

Conservation

The sanctuary within: Interiors of Important Churches

By Hector Abrahams

Over the last year the National Trust has received urgent correspondence about church interiors under threat. They have come from different parts of New South Wales and raise a broad spectrum of issues.

Of all the wonderful places and buildings we have, church buildings are in an unusual situation. For whilst religious buildings are not publicly owned, in many senses they operate so. The lives of people, families and communities have been, and are, involved in them deeply. It shows in their fine interiors. This applies for any religion or denomination, and the sense of ownership is not confined to the regular attender or believers. Moreover, our secular Australian governments are accommodating of recognised religions. They grant tax relief, offer involvement in social welfare, and sometimes generously fund conservation projects.

The letters of the last year complain to the Trust both about change and lack of change. For example, at two churches in the inner western suburbs of Sydney there was wind of proposals to move out original pews, while in the Hunter Valley, the 1840-1851 St Clements at Falbrook (now Camberwell), was to be abandoned after an internal fire. At the other end of the spectrum, letters come seeking Trust support for conservation appeals. Whether change or lack of it is the problem, the desire is the same: to protect significant interiors. What are the issues?

The greater pressure for change is not from declining churches, it is from thriving ones

It is said that churches are in decline, but in New South Wales we don't have the waves of closures being experienced in England, nor do we match the number of major church closures in Victoria and Tasmania. The proposed closure of St Clements was controversial. It has only a small usage, but there is a strong affection for it in the community and it has a cemetery separately cared for. Together with the enormous change going on around it through mining, it is a complex problem.

There are two types of change. The first I call organic change, as found in all interiors, like our houses. It goes on to a better or worse standard, as habits change. There are changes imposed by regulation, some of which are very welcome, such as equitable access. St Marys RC Cathedral in Sydney is a good example of careful change for equitable access, and the remaking of the sanctuary for different presentations of worship. The quality of this kind of change varies, but it is culturally continuous.

The other kind is wholesale change, such as happens with a thriving church or a new congregation. For instance, in the older parts of Sydney Greek Orthodox churches now occupy Anglican and Congregational churches, and new interiors have been installed. Or sometimes it's a new broom sweeping in a new interior for worship of a completely different manner. This is not new - St James, King Street, was remade in the 1890s - but this is more common now in little churches. Annandale community church is a strong example. The old interior has been entirely replaced.

Sometimes substantial changes are proposed for good motives, but with too little thought. This provokes the strongest response when it offends public conscience and comes without announcement. When the cedar pews of the old St Barnabas at Broadway began to be removed the Council was alerted and the removal was stopped. Local councils are able to take action since most churches are listed on Local Environmental Plans as heritage items. Sometimes the authorities don't take action at all. And sometimes they require a proper analysis and then give consent to a scheme of change, as happened at Broadway. Many pews were kept, some were stored and a plan was being drawn up for consent when a dreadful fire took the building.

The Religious Property Advisory Panel of the Heritage Office advises on



Chancel of Christ Church St Laurence, Sydney, completed c1845, altered many times since. Photograph by Eric Sierrins

issues like these, and is about to compile a manual. Good policy is easy to frame: Assess significance. Assess the needs. Make change so as to conserve significance. Involve people. Have good statutory lists.

Churches get caught in the need to adapt to change like all of us. I advise that the interior of a listed church should always present as a conscious whole. Some things are more easily adapted and made relevant, such as signs and lighting, banners and cushions, good access and up to date noticeboards. Good housekeeping contributes much to hospitality. An historic church interior can be presented well and to the enrichment of all.

Hector Abrahams is an architect and Partner in Clive Lucas Stapleton & Partners Ltd with a special interest in ecclesiastical architecture.



The interior of St Barnabas, Broadway, taken c1900. The cedar pews by Edmund Blacket were rearranged in the 20th century, and some of them removed in the early 21st century. The east window was original to this building, but was second hand having first been installed in Christ Church St Laurence