University estates as cultural property

On the face of it, most purpose-built Australian university campuses are culturally significant places worthy of extensive heritage protection and intensive conservation work. Certainly, several of the older campuses have robust systems for protecting buildings, if not landscapes and places more widely, and invest significant resources in building conservation. Moreover, many newer Australian tertiary institutions, especially those that have emerged or grown mostly in the period since the Dawkins reforms of the 1980s, have actively sought to become institutional agents of conservation, acquiring prominent historic properties as a way of associating themselves with a historic tradition or providing a kind of credential as a steward of cultural property. As discussed in Chapter 10, institutions such as NDA in Fremantle and Deakin at its Waterfront campus in Geelong have become active in the process of historic urban renewal via adaptive re-use of warehouses and other buildings that are recognised as possessing cultural value in their respective cities. In a more conventional manner, and going back some time, other institutions have acquired key historic properties and used these as a basis on which to build a more expansive campus. From the 1950s onwards, UNE built its rural campus at Armidale around the mansion Booloominbah (1888), designed by John Horbury Hunt. Charles Sturt University's Bathurst campus (1989 onwards) is built around the existing Bathurst Teachers' College buildings, which were designed before WWI by Walter Liberty Vernon for the former Bathurst Experiment Farm. As a third example, Western Sydney University's Rydalmere campus has been developed on the site of the former Female Orphan School (1813–18) and maintains the state heritage-listed building – one of the oldest extant colonial buildings in NSW – as the home of its Whitlam Institute (Figure 11.1).[5]

In general, a fairly conventional sense of obligation to heritage, namely the protecting of historic buildings, forms part of the wider estate management process at several of the more established institutions. This is most pronounced at institutions such as USYD, UoA, UWA, and UoM, where intact traditionally collegiate buildings from the earliest phases of development survive as individual landmark buildings and sometimes as coherent ensembles.[6] The value of these landmark buildings on campus, and the quadrangles and cloisters of which they are part, is made manifest by their deployment in university brochures, on websites, and throughout all manner of branded material. Much university marketing reveals that there is an iterative dependence on the core set of historic buildings to frame the relationship of the campus to

Figure 11.1

Former Female Orphan School (1813–18), now the Whitlam Institute at Western Sydney University following restoration work, c.2003. Source: rayjoycephotography.com. Photographer: Ray Joyce.

an authorised idea of institutional identity and student life. This broadly reflects a longstanding concern with, and dependence on, tradition that has been ascendant on Australian campuses. But as this book reveals, such dependence was challenged and recast by the rapid growth and expansive physical development of the sector in the post-war decades. Modern architecture, planning, and new approaches to landscape design were all central to that process.

The story of Wilson Hall by Reed and Barnes (1882) at UoM highlights the shifting meanings of the campus in the post-war decades. Fire destroyed its roof and badly damaged other sections on 25 January 1952 (Figure 11.2). Consequently, the institution's leaders faced a difficult choice – one that divided the university community. Should its most significant building be reconstructed and restored in such a way that honoured established traditions and architectural forms? Or should the university update its public image, and save a considerable amount of money, by opting for a modern replacement? Many members
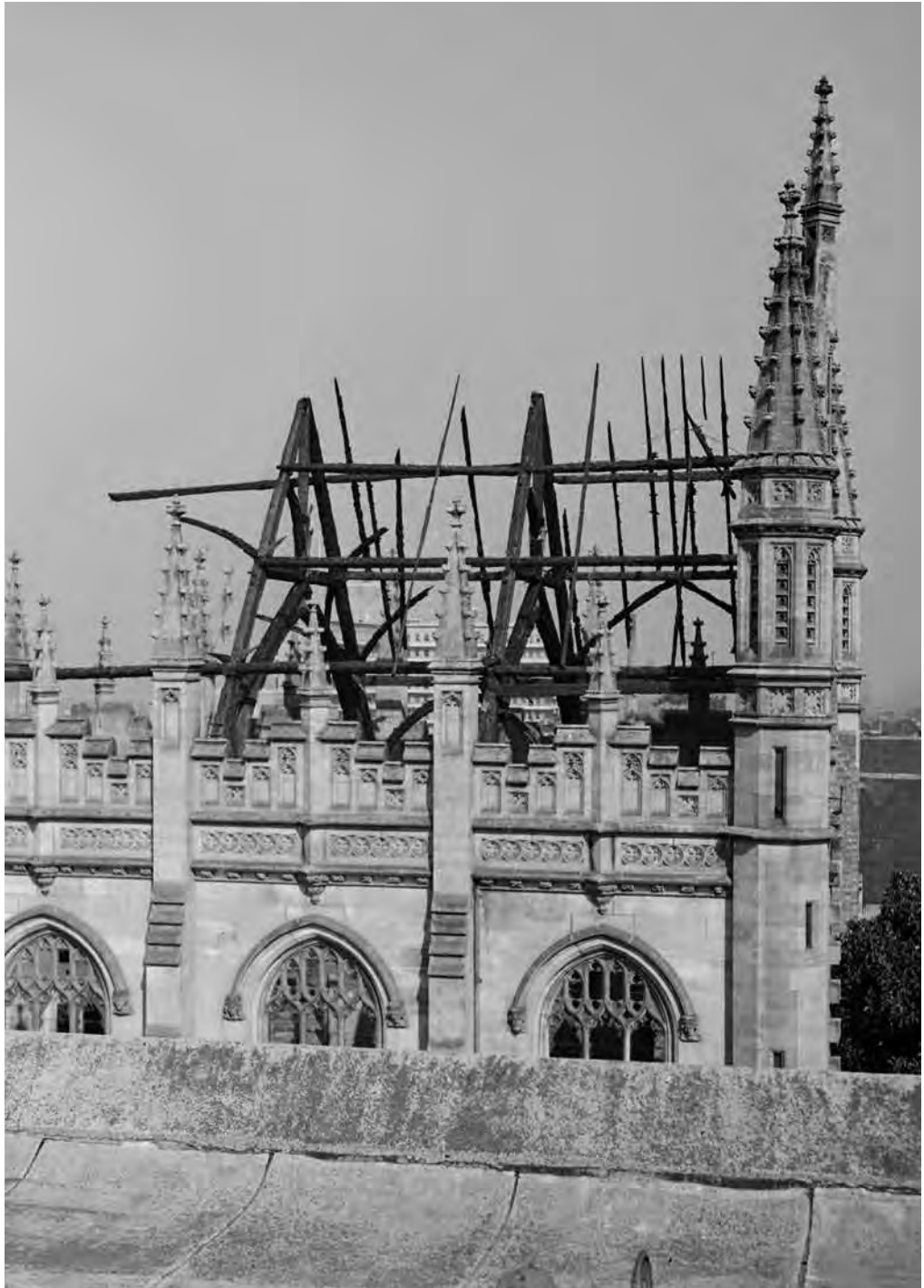
Figure 11.2

The remains of Wilson Hall, University of Melbourne, following its destruction by fire in early 1952 and pending demolition. Source: University of Melbourne Archives. Photographer: Colin Sachs.

of the university community opposed the ultimate decision to opt for a replacement building. Yet the decision flagged the university's embrace of modernisation and its commitment to the idea that contemporary art and design could express the aspirations and ideals of the institution.[7]

Were a building of similar prestige on one of the older campuses to be badly damaged by fire today, it seems likely that the decision would go the other way. The high status of Wilson Hall, and the fact that significant sections of the building were unharmed by the fire, would almost certainly now lead to a decision to restore and reconstruct the damaged building. From the 1970s onwards, a widening embrace of heritage conservation has tempered the enthusiasm for complete modernisation of campus buildings and infrastructure. Yet, despite the growing importance of heritage and conservation as a mode of campus management since the time of the Wilson Hall fire, the commitment to heritage and the pattern of protection on Australian campuses remain patchy at best. This is a consequence of differing heritage and planning legislation across the states, and a widely varying perception among the universities of the value of formal heritage protections in estate management processes.

At the expansion-era campuses, the ambivalence about heritage conservation in estate management is particularly notable. It is reflected by a survey of the state-level heritage listings of Victorian campuses. While UoM possesses a number of listed nineteenth-century buildings as well as three post-war buildings on the Victorian Heritage Register – including the replacement Wilson Hall by BSM (1956) and a campus-defining landscape created by an innovative underground car park (Loder and Bayly in association with Harris Lange and Partners, 1972) – there is only one other state-listed post-war building on a major university campus. This is the Religious Centre at Monash (1967–68) by MSM. This paucity of listed buildings is despite the fact that Monash alone contains the Robert Blackwood Hall by Roy Grounds – a major work by one of the architectural profession's most influential post-war figures – as well as the landmark Menzies Building by EMS (1961). Neither is heritage listed, and the latter has arguably only been spared the wrecking ball due to its sheer enormity. Equally, La Trobe's original Bundoora campus possesses a collection of major buildings, a mature landscape, and a campus layout that reflects its thoughtful historical masterplan. If nominated at the campus scale and supported by the university, it would certainly qualify for state-level protection.[8]

While many of the key early buildings on the expansion-era campuses have survived, the coherence of thoughtfully designed and realised campus environments at places such as La Trobe and Macquarie

Figure 11.3

Demolition of the Central Courtyard and Union, Macquarie University, early 2018. Source: Courtesy Demolition Environmental Civil Contractors. Photographer: Frank Lombardi.

has been challenged in recent times. A number of new buildings and precinct transformation efforts, while not necessarily bad projects in themselves, have focused more on campus branding and individual expression than longer term continuity connected with coherent campus planning, landscape, and architectural identity. Macquarie is arguably the best of the post-war campuses in terms of integrating significant individual buildings into a flexible but legible campus plan and a carefully orchestrated landscape, yet its leaders and campus planners have nevertheless chosen to demolish some original buildings as well as a highly significant designed landscape. The Central Courtyard was dominated by a grid of mature Lemon-scented Gums as part of a landscape plan by Richard Clough. The university chopped the trees down at the end of 2017 as part of a major redevelopment of the area, and at around the same time demolished the union building by AMMW (1968), which had formed part of the perimeter of the original campus core (Figure 11.3). The university argued that the trees had to be removed as part of sound risk management, but did not address the value of the designed landscape itself, only discussing its current strategy in terms of its ecological compensation for the loss.[9]