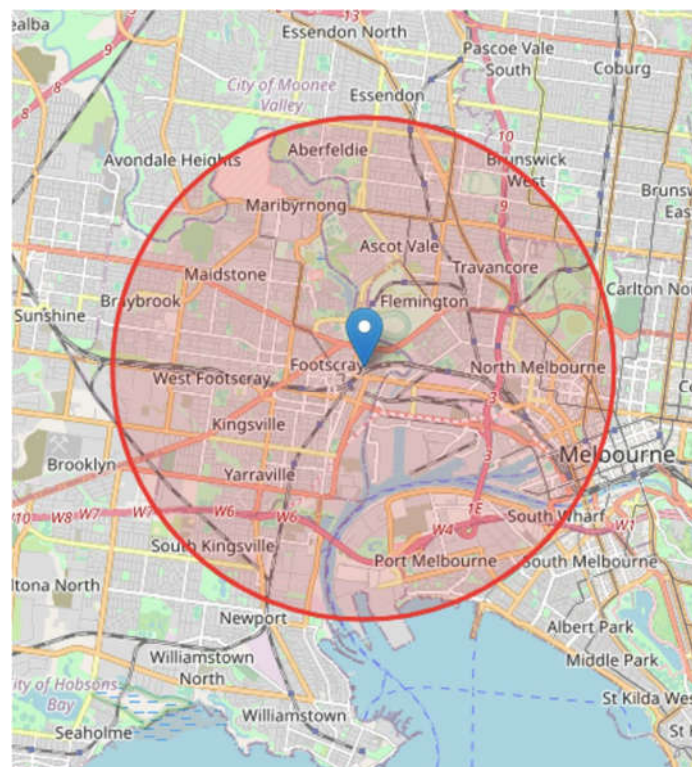
But I don't always take the time to think about what heritage means to me, and how that can inform my work.

This year everything changed. For all of us. Like many others, I was forced to retreat into a small bubble due to Victoria's strict COVID-19 regulations. I haven't worked in my office since March. For more than 100 consecutive days this year, our movements were limited to a 5km radius, and outdoor activity was subject to time limits.



COVID-19 in Footscray. On the left, “Checkpoint Barkly”—an artist’s response to the lockdown of postcode 3012 in July 2020, which divided Footscray and West Footscray.

As my world became smaller, I needed to find ways to maintain my mental and physical health. So I started exploring my backyard.



My 5km bubble.

I live in Footscray, in the inner-west of Melbourne. For those of you who aren't familiar, it is on the Traditional Lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung peoples, bordered by the Maribyrnong River in the east. It has industrial working-class roots, and has seen waves of immigration, from Europe, south-east Asia, and more recently Africa. It's rapidly gentrifying, and under significant development pressures. But it has a vibrant arts scene and cool bars. For as long as the cool people can afford to live here.



Footscray Cemetery

Right at the start of lockdown, my travels took me to the cemetery, full of stories past and present, physical and intangible heritage, where a masked stranger shared a mourning ritual with me because she wasn't able to visit with her family.

I spent time in Footscray Park, created in the early-20th century following a community campaign, at a time when Melbourne's western suburbs lacked public parks and gardens. Designed by Rodney Alsop, it's one of the state's most significant Edwardian gardens, and the location of cultural events like Vietnamese New Year, and the Laneway Festival.



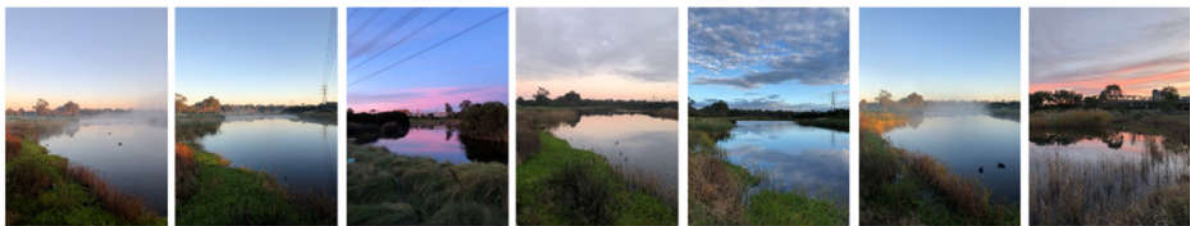
Footscray Park

Among my favourite places are the oases reclaimed from the west's industrial history. Pipemaker's Park in Maribyrnong is home to the History of the Lands Garden, which has transformed the concrete foundations of the Hume Company's pipe factory, telling the stories of the place from its deep history and ongoing connections to Aboriginal peoples and cultural heritage, to colonisation, and industrialisation.



Pipemakers Park, Maribyrnong

Newell's Paddock in Footscray, once a holding yard for sheep and cattle destined for the William Angliss abattoir, is now a lush wetland area home to many species of birds. Designed by landscape architect Dr Jill Orr-Young in 1988, the park is now cared for by the Friends of Newell's Paddock.



Newell's Paddock, Footscray

Travelling south along the Maribyrnong takes you past the Temple of the Heavenly Queen, with its statue of the Chinese sea goddess Mazu, and past the Blackbird, a 1920s passenger ferry which has been providing tours of the Maribyrnong with skipper Peter Somerville for 35 years.

Footscray Community Arts Centre is another monument to community action, established in 1974 by artists, unionists and community activists with the aim of establishing an arts centre which responded to the social and cultural needs of Footscray's marginalised and disadvantaged communities. Its home is historic Henderson House, once part of a piggery.



From Left: Heavenly Queen Temple; the Blackbird; Henderson House, Footscray Arts Centre.

Further south still, I visited the Westgate Bridge the day after the 40th Anniversary of Australia's worst industrial accident, which saw the deaths of 35 men when a span of the bridge under construction collapsed. And Stony Creek Backwash, where a forest of white mangroves was replanted by one man, after years of industrial pollution wiped them out.



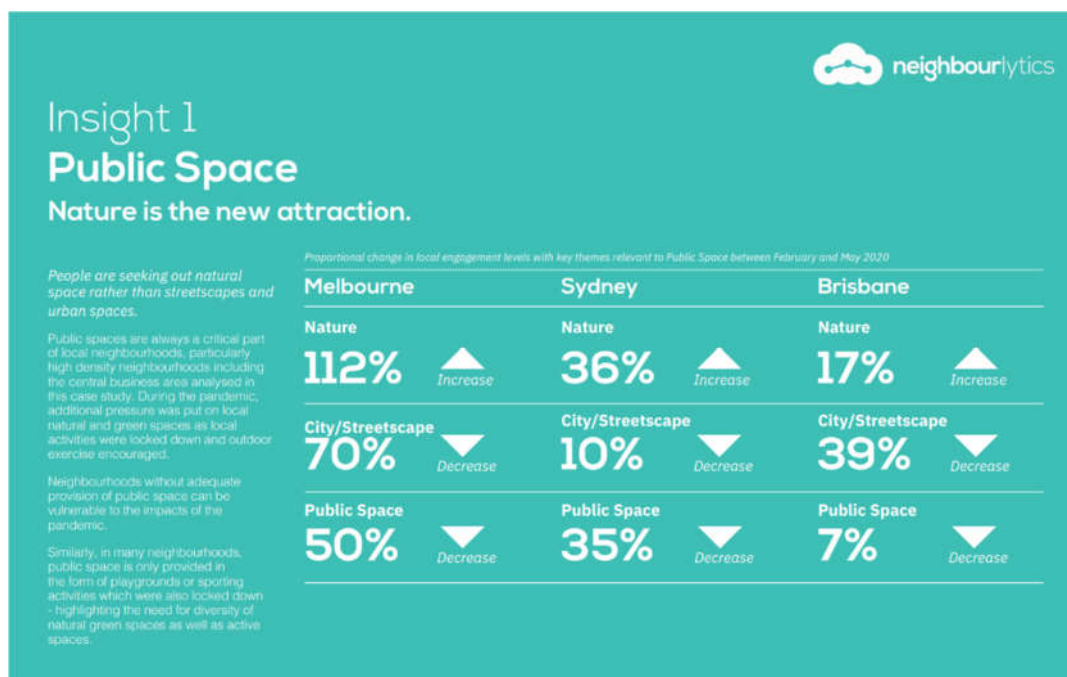
Westgate Bridge and Stony Creek Backwash

Some of these places have formal heritage protections. Many don't. All of them speak to our rich and diverse cultural heritage, and the actions of generations of residents and custodians. And they are places which are used and loved in a million different ways, and create meaning and a sense of place for the people who live and visit here.

And I'm not the only one who has been exploring these places and seeing old places with fresh eyes. With exercise one of the only outdoor activities permitted in Melbourne, public parks and outdoor spaces have been busier than ever.

In October, [the Age reported](#) on the trend of people seeking out green spaces within their 5km radius, including one family which, like me, discovered the "unexpected treasure" of Pipemaker's Park.

[Polling by the Victorian National Parks Association](#) found that COVID-19 restrictions had made respondents value access to natural areas and national parks more. Nearly half said restrictions made them visit bushland and parks in their local area. And this is part of a broader worldwide trend.



Insights from [The New Local: Data Report](#), 2020, by Neighbourlytics (sign up to download the full report).

[Research by Australian firm Neighbourlytics](#) has also found a significant increase in visitation to public open spaces, including parks and gardens. While interaction with public space decreased, we know that activity in the public realm in our cities will increase along with the trend for new outdoor dining spaces and parklets, increasing engagement with our heritage buildings and streetscapes.

But while some aspects of our cultural heritage have received greater recognition during COVID-19, others are not faring so well.

Footscray is well known for its vibrant multicultural dining scene, from African tea ceremonies to bowls of pho. But there are lots of “for lease” signs now.

We have the bustling Footscray Market, which continues to do a strong trade, but around the corner is the twisted wreckage of the Little Saigon Market, our other major fresh food market, which burned down several years ago and has never been rebuilt. Retail and hospitality are the lifeblood of our city, and an essential part of our cultural heritage, but they're suffering.



From left: Footscray Market before COVID-19; the remnants of Little Saigon Market.

When I visit Footscray Market, or line up for a banh mi at Nhu Lan, I'm experiencing cultural heritage, and sharing in the cultural heritage of my diverse community. But the faces I see down the street are not the same faces I see at consultation meetings on cultural heritage issues. These places exist outside our formal structures for recognising and protecting cultural heritage. But they're often the places that people connect to most, and seek out for "authentic" experiences.

In my role at the National Trust, I'm increasingly becoming aware of the issue of relevance for cultural heritage institutions and heritage practice. While the state and federal government has begun to announce support packages for creative industries and tourism, heritage seems to be falling through the cracks and missing out on a seat at the table. While the heritage industry will no doubt be stimulated by the rush to fast-track construction projects, we also need to work together to promote the value of heritage to communities and economic development, and leverage funding opportunities.

In late-2019, the [US National Trust for Historic Preservation conducted a survey](#) to understand the movement's core values and challenges. The No. 1 challenge, funding, was no surprise. But No. 2 on the list is relevancy. Which ties in strongly to other key challenges identified including lack of diversity in the preservation movement, and risks posed by climate change.

As ICOMOS members, we have an opportunity to work together to identify our own challenges, and advocate through the work of the organisation both nationally and internationally, through its excellent Scientific Committees and Working Groups.

But while we tackle these strategic issues, we also need to remember what's in our own backyard, and how heritage can enrich people's lives on a day to day level, as we work together as a community to rebuild and regroup economically, socially and culturally in a post-COVID world.



The sights, sounds, and smells of Footscray in a pre-COVID world.

To quote two admired colleagues, Dr James Lesh and Dr Kali Myers from [their recent op-ed in The Age](#) on the Royal Exhibition Building and Carlton Gardens Heritage Site:

Heritage places have the potential to inspire us to rethink the past towards more just and equitable futures. Heritage must always account for both physical and social fabric, reflecting the complexity and diversity of contemporary Melbourne.

Shrinking my world, temporarily, has had the surprising result of allowing me to focus more clearly on the broader challenges we face. And I've come to realise that heritage is more relevant than ever, it's just that people aren't always calling it that.

In reflecting on my bubble, and what heritage means to me, I have been reminded of this wonderful quote by Susan Orlean, from her book *The Orchid Thief*. And I'll leave you with that.

The world is so huge that people are always getting lost in it. There are too many ideas and things and people. Too many directions to go. I was starting to believe that the reason it matters to care passionately about something is that it whittles the world down to a more manageable size. It makes the world seem not huge and empty but full of possibility.

Susan Orlean, *The Orchid Thief: A True Story of Beauty and Obsession*

Random House, 1998.

About me:

Felicity Watson is the Executive Manager of Advocacy at the National Trust of Australia (Victoria), and has nearly two decades of experience in cultural heritage. Felicity is also the President of Yarra Pools, a not-for-profit, community-led initiative to reintroduce swimming to the lower reaches of the Yarra Birrarung.

Contact me:

Email: felicity.watson@gmail.com

Twitter/Instagram: @felixexplody

[Linkedin](#)