

The Tyre Swan: Continuity Vs Creativity

James Broadbent

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In another moment Alice was through the looking glass and had jumped lightly into the Looking-glass room . . . Then she began looking about and noticed that what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but outside all the rest was as different as possible.

'Nothing is what it seems', exclaimed Alice.

'Exactly the contrary', said the Red Queen.

'Things are all the wrong way round', continued Alice. 'Banks are restaurants, warehouses are blocks of flats, post offices are hotels, hotels are shops and shops are post offices. Everything is something else.'

'It is called Adaptive reuse,' replied the Mad Hatter sternly.

'But isn't Adaptive reuse a tautology?' asked Alice, innocently

'Don't be impertinent', said the Mad Hatter, crossly, adjusting his bow tie.

I wonder why 'making do' is the term used in the decorative arts - particularly Australian vernacular decorative arts - and 'Adaptive reuse' is used for architecture? One sounds so much more important than the other, but of course what Alice didn't know is that 'architects' speak' is almost, *ipso facto*, tautological. It seems to me that Making-do and Adaptive reuse have a lot in common. Take for instance the Tyre Swan. (I frequently take for instance the tyre swan: its imagery and layers of significance are so . . . adaptable and reusable). The tyre swan is one of the most innovative contributions Australia has made to the decorative arts, and probably its major contribution to the art of gardening.

The American architect Robert Venturi used to write about sheds and ducks. I will talk about tyres and swans. Here we have a perfect example of adaptive reuse. What was once mundane and obsolete has become a work of art, ingeniously adapted to its new use as a garden ornament. What was once a tyre, is now a swan. The transformation is simple, witty and consummate. Isn't this the exemplar of architectural recycling and making do? Yes, for many obsolete buildings. It's always a pity to waste anything, whether a tyre or a building, if something useful can be made of it. Better still, if something beautiful can be made of it. But what if a building is more than an obsolete, but convenient, container? What if it already has architectural, or more importantly, social significances to us or to others?

Adaptive Reuse: Continuity and Creativity

No-one is worried, yet, about destroying the integrity of a tread worn tyre, by transforming it into a swan, but there are concerns about architects turning time worn tyre buildings into swans in the name of adaptive reuse. How can the integrity of a tyre building be conserved if the desired end result is a swan? The contrast between wharf No 4 Walsh Bay and the Woolloomooloo wharf makes my point. Wharf No 4, the Wharf Theatre, is a tyre, 'adaptively reused', but still a tyre. The Woolloomooloo wharf seems to me to be a tyre recycled as a swan: the elements are there, mostly, just rearranged and embellished, so that it doesn't feel like a tyre anymore.

Integrity is a word that is very easy to use, but very difficult to define in building conservation. Stylistic integrity is most readily accepted – just so long as it looks roughly the same, it's all right. This is different to physical integrity, where a modern fake is not as good as the old original, and different again to historical integrity with its respect for continuing social and historical values. When, in turning a tyre into a swan, does physical intervention, even in the name of adaptive reuse, actually mean architectural or heritage rape? The building can't scream 'No'. The public sometimes does, as happened with the Conservatorium of Music. But architects, in my experience, very rarely say 'Enough's enough'. The Conservatorium of Music was a mess. It may, when work is finished, stylistically look the same, even better than what it was. It may remain largely physically intact, under its new roof and on its artificial site, but I still believe that it has been raped by the New South Wales Government Architect, its over development compromising the historical integrity of both building and site.

It may look the same again, but will it feel the same again to anyone knowing what has happened to it, how it has been molested? The same applies to buildings that are moved and rebuilt. Rape doesn't have to result in overt physical damage or change. And, of course, there are always the old arguments – 'Geez, your honor, I done it but me mates made me, and if I 'adn't, someone else would have done it bad. Besides, she was asking for it, the state she was in'.

Perhaps there should be Heritage Conservation Awards to architects who say 'No'. There wouldn't need to be many given. One of the problems seems to be that architects often have Cinderella complexes. They're schooled to believe, as I was schooled to believe that there is a design solution to everything and they have it. Like the ugly stepsisters, they believe that they can fit any crystal slipper. Or perhaps it's the rich man and the camel complex – architects of course can pass through the eye of a needle. It's their God-given gift. And it's perfectly obvious that the Old Lady who Lived in a Shoe should have consulted the best adaptively reusable architect instead of going to a family planning clinic.

'I think it highly unlikely that a building exists which cannot be improved by bringing it into the contemporary context', said the Government Architect, pontifically. 'How impertinent' thought Alice, humbly.

Luckily, in the real world slippers are rare things and thongs are more adaptable and luckily also, that time-honoured architectural maxim still holds – 'Function follows Form'. What a pickle adaptively reusable architects would be in if that early twentieth century aberration of 'Form follows Function' was really true. How could any crystal slipper be made to fit all the old lady's children?

Buildings ARE very adaptable, for generally, if one is honest about it, from their very beginning their use has been tailored to fit whatever form, prevailing fashion and style or artistic inspiration has directed. And that's not such a bad thing. Also, if one is honest, how many more buildings are made redundant and demolished, really because their style is obsolete, rather than their function. Like the Rural Bank in Martin Place – how unfashionable a decade or so ago its Art Deco pastoral imagery was to Mr. Nicholas Whitlam and the board of the newly-hatched State Bank. How appropriate, alas, now to its latest manifestation as the State Colonial Bank.

The fashion for recycling is, I trust, stemming this, and I sincerely hope that that fashion is developing into an ethic, but I am cynical in disbelieving that adaptive reuse and conservation are synonymous. Salvation does not lie in adaptive reuse, although that may be one rocky road to salvation. I was puzzled earlier this year when I received an invitation to the National Trust's Heritage Conservation Awards, to be announced in a reception room in a new city hotel. Why at an hotel? Then someone told me that it was the General Post Office, but the awards were to be at the Westin Hotel – the G.P.O. no longer existed.

What's in a name? A lot, I think, in the community's consciousness and sense of history and place. I am profoundly saddened when now I walk through Martin Place. One of the social *foci* of the city – a city with very few such *foci* – has been destroyed. The G.P.O. no longer exists. It's architectural style remains; the fabric largely remains (except for anything which has to do with the Post Office). Everything else – its history, its role as a major civic building in a major civic space – has been destroyed. Its rape has not been as violent as that of the Conservatorium. But rape, the forced theft of its historical integrity – call it what you will – has left a shell, an expensively plumaged swan. As I walk along its lifeless arcade with its barricaded doors hiding expensive boutiques, I don't know which offends me more – the tawdry mini supermarket to which the Post Office has been degraded at one end, or the up-to-the minute stylish private banking office – vulgar in an ever-so-smartly designed way – at the other end. It makes me remember fondly the old disfiguring partitions and telephone booths. They gave a public purpose to a public building. Both have been lost.

Adaptive Reuse: Continuity and Creativity

If the purpose of a building is part of its historical significance, adaptive reuse can be as destructive as architectural remodelling. The city becomes a disorientating sham. 'Why, it's all just like a game of charades', thought Alice. Thank you.

That's just to show that I don't really condone architectural fashion, but 'Well, Gees, your honor, if I 'adn't done it, gentle-like, someone else would 'a done it, and besides they was asking for it'.



The former General Post Office, Martin Place, Sydney

