

Whitehall: House Of History

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The building "Whitehall" in the Manly-Balgowlah community has had numerous uses over time, from being the residence of Australia's first prime minister in the late 19th Century to its contemporary function as a place of gathering for the Norwegian Church Abroad. This article explores how the shift in purpose of Whitehall over time has shaped the identities of the people who interact with the site, as well as raising issues of the interplay between tradition and modernity present in the local community: The heritage listing of Whitehall offers an interesting insight into the importance of protecting the physicality of history and memory in Western traditions, whilst the changing uses of the site suggest a constant evolution of the values in multicultural Australia today. Through the lenses of archival research, personal interviews and published literature, this article examines Whitehall in a way that acknowledges the cultural, political and emotional significance of the building and its role in creating a sense of collective belonging through shared memories and experiences within the local community.

Keywords: Modernity, Tradition, Victorian Gothic Architecture, Norwegian Church Abroad, Spatial Interaction, Federation, Multiculturalism

Introduction

Like Whitehall, our lives are defined equally by physical attributes and events, the people we interact with, and the changes that occur inside us.

Australia became its own federated nation in 1901 under the first Prime minister, Edmund Barton. Compared to the rest of the world, modern Australia is a young country with little more than a century of political, technological and architectural history. Having been colonised by Britain, most of our cultural traditions are adopted from a society on the other side of the world. Thus, the changing nature of Australia's social context raises interesting questions about what tradition means for our society, and how modernity reveals itself in our surrounding environment through the evolving cultural demands of people and how they interact with the spaces around them. In the years between 1888 and 189, prior to his election as Australia's first prime minister, Edmund Barton lived with his family in a stately cottage in Balgowlah near Manly. The house, now named Whitehall, is one of Australia's earliest surviving examples of original Victorian Gothic architecture. The site is now occupied by the Norwegian Church Abroad, who use it as a place of spiritual worship and a community centre for Scandinavians living in Australia. The house is also on the Register of the National Estate. These ideas of architecture, spatial interaction and shifting identities of the local community represent the interplay between tradition and modernity: Whitehall is now a site for upholding Norwegian customs and culture, yet for many, it also symbolises the time of federation which characterises our modern nation today. Thus, this site plays a crucial role in unifying the local community through providing a place where people can engage with their own histories and traditions whilst sharing with the different experiences of those around them.

Architecture

The architecture that makes up our physical society is an embodiment of our beliefs and reflection of our identity at certain times throughout history. Although the builder and designer are unknown, Whitehall is an example of picturesque mid Victorian Gothic architecture. Acknowledging the details of this architectural style becomes important when considering the views of Dixon and Muthesius in relation to modernity:

“With the growing Enlightenment and liberalism, writers began to stress that each civilisation should be judged on its own merits by its own criteria. This was an incentive to search for differences of thought, manners, and of architectural styles.” (1978, pp. 19-20)

Thus, modernity can be interpreted as the aspiration for society to distinguish itself from previous generations through innovation and progress, seen in the reference to Pollard within Wright’s work: “Western cultural tradition still believes in the Victorian idea of progress: the assumption that... “it consists of irreversible changes in one direction, and that this direction is towards improvement.”” (2004 p. 3) In the case of Whitehall and other buildings in the mid 1800s, this is visually evident through the emergence of new building styles and features which would effectively label the structure as contemporary and desirable, such as taking the “form of a three storeyed building, no longer having a basement...entrance located on the ground floor and protected by a small porch; bay window; plate glass” which are listed in Avery’s guide to *Victorian and Edwardian Architecture* (2003, p. 18). At the time of Barton’s residence, these features, as well as the ballroom and drawing room, would have had context-specific functions such as hosting evening dinners and dances; necessary for Barton playing the role of a man with respected political position.

Yet, in addition to offering modern features, this example of architecture also reflects a heritage and cultural identity as ‘Victorian Gothic’ was considered a national style for England. The style draws on architectural themes and inspirations from the middle ages seen through its picturesque and romantic motifs, steep-pitched rooves and stained glass. This is still relevant to our national heritage and traditions today because of Australia’s history of colonisation by the British. For many people, Britain’s history forms part of our history. The Australian government recognises and honours buildings as integral to our national history; a representation of the past that has shaped the people we are today. For many, Whitehall is a symbol of the foundation of our modern, democratic nation and this is acknowledged through its protection on the Register of the National Estate since 2002, as well as the actions of Manly Council to call upon the Federal Government “to purchase Whitehall and turn it into a Museum to commemorate our first Prime Minister.” (*Service Planning and Commissioning Committee*, 2002). The 1970s extension on the house is termed “unsympathetic,” personifying this part of the building as though it hurts or diminishes the culturally embedded value of the rest of the house. Subsequently, understanding the site of Whitehall helps enforce the idea that upholding traditions and customs contribute to a place or person’s sense of integrity and identity.

Most of the house’s structure still stands the same today as when it was inhabited by Barton and his family in the 1890s. However, the utility of the house’s features have changed. For the Norwegian Church Abroad, the ballroom provides the perfect setting for community dinners, the large kitchen hosts free family breakfasts of Norwegian porridge on Saturdays and the small room on the top floor offers a sanctuary for private prayer. Thus, over the past century the original rooms and architectural features have been reinterpreted to accommodate the new needs of a people and culture that are very different from the initial purpose of the building. It

is interesting that through being Heritage listed, Whitehall is protected from physical change, yet is still open to changes in use and ownership. This highlights a juxtaposition between the protection of aesthetic traditions and culture with the modernism of developing new purposes and meaning for the site of Whitehall, essentially forming a compromise between the old and new, past and present. This allows new meaning and significance to be given to the building for another generation of Australians regardless of their cultural origins. Understanding these issues allows us to consider other ways we can revitalise and share our surrounding physical environment so that all common spaces are accessible for people of diverse backgrounds to enjoy.

Human interaction with the Space

The needs of the local Manly and Balgowlah community are reflected through the fluidity of the functions Whitehall has served – for example politically, as the house of the first Prime minister, educationally, as Winchester Boys College after Barton moved out, and religiously, as the Norwegian Church Abroad today. This reinforces the words of Kant and aids in our understanding of how modernity is linked to progress and change:

“One age cannot bind itself, and thus conspire, to place a succeeding one in a condition whereby it would be impossible for the later age to expand its knowledge, to rid itself of errors, and generally increase its enlightenment. That would be a crime against human nature, whose essential destiny lies precisely in such progress.” (1784, p. 2)

In other words, beliefs, regulations and institutions need to change with context, to enable not only physical progress in technology and construction, but in thought and social issues. The idea of the unification of one federated Australian nation in 1901 links to ideas of pursuing ‘one truth’ through one leader, one constitution and one nation, subsequently grounded in modernist principles. This idea of progress and power is outlined by Wright when he discusses how “we moved beyond the environments that had made us, and began to make ourselves” (2004, p. 13). Understanding this is crucial in reflecting on the early significance of Whitehall as the home of the first prime minister, and in comprehending why some local residents have imbued the site with a sense of unparalleled importance to Australia’s history.

Now the site is the centre for Norwegian worship and community events. This incites interesting issues of preserving foreign cultural traditions, yet also relates to ideas of national modernity as Australia progresses towards being more multicultural and offering community services for different people’s needs. This conveys the inherent conflict between societal ideals of modernity and tradition in contemporary Australia. In an interview personally conducted with the Norwegian minister at Balgowlah, Lena Skaug, she discussed how Whitehall is “a port to come to when away from home,” (Skaug, 2011) offering a variety of religious and community services for the Scandinavian community, such as school dinners for exchange students, movie nights for the elderly, a playgroup for children and special services like prayer memorials after the recent Norwegian bombing and massacre that occurred in July. This represents the prevalence of both modernity and tradition within the one building, and in a broader sense, contemporary Australian society. However, there was conflict within the local area when the house was up for private sale before being bought by the Norwegian Church. The push by community members to preserve the house as a museum of federation indicates another desire: paradoxical to progression, many local residents wanted to cling to Whitehall as a tangible safe haven of their past heritage. It is interesting to consider what elements of the

building people have a connection with. Is the physical architecture precious and valuable? Does it represent memories and a lifestyle that have long since passed? Or is it a deeper tie to events that happened within the space, like Barton's conception of the ideas that later formed our national constitution? All these issues relate back to how people interact with places, and how this forms our identity. Lydon presents the idea that "scholars across several disciplines have drawn attention to the privileged status assigned visual and spatial forms of knowledge in the Western intellectual tradition." (2005, p. 212). Lydon's theory of Western Knowledge translates into the context of Whitehall, suggesting that the preservation and functioning of the building itself represents the local history of Manly far more than written or oral stories, because people from Western cultures tend to place more emphasis on their connection to physical, tangible objects. This contrasts to other cultures such as Indigenous Australians who construct their identity through the retelling of stories, as explained by Barney in Cowlshaw's work: "I've got an identity. That's all I need to know. I don't need to walk around with war paint on, advertising who I am" (2009, p. 189). The contrary Western desire to attach oneself to visual and physical indicators of history explains why there was such a push by long-term Manly residents to transform Whitehall into a museum.

However the theories of Guiraud in *Semiology* (1978, pp. 82 – 83) are also helpful in understanding how human interactions shape social routines and identity, sometimes establishing a common ground to relate to people who are different: "Rites, ceremonies, festivals, fashions and games are ways of communicating, by means of which the individual defines himself in relation to the group and the group in relation to society." This point not only refers to Whitehall, but can be taken further to include the process of interacting with sites and spaces throughout our present day community. When people engage with places over time through living, visiting or working there, it creates a sense of organisation and attributes individual roles and significance within a social structure, aiding in a feeling of collective belonging and history through shared memories at the same site. On a microcosmic level, this is how Whitehall can be seen as unifying past, present and future citizens or visitors of the Manly-Balgowlah area.

The shifting identity of Balgowlah, and on a broader level, Australia

The architecture of Whitehall as well as the changing ways people interact with the site represent the blur between modernity and tradition in the local community, as well as the nation as a whole. There is a clear shift away from ideas of colonisation and Australia's early cultural links to Britain, towards embracing multiculturalism as a way of progressing forward – seen metaphorically through the different community interests of Sir Edmund Barton and the Norwegian Church. According to Gillen and Ghosh, "all history is the history of colonisation, because all of us get to where we are from somewhere else." (2007, p. 14). This path of modernity and progress is shown through the initial colonisation of Britain, which then colonised Australia, which is now home to many different cultures, like Norwegian.

Australia's national policy has changed from one of assimilation for the Aborigines in the early settler era, to one of multiculturalism for other minority groups now (1861, p. 510). This suggests that modern, enlightened thinking can involve embracing other people's customs and traditions in order to achieve social unity and cohesion. This progression towards embracing multiculturalism and allowing continual, fluid changes in social practices, as seen in the ownership and spatial interactions with Whitehall, can seem contrary to ideas of tradition and ritual – words which naturally imply a fixed identity and process of doing things which is embedded in the past. However, through understanding the site of Whitehall, it becomes clear

that traditions can evolve too, taking on new meaning and relevance to the people who partake of them as a result of integration with the existing memories and environment that form the cultural surroundings.

Ang and Stratton discuss the implications of Australia adopting a multicultural political discourse for long-term Australian citizens who do not associate themselves with other cultural backgrounds, proposing that they lose their ability to relate to their own past and culture:

“As a result, there is a gap between the neat official representation of "multicultural Australia" on the one hand, and the contradictory everyday experiences and historical memories of these people on the other – experiences and memories which remain unaccounted for, or are even denied and disclaimed, by the official discourse.” (1996, p. 26)

However, interpreting the site of Whitehall offers an alternative to this theory, showing that exposure to other cultures can essentially form a new history for other Australians through altering the meaning and relevance of their own past experiences. For example, when traditional Norwegian and colonial Australian histories unite at Whitehall, they give meaning to each other and create a broader sense of significance for the site of Whitehall: through acknowledging the importance of the unification of Australia’s many individual states in 1901 we can apply a similar understanding to the importance of embracing different cultures and traditions within Australia today. Thus, Australia’s federation can still hold relevance today to new Australians from other cultures, just as long-term citizens can benefit from the traditions and practices of a multicultural nation. In this way, a sense of collective belonging arises through the sharing and integration of memories and ideas.

Thomas investigates Ang and Stratton’s idea of identity further, accounting for the feelings of long-term Australians on a society-wide level: “With the rise and institutionalisation of multiculturalism, ‘identity’ is associated increasingly with cultural difference and minority status which is unavailable to the dominant culture” (1994, p. 182). Again, this reinforces the notion that perhaps we need to consider defining identity based on collective interests and shared experiences, rather than clinging to what makes us an individual in the group. In this way, the amalgamation of past and present histories and cultures that occurs at the site of Whitehall offers a contemporary working example of the positive social implications that can result from sharing stories and spaces with people in a community.

Conclusion

Tradition does not have to deny change, just as modernity does not need to focus only on the future. Understanding the physicality of the Whitehall building and the ways it meets the needs of changing owners proves how architectural features which were termed ‘innovative’ over a century ago can still offer new functions today, even if they are now ‘traditional’ and heritage listed. In this way, Whitehall proves how customs can be revitalised and reinterpreted to include new groups of people who offer their own unique insights and ways of thinking, leading to greater social inclusion. This carries social and political significance for the rest of Australian society in the present day through its ability to offer a working model for embracing multiculturalism whilst retaining a firm sense of historic Australian identity. Naturally, conflicting interests are represented through the relocation and adaptation of Norwegian religious traditions within a Sydney house that has historic links to the founding of the

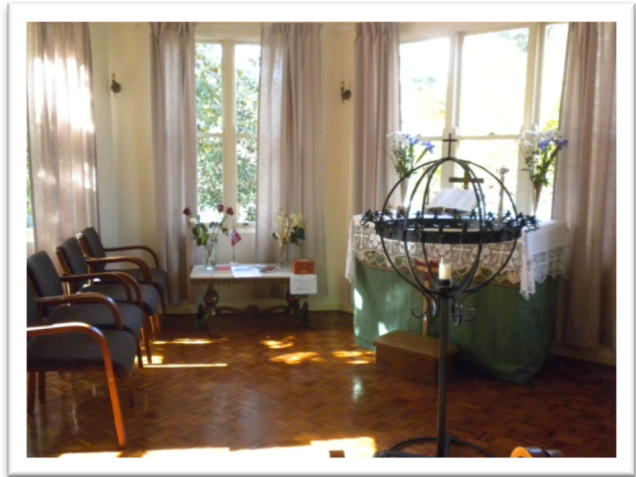
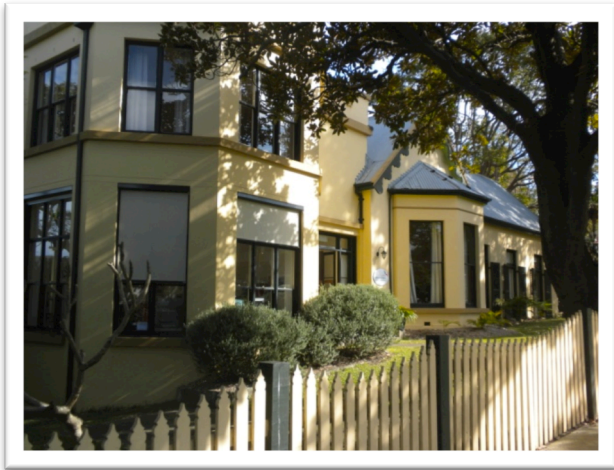
Australian nation. However, this situation ultimately conveys how traditions need to change to suit evolving social contexts, whilst keeping their meaning rooted in experiences of the past. This form of progression honours the past at the same time as accepting that life much change and continue. Subsequently, a compromise is met between ideas of modernity and tradition which has the ability to empower contemporary society and validate the past, present and future lives of those people living within a multicultural Australia.

Notes on contributor

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(Personally taken photographs of Whitehall's interior and exterior; 11 August, 2011)

