



The Good, the Ugly and the Dangerous: Transformations in an Australian Goldfields Heritage City

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A major historical feature of Australia is the gold rush boom of the latter half of the nineteenth century. The impact of immense new wealth was felt in a series of places. Bendigo, 150 kilometers inland and north of Melbourne, epitomized those new cities that sprang up. At its peak in the 1880s Bendigo resembled a great industrial landscape dominated by over 200 major working mines. The Bendigo goldfields still hold the title of the third richest gold mining field in history. That extraordinary period has left a remarkable cultural heritage landscape comprising two contrasting elements and sits starkly in a contemporary city of 100,000 people. There is an eclectic mix of grand 'European' inspired architecture in the city centre and areas of former mining activity comprising heaps of 'mullock' and polluted sand dotted with the remaining collections of rough vernacular miners' cottages.

While there is a collective passion and support for the conservation and preservation of the grand buildings, there is a contrasting reluctance and disdain for keeping those elements of the landscape that display the harshness and almost brutality of the goldfield workings. In fact large areas of former mining activity have been systematically removed and replaced by modern housing estates. Attempts to convince the community of the value of the remaining industrial heritage areas as a planned element of the urban form have met with resistance and disbelief. Those forces came into even starker contrast when bushfires (part of the February 2009 Victorian Fires that saw 173 killed and over 1,800 houses destroyed) swept through the outskirts of Bendigo, including large sections of the historical mining areas and destroyed many former miners' cottages. The demands to build new houses to replace those lost, swept aside any considerations of heritage. The fires further strengthened the widely supported view that these heritage landscapes were of little value and now were susceptible to fire because of the re-growth of vegetation and the old timber structures that stood on them.

This paper documents the transformation of the historic landscape and explore how a contemporary city can plan for and place a value on a heritage that in many respects is only seen to represent the ugly side of a rich past. Such an agenda is further compounded because the heritage landscape comprises buildings that the original owners erected for use only until they could afford something better. The planning agenda is heightened by debate over the value of retaining piles of sand and rock with dispersed highly flammable exotic vegetation. That landscape sits rather incongruously with the overall setting of the city. Bendigo, as a residential city is almost encircled by a National Park comprising dry forests where the population now sees that the most dangerous threat to life and property is from bushfires. The unusual and extraordinary heritage legacy of a nineteenth goldfield is under threat on a number of fronts. In providing an account of the development of this situation the paper seeks to place Bendigo's remarkable heritage within a wider contemporary and international setting.

KEY WORDS: Urban industrial landscapes, contested values, fire management.