

The Walter Reid Community Arts Centre

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August 2004

The Walter Reid Building in which this Conference is being held, is a former warehouse, since 1977 used as an Arts Centre. Conference delegates will have had an opportunity to walk through it and no doubt have formed an opinion about the success or otherwise of this conversion.

Frank Brabazon Rudd was transferred to Rockhampton, the head office, of Walter Reid & Co, from the Brisbane branch in the early 1950s. His grandfather, William Rudd, was the Managing Director, his father a Director. In his recently published memoir, *Half a Lifetime*, he writes:

The first thing that hit me in Rockhampton was the leading status of Walter Reid and Co. in a city of many warehouses. The firm's history had begun in 1862 when Walter Reid walked into the collection of huts that was Rockhampton; keen to try his luck on the new gold fields nearby. When told the gold was running out, he took a job in a bush store on the riverbank¹.

Frank Rudd describes his daily work, 'more interesting than in Brisbane, but my private life was humdrum, to say the least'². He quotes Cameron Forbes, then a journalist on *The Morning Bulletin*:

In general, culture in Rockhampton was practised among small groups of consenting adults, and exotica was take away sweet and sour from Wong Hing's. Sophistication was a blue tuxedo and Barossa Pearl³.

Rudd's views on the city improved as he made friends and became part of a community.

Now the warehouse is an arts centre, and 'culture', if that means the creative arts and crafts, is openly practised in this building. Its conversion to arts centre reflects economic

¹ F.B.Rudd, *Half a Lifetime in the Australian Bush: a Memoir*, Central Queensland University Press, Rockhampton, 2004:75-76.

² *Ibid*:76.

³ *Ibid*:77.

and social changes driven by new means of trade, transport and communication and by different balances between work and leisure which have accelerated in the last fifty years. In cities everywhere, warehouses in city centres have been left empty while new needs have arisen for places where people can participate in leisure activities. At the same time, interest in Australia's heritage has grown, as pioneering times have passed and people have questioned what is valuable in our towns and cities. Local government bodies have responsibilities both for the physical fabric of the towns they administer and for the well being of those who live in them. It is therefore most appropriate that they play a key role in making connections between buildings and citizens' needs and activities and heritage.

Rockhampton is one of many cities where warehouses have been adapted to new uses. You may have visited the Rocks District of Sydney and Salamanca Place in Hobart. Argyle Stores, the first building in the Rocks to be converted, was first used by craftspeople and I recall it as an exciting place to visit in the late 1970s. It is now occupied by tourist-oriented businesses⁴.

An example of warehouse to arts centre, converted at almost the same time as our building, exists in Brisbane, where the former Coronation House, a warehouse of 3,000 square metres in Edward Street, became a Community Arts Centre. It was built in the 1880s and 1890s, with brick walls and heavy timber posts and floors. The conversion was complicated by the need to conform to the fire safety requirements of the City Council and also by the gap between the initial Commonwealth grant of \$370,500 and the cost of renovations⁵. The Centre, established under a Trust set up by the Australia Council, is now called Metroarts, Community Arts Venue and Arts Incubator, and houses two galleries, two performance spaces, artists' studios and arts organisations, rehearsal

⁴ A. Latreille, P. Latreille and P. Lovell, *New Uses for Old Buildings in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1982:70.

⁵ *Ibid*:58

⁶ Metroarts!Community Arts Venue and Arts Incubator, www.gobrisbanecity.com/brisbane/expressionsdancecompany2049.asp accessed 5/4/04

and meeting spaces, a restaurant and coffee shop⁶. I do not know how successful this centre is, but Coronation House was just one of many warehouses in Brisbane and I doubt it has the iconic quality that our building has for Rockhampton.

Warehouses offer many attractions: space, solid construction, central city location and aesthetic qualities. Prince Charles, whose well known aversion to modern architecture has been the subject of some mockery, has commented that

many [industrial buildings] stand at the core of the communities which grew up around them, and remain icons for their towns and cities ... Many were built to the highest architectural standards of their day and despite the passage of time remain in remarkably good condition⁷

He also observed that they ‘reflect something of the natural world and of the innate urge to beautify our surroundings through human craftsmanship’⁸.

This building was built as the second warehouse for the merchant company of Walter Reid & Co. It was built in 1900–1902, as the first building completed in 1894, on the Quay Street corner of Derby Street, had become too small for the expanding business. By this time the business was no longer owned by Walter Reid, the Scots merchant who had founded it with a retail store in East Street in 1862. In its heyday general merchandise, hardware, wine and spirits were brought up river from Keppel Bay by lighters and unloaded at the river wharves. The first stage of the Central Queensland Railway opened in 1867 and was extended to Bogantungan by 1893, ensuring that the western trade passed through Rockhampton. Although towns were small, the pastoral stations had their own stores, from which they supplied their employees with everything from boots to tobacco, as well as needing stocks of fencing wire, and general farm and building materials. Close personal relations grew between warehouse and customer,

⁷ Prince of Wales, ‘Making heritage industrial buildings work’; a conference organised by Regeneration through Heritage, 1999:2, My documents, \conference\The Prince of Wales – Speeches. htm, accessed 4/5/04.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 5.

evident in the letter which Cedric Wills of Cullin-la-ringo station wrote on 8 January 1891, with a request from his troublesome aunt, Mrs Roope, ‘for a case of ale like the last you supplied her with...Mrs Roope cannot make me understand what sort of ale she wants but you will know by your book what you supplied previously’⁹. Commercial travellers who collected and transmitted orders were the link between the warehouse and the consumer.

Walter Reid sold the business in 1881 to McIlwraith McEachern, who retained its name. Two directors of Walter Reid & Co, Rees Jones and John Ferguson, acquired the site; Rockhampton architects Hutton and Hockings designed the warehouse which was built by Dennis Kelleher, in 1900–1902. The building is three storeyed, of unpainted cement-rendered masonry; the unrendered brickwork can be seen facing Quay Lane. The internal framing is of hardwood timber columns, bearers and joists, which impress by their size and recall the majesty of the trees from which they were cut. The roof was of iron, saw tooth with clerestory windows. Flooring of wide, rough sawn boards was laid and ceilings on the ground and first floors lined with galvanised ripple iron¹⁰. Over the floor boards on the top floor concrete was later laid, as reinforcing for the tinware shop where tin products from watering cans to roofing were manufactured. The building was divided internally into three sections by masonry walls. A carriage way, now blocked by the Climbing Center, ran through the building from East Street to Quay Lane. The main construction features are now visible and give an impression of size and strength as they recall the natural world from which they came and the huts and shelters of bush timber and iron of the first white settlers in the district.

The historic significance of the Walter Reid Building is not in its age or association with great events or important people but arises from its function and context. It recalls the commercial foundations of Rockhampton on the river and the city’s role in the settlement and industrial growth of Central Queensland. It is a solid witness to the past and involves

⁹ Cedric Wills to Messrs Walter Reid & Co., 8/1/1891, in Cullin-la-Ringo letterbook Sept. 1891-March 1894.

¹⁰ Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle, Walter Reid Community Arts Centre, Rockhampton: a conservation study for the Rockhampton City Council, 1995:18.

us ‘in a mostly unreflecting, or at least compulsive, participation ...in the continuum of past-and-present’¹¹. Graeme Davison suggests that what makes a building ‘historic’ is that ‘it throws light on a significant aspect of the lives of people of the past’ and suggests that we regard a building as a ‘document’ which we interpret so that we become aware of the processes of cultural and social change that have altered and refurbished it. The present phase of this building is another layer in the ‘palimpsest’, or parchment, that has been written upon, crossed out and written on again¹².

Much more could be said about the architectural quality and historic significance of the building, but the detail is well documented both in the heritage citation and the conservation study done for the RCC by Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle in 1994-5. I will now move on to the building’s adaptation as community arts centre.

By the 1970s the great days of warehousing and commercial travellers were finished, by the advent of supermarkets, improved road transport and instant telecommunications. Walter Reid had given up wholesaling and both its Rockhampton warehouses were for sale. At the same time Rockhampton had reached maturity as a city, with its basic infrastructural needs of water, sealed roads and sewerage completed. Life for its citizens had changed too, especially for women, as time spent on housework was reduced by labour saving devices. Several generations had passed since the pioneers first unloaded on the banks of the Fitzroy; people who had spent their lives in Central Queensland retired from work; a University College had been established. The little theatre, art and photography, weaving and patchwork, all had active practitioners, working together and needing meeting and performance places. There was a new interest in the arts from the Federal Government and the Australia Council for the Arts was founded, dispensing money. Rockhampton had a Mayor, Rex Pilbeam, whose energetic fund-raising became legendary, and whose domination of the Council allowed him to pursue his vision of the city. It was his vision and energy that built the Pilbeam Theatre and Rockhampton Art Gallery and raised an acquisition fund which has acquired a wonderful art collection.

¹¹ A. Atkinson, ‘Heritage, self, and place’, *Australian cultural history*, no.23, 2003:162.

¹² G. Davison, *The use and abuse of Australian history*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000:141-144.

Moreover, he had a strong interest in the welfare of young people and the support of young talent.

Pilbeam had seen the Argyle Centre in Sydney and was instrumental in the purchase by the RCC of the former Bulimba Brewery in 1972-3. It was intended as a training centre for young people once funds had been raised for its conversion, but nothing was done with it. It served as a props store for the Little Theatre and the Musical Union, until it burned down¹³

In 1975, Max Scott, then Walter Reid's Rockhampton Manager, offered this warehouse building to RCC for \$160,000. The offer was accepted; Pilbeam's vision at this time was to create what he called a Picanninny Centre for Young People¹⁴. Council agreed to the proposal in August 1975.

The conversion predates the Burra Charter which was first adopted in 1979; the main constraints for the task were the need to ensure conformity with the fire safety regulations, and cost, which ensured changes were minimal. Fire escape stairs were built on the East Street and Quay Lane elevations, a passenger lift was installed and partitions were built to provide suitable tenants' spaces. Toilets and bathrooms had been installed during the Second World War when the building was used as an American Army Hotel and Red Cross recreational club. Purchase and conversion cost the city approximately \$500,000.

The first tenants included spinners and weavers, potters, the lapidary club, art and camera groups, Little Theatre and Junior Little Theatre, the Chamber Music Society and the Youth Orchestra. Space was leased rent and rate free for leases of twenty or thirty years with a condition that groups concentrate on the training of youth and the support of youthful talent¹⁵. Pilbeam's dominant presence meant he had no difficulty in gaining the

¹³ Gordon Shields, Oral interview 10 May 2004.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Walter Reid Community Arts Centre, Official Opening Ceremony, Programme*, Rockhampton City Council, 1975.

support of the City Council for this project, but the emphasis on youth assured its passage. Gordon Shields commented ‘Training of young people was an integral part of getting the lease. Children were the basis of the whole show’¹⁶.

Over the years the building received little maintenance and deteriorated, moreover, this end of town lacked activity and was in danger of dereliction. The building had been entered on the Queensland Heritage Register and the National Trust Register; RCC, assisted by the Queensland Heritage Grants Scheme, called tenders for a conservation study and in 1994; architects Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle were the successful tenderers¹⁷.

They worked with the principles established in the Burra Charter, especially Article 21, on Adaptation, which states that

21.1 Adaptation is acceptable only where the adaptation has minimal impact on the cultural significance of the place.

21.2. Adaptation should involve minimal change to significant fabric, achieved only after considering alternatives¹⁸.

From this Allom Lovell Marquis Kyle developed four basic principles: to reveal hidden aspects of the building and the substantial scale of its interior spaces and to increase natural light; to consolidate existing service areas including the positioning of the vehicle access and the drive-in service delivery; to develop a circulation hierarchy for access and movement around the building; to develop a planning logic in the allocation and arrangement of spaces and their relative location. When Tony Madden Architects, a Rockhampton firm, won the tender for the refurbishment and gained approval from the Heritage Council, their plan closely followed these principles¹⁹.

¹⁶ Gordon Shields, Oral interview 10 May 2004.

¹⁷ Conservation study- School of Arts, Customs House and Walter Reid Centre; draft report 1994 RCC file T EN 94/3; Final Report 1995 file T EN 9/4/3.

¹⁸ *The Burra Charter; the Australian ICOMOS Charter for Places of Historic Significance 1999*, Australia ICOMOS, Burwood Vic, 2000,:7.

¹⁹ Application for Approval under the Queensland Heritage Act for signing by Council, by Tony Madden Architect and Interiors Pty Ltd , 3/9/01, RCC file T EN 01.2.4

The use of glass and light metal, the removal of long corridors and low ceilings and the development of the entrance foyer on Derby Street have opened up the building. The architect's use of glowing colour makes a major contribution to the building's liveability; this has been enhanced by art works at the entrance and in the public spaces on each floor. As a member of a tenant group and a Rockhampton ratepayer, I admit to a deal of pleasure each time I enter the building.

There have been times of anguish, however, and the preservation of heritage by local government will compete with other priorities and ratepayer demands. Zoe Scott and Tom Upton wrote recently of five serious challenges which clearly are relevant to this city's publicly owned heritage buildings. They are the challenge of funding, the challenge of relevance, the challenge of duplication, the challenge of coordination and collaboration and the challenge of management²⁰. The authors suggest that the linking of heritage with tourism is the light at the end of the tunnel²¹. I would like to consider these five challenges and relate them to the Walter Reid Centre.

Firstly, the challenge of funding. Acquired with the help of government grants and refurbished with the assistance of heritage funds, the large costs have been met. I have not attempted to consider the difficulties which had to be overcome to gain and retain funding, but the cost of maintenance is a perennial issue. Throughout the eighties and into the nineties, the Centre struggled to maintain an adequate standard of amenity with minimal income. The general deterioration and upkeep of the building were regularly raised at Committee Meetings, and the Council was looked to for appropriate action. The then President of the Tenants' Committee, Don Knowles, commented in August 1995:

The support we received in the past, as the focus of community art in Rockhampton, seems to have faded away in these stringent economic times²².

²⁰ Zoe Scott and Tom Upton, 'Heritage partnerships: challenges and opportunities', *ARTery*, 2nd ed, Nov. 2003:14-15.

²¹ *Ibid*:15.

²² Walter Reid Cultural Centre Tenants' Committee, President's Report for 1994-5, Aug. 1995.

It is unlikely that the costs of maintenance will ever be met by the building's tenants. When the prospect of tenants funding maintenance was raised at a Tenants' Committee meeting in November 1992, the Committee's bank balance was \$324.63²³. Moreover, maintenance is seen to be the responsibility of the owners, the Rockhampton City Council, which must ensure that maintenance conforms to the provisions of the Heritage Act.

Commercial use of the ground floor has been proposed and a retail arcade was to be part of the refurbished building. This has not yet been realised²⁴. Without a large increase in visitor numbers, probably dependent on tourism, sales are unlikely to provide significant income. Perhaps space could be found on the ground floor for an interpretive display about the building; it should not be difficult to marshal the tenants' talents to develop a display attractive to tourists that imaginatively illustrates the past of regional commerce and transport.

Relevance might be deleted from the list of challenges. The need for a community arts venue can only grow, as demographic change ensures no lack of potential users who have moved on from their working lives and have leisure time to pursue their interests. However, Zoe Scott and Tom Upton rightly identified 'the importance of preserving, maintaining and supporting heritage within both the broader community and Council. This often means the partnership between Council and community can fluctuate as different priorities emerge'²⁵. At present our Council is engaged with heritage issues, but there are differing views of what Rockhampton is about, as is evident in the many plaster models of bulls, built by various interest groups, around the city. A stranger might ask, are these religious icons? The National Trust has a role as a lobby group in keeping heritage issues before the community; unfortunately the Rockhampton branch is in abeyance, but its voice may be needed. It was the Trust that led the protest when Brisbane's Customs House was under threat from a planned addition to an abutting

²³ Walter Reid Cultural Centre Tenants' Committee, Minutes of the meeting 2 November 1992.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 12 March 1996.

²⁵ Zoe Scott and Tom Upton, *op cit*:14.

building of four to six storeys; with its regional groups and membership which can be quickly mobilised the Trust continues to have a key role in the protection of heritage²⁶.

Mayor Pilbeam forestalled opposition to his plans for this building by insisting on a focus on youth. Retaining this focus is a challenge when young people have such a diversity of activities to choose from and as many tenant groups consist of older people, programs to attract young people can be difficult to fit in. Nevertheless, they are especially evident participants in weekend activities.

Relevance might be considered from another viewpoint. How relevant is the current use of this building to its original purpose; does it relate to its heritage significance? Graeme Aplin asks

Is saving a heritage site at the expense of a major change that impacts on its significance worthwhile? Is the significance great enough, and can enough of it be retained? Is there no viable alternative?²⁷

Certainly the significance of this building has been severely impacted on, but not lost. Of the historic themes devised by the Australian Heritage Commission with which the building is linked, what clearly remains is the theme of ‘remembering significant phases in the development of settlements, towns and cities’²⁸. The original warehouse is still evident, enhanced by the recent refurbishment which opened up its spaces. The reply to Aplin’s third question is, No, there was no viable alternative. With its bulky presence dominating lower East Street, close to the river, its original purpose will remain in community memory and should be protected in the City Plan which in draft form contains new controls recommended in the *Urban Heritage & Character Study*

²⁶ ‘Brisbane’s Customs House under threat!!’ insert to *Heritage Intrust*, winter 2002.

²⁷ G.Aplin, *Heritage: Identification, Conservation, and Management*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2002:134.

²⁸ *Australian historic themes: a framework for use in heritage assessment and management*, Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra, 2001.

commissioned by the Council²⁹. The precinctual model which it used recognises the significance of this part of the City.

Duplication is potentially a challenge, not that another such building exists in the district, but as uses and support for other Council owned sites are sought. However, the facilities available in Walter Reid are unlikely to be repeated elsewhere.

Coordination and collaboration between user groups, the City's cultural groups and between all levels of government must continue if this building is to enjoy long life as a community cultural centre. This challenge is closely linked to the challenge of management, where the issues of funding, maintenance, tenants' leases and heritage conditions all reside.

The most difficult issue in the whole process of refurbishment was that of the tenants' leases. These were mostly for thirty years from 1981 with rents at concessional rates. Council had to commence a negotiation process with tenants to voluntarily relinquish ten years of their leases in return for improved facilities, while Council had to forgo its goals of full-cost pricing and user pays³⁰. It was also anticipated that some tenants would share space. A Reference Group was formed in 2001, to participate in the planning of the refurbishment and resolution of the lease issue. Consisting of Councillors and Council staff, the Architect and two representatives of the tenants, it worked with patience and persistence through these issues. The Tenants' Committee has been re-energised since the difficult days of the eighties, and in the refurbished Centre a Council employed Promotions Officer liaises with user groups. The renegotiation of leases has yet to be completed but a shared commitment to the Centre's future requires continuing cooperation between tenants and the Council.

The refurbished Walter Reid Community Arts Centre has ensured a continued life for an iconic heritage building, connects us with our city's past and enlivens a part of the City

²⁹ Allom Lovell Architects, *Urban heritage & character study for the Rockhampton City Council*, Brisbane, 2000.

³⁰ Legal advice, Swanwick Murray Roche to CEO, RCC, 7/9/01, File EN 01.2.4.

which was at some risk of dereliction. Through the efforts of Council, the professional skills of architects and the creative activities of tenants practising their arts and crafts and working co-operatively, the building has been successfully adapted, its heritage quality sustained and the City's artistic and cultural life enriched.

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