

Heritage Watch

Edited by CAROLYN COLLINS

Endangered places

NEGLECT is the theme of this year's endangered places list, announced by former Whitlam government minister Tom Uren in Alice Springs recently.

From alpine huts on Ben Lomond in Tasmania to the Geelong ovoid sewer aqueduct, the 2000 list — the third to be compiled by the Australian Council of National Trusts (ACNT) — highlights 30 heritage places across the nation facing threats of demolition, redevelopment or decay through neglect.

During the next few weeks *Heritage Watch* will feature the places listed on this year's list, which have been nominated by individuals and groups throughout the country.

Cotter Cottages and Cotter Bridge, Stromlo, ACT

THE cottages and bridge are associated with the Cotter pumping station which was built in 1915 to supply water to the new national capital. The single-lane bridge, built in the same year, provided access to the western side of the Murrumbidgee River and the Cotter Dam. The six cottages were built for pump engineering staff between 1927 and 1957.

Two are considered good examples of government designs adapted for the rural site and the 1950s cottages are good examples of the simple yet practical housing provided during the station's operation. The National Trust (ACT) has nominated the cottages and the bridge because two of the cottages are subject to a development application.

Victoria Theatre, Perkins Street, Newcastle

VICTORIA Theatre is the oldest theatre building still standing in NSW and one of the oldest surviving purpose-built theatres in Australia. It served as the Hunter Valley's premier cultural venue for 90 years.

The original 1876 Victoria Theatre was a large building that was rebuilt in 1890-91 into a brick structure with a plush three-level auditorium, a large stage house and a small hotel. In 1921 there was a major internal refurbishment, including a redesigned dress circle for cinema. It was taken over by Sir Benjamin and John Fuller in 1922 and is well remembered as the venue for the National Grand Opera.

After it was closed as a principal theatre the Victoria Theatre suffered years of neglect and deterioration. In 1990 a jeans company unsympathetically built a false modern shop at street level but the shop is now closed.

In 1999, ignoring listing on the Register of the National Estate and in NSW, the theatre was advertised as a city redevelopment opportunity. The ACNT says that while it is on the state heritage register, and so has the highest statutory protection, the owner can still seek to redevelop the site and may eventually be permitted to do so.

Town Hall ruins, Smith Street, Darwin

AS featured previously in *Heritage Watch*, these ruins are a powerful reminder of the damage caused to Darwin by Cyclone Tracy in 1974 and the ACNT believes they should be retained as a memorial. The original town hall was constructed during 1882-83 and until 1974 performed many functions as one of the town's main public buildings, including acting as the courthouse, institute and library, Commonwealth Bank branch, tax office, wartime navy workshop and, finally, as a museum.

Cyclone Tracy almost demolished the building but the ruins have since been stabilised. The National Trust (Northern Territory) says the town hall ruins symbolise the provision of local government for Darwin residents, the consolidation of Darwin as a city and the destruction caused by the cyclone. It is concerned about plans to construct a reproduction of the building on the site.

Sitelines



Ben Lomond Australian Council of National Trusts

THESE nine alpine ski huts, at Ben Lomond in Tasmania, were built on the northern slope and plateau of Ben Lomond between 1932 and 1960 using mainly rock, found stone and logs with roof shingles. Each hut offers the visual appeal of a small, isolated structure in a dramatic mountain setting but the group of huts as a whole is even more valuable. The huts evoke the history of development of access to these ski fields from soon after skiing was first practised as a sport in Tasmania. They were built by the Northern Tasmanian Alpine Club, which was formed in 1929 with the help of local bushmen, who carried in building materials and supplies by packhorse. The National Trust (Tasmania) fears the National Parks and Wildlife Service may require the huts to be moved from their original sites to the more recently constructed Alpine Village area, which would remove all evidence of the original siting of the huts and the pleasures of encountering them in their isolated alpine settings.

Sydney's revamped airport has a remarkable new bridge with layered symbolism but you'll need an international flight ticket to see it. **Peter Ward reports**

HOUSES shelter, fences surround, gates open or close, and roads travel: what do bridges do? They join, they bring together, they reconcile, and Sydney has just acquired a remarkable bridge whose architectural elegance, complex structure and layered symbolism are designed to do just that.

It's called the Wingara Bridge and it's one of eight Art at Work projects recently unveiled at Sydney International Airport in time for the Olympic Games.

But you have to say that as an engaging conflation of public art and inventive architecture it has a problem. Public art needs a public and in this case the public needs an international flight ticket to see it. The Wingara Bridge is behind Customs in the so-called "hygienic" area of the airport.

This is a clear disadvantage. It's not as if Sydney is a hub airport with a long-term floating population waiting for connections, wanting to be entertained, perhaps even wanting something profound to contemplate. Australian international airports are get-on and get-off places, with perhaps a bit of shopping and a drink during the hour of limbo before the flight is called.

Therefore one wonders just what the ultimate impact of the Art at Work program will be on the distracted, ephemeral travelers for whom it was intended. Airports the world over attempt to give themselves local colour and expression, but once you're in the system, behind the gates, it's a surreal world, a disembodied Taoist flux, as Robert Dessaix memorably observed.

Still, the Art at Work program's intentions were good, and the Wingara Bridge is its major achievement. The program features the work of some 25 Australian artists, designers and architects and was commissioned by Sydney Airports Corporation as part of the \$600 million upgrade of its international terminal.

The \$4.5 million art work's price tag is of course less than the one per cent of total capital expenditure which world's best practice (in places like The Netherlands and Queensland) says should be set aside for art in public places.

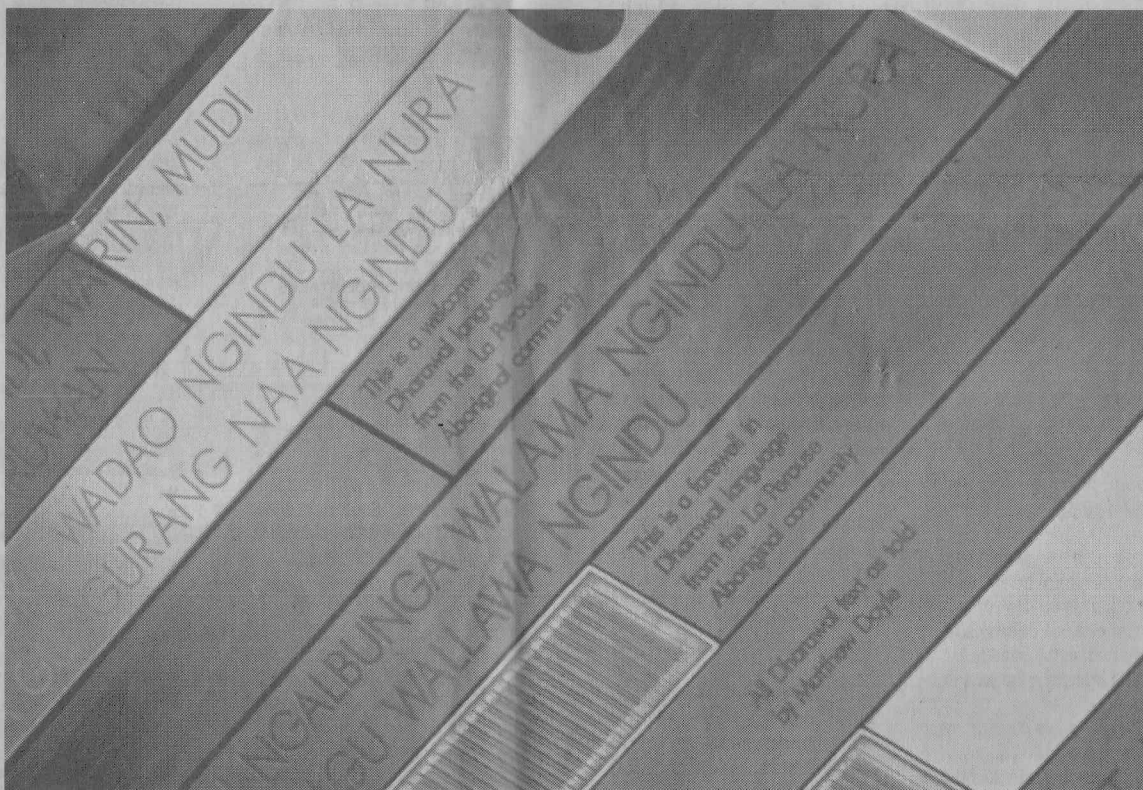
But that \$1.5 million shortfall quibble aside, the works are now up and running and being promoted by the corporation's spin doctors, whose ghastly jargon says they're all part of the airport's "commitment to providing a 'Total Journey Experience Enhancement Program'." It's impossible to know what they mean by that: for most sensible folk, a total journey experience means just getting there intact.

The projects begin with the Walama Forecourt by Judy Watson and Brook Andrew, which are said to provide "a riveting sense of landing", and Arrival: Southern Cross on the arrivals level, as curated by John Murphy and designed by Jonathon Richards. The latter uses material from the airport's earlier heritage art displays.

These are followed by Walling Walls by Robyn Backen at Terminals B and C departures, which provide "a farewell point at the 'heart beat' of the airport" by way of soaring, semi-opaque glass barriers threaded with optic fibres



A runway success



flashing messages in the lost e-language of morse code.

Then, near McDonald's, midway between departures gates B and C, is a "family-oriented zone" dominated by a giant mosaic and tile Green and Golden Bell Frog sculpture by Ron Smith, designed to be "a touchstone" for good luck, safe passage and safe return. The semiotics are a tad skewed here, since the Green and Golden Bell Frog is an endangered species.

However, undeterred, the spin doctors just let their verbiage rip. For this "astounding work" they tell us Ron Smith "sought inspiration from Fabergé eggs, Tex-Mex roadside art, Ludwig of Bavaria, Liberace, and Australia's love of the BIG attraction, such as The Big Banana, The Big Merino, The Big Pineapple and The Big Prawn". I bet he's had them on.

And that's not all. In departures pier B Fiona McDonald and Kathy Grant have produced a Millennium Tympanum whose symbolic forms explore the history and people of the coastline from Botany Bay to Port Jackson.

Then, the Wingara Bridge apart, the whole assembly ends with Arrival Photography, backlit photographic work displayed in advertising signage panels in the arrivals corridors, and a moving image display on plasma advertising video screens above the baggage carousels.

More than 16 photographers are featured in the former, which was curated by Sandy Edwards and Linda Slutzkin, while Susan Norrie and Michael Riley made the images for the carousel works. Their curator was Barbara Flynn.

Barbara Flynn was also the curator and project manager of the Wingara Bridge and is a new name in Sydney town — one, it seems, increasingly to conjure with. A New York art dealer who moved to Sydney two years ago with her Australian husband, one of her current projects is her advocacy, promotion and spon-

sorship search for major commissions in Sydney of sculptures by the American luminaries Richard Serra and Mark di Suvero.

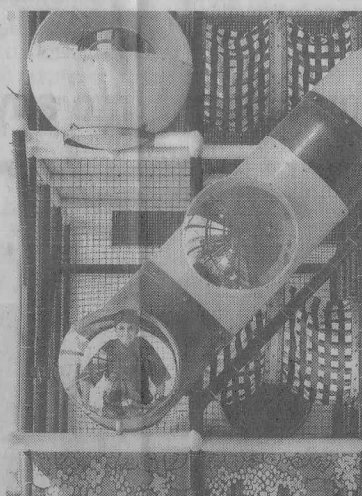
Both of these mature internationally renowned artists have had a long association with architectural and public art commissions.

Mark di Suvero's huge steel constructions memorably turned heads at the 1995 Venice Biennale, while Richard Serra's most recent headlines were generated by the giant elliptical rolled steel forms he made for his friend Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain.

So with the Wingara Bridge project, big scale in public art was clearly not an issue for its curator and project manager, though per-

Their work demonstrates a strong sense and knowledge of history

Barbara Flynn



Playful: The airport also includes safe space for children

haps balancing all the elements of what was ultimately a complex collaboration was.

In the first instance, the bridge was designed by architects Lindsay and Kerry Clare, who at the time were design directors in the office of the NSW Government Architect.

They in turn were assisted by Dillon Kombumerri, Alison Joy Page and Kevin O'Brien of the Merrima Aboriginal Design Unit, in the same office, while Merrima, in their turn, worked in consultation with the La Perouse (Dharawal) Aboriginal community.

Other consultants included Hetti Perkins, Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the Art Gallery of NSW, and Matthew Doyle, a Dharawal linguist.

The Wingara Bridge spans the void in the airport's pier C, the architecturally awkward triangular extrusion at the southern end of the old terminal building. It leads from shops and bars to shops and bars on the upper level of the pier and so has a fairly mundane context, the irresolute shopping centre-food plaza ambience of airports worldwide.

But the site and its bridge nevertheless was seen as linking with two of the other Art at Work projects. As the core curatorial group saw it, the bridge metaphorically traverses the coastline outlined by the Tympanum's silhouette images of black and white contact. Similarly, the Wollema Forecourt was imagined as part of this symbolic "land and water, air and bridge" architectonic group.

It all sounds very fine and is obviously well intentioned, but one doubts many, if any, travelers through Sydney International will get the full-on flavour of all these widely dispersed considerations and obscure organising principles. One of the besetting faults of late-20th-century art practices is their tendency to an alienating, if not an

actually bamboozling, arcanery.

But the Wingara Bridge in itself escapes this criticism. It is an easily read and understood work, both in its architecture and its art, and as a consequence has a simple integrity that overcomes its context and especially its lack of ceremonial space.

Structurally, the 20m-long bridge is composed of a vertically tapering steel box beam, some 800cm by 1500cm at centre point, carrying 50 cantilevered steel joists at 600cm centers and a long steel, glass and timber handrail. As it gently curves past one of the quay's columns, a 100cm steel rod "outrigger" on steel spaces runs along the beam's top outside edge countering any tendency to twist.

The beam is clad in part in diagonally spread flat sheet aluminium, doubled back on the edges and flathead nailed to a thin pine frame, giving a hand-finished, slightly "feathered" surface. The two-metre wide decking consists of stainless steel grating and lineal planks made, variously, of slip-resistant glass, jarrah or solid stainless steel.

MANY of these bear inscribed texts, poetry and, at the bridge entrances, "welcome" handprints by members of the La Perouse Aboriginal Community. Included are welcome and farewell statements in the Dharawal language, the Dharawal Whale Dreaming story, the poem The Past by the poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker, 1920-1993), a quote from a letter by Governor Arthur Phillip (1788-1814) concerning Aboriginal beliefs, and a song text by singer Archie Roach.

As Barbara Flynn describes it, "honesty and connection" are basically expressed in the Wingara Bridge metaphor and its structural components, with a zoomorphic element in the design's relationship to the whale, the Dharawal people's creation symbol.

Semiotics: The Wingara Bridge, above, is the Art at Work program's main achievement at the upgraded airport. Also noteworthy are the new retail section, top, and the Aboriginal involvement, left

For those outside animism, this last is harder to see as a major design intention, but doubtless it's all in the eye of the beholder.

Easier to believe is Barbara Flynn's account of the architects' approach, which in part alludes to their celebrated and award-winning work on the Queensland Sunshine Coast.

Kerry and Lindsay Clare's Cotton Tree social housing project at Maroochydore, Queensland, was recently selected as one of 10 contemporary buildings selected worldwide for inclusion in the Ten Shades of Green exhibition in New York. The exhibition sought to demonstrate how architectural excellence can easily conflate with environmental sensitivity.

Nevertheless, coming from architects hitherto well known for their pared-back, practical, rationalist aesthetic, the Wingara Bridge's semiotic layerings and expressive design could be seen as constituting a departure of sorts for the husband and wife team, but not according to the curator.

"From years of practising in Queensland they developed an understanding of light which has served them in developing a sculptural bridge that is experienced in the round," she says.

"The Clares have developed an understanding of Australia's emerging culture and diversity as well as its traditions and memories. Their work demonstrates a strong sense and knowledge of history, a flexibility of approach, unfailing integrity to materials, an understanding of the needs of values of families, and an openness to people different to themselves."