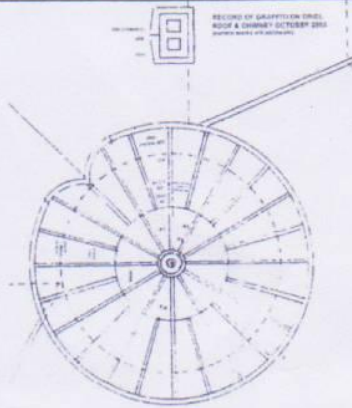


## The Writing's on the Wall

# Valuing Heritage Graffiti

GINA PICKERING | EDITOR AND ROHAN STOREY | ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIAN NATIONAL TRUST (VIC)



The Old Observatory in Perth gave up some of its hidden and long held graffiti secrets during recent conservation work to repair roof leaks and replace its unusual curved guttering. The discovery came within weeks of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, internationally recognised for its political heritage landmark qualities and defining graffiti markings. While both heritage sites are worlds apart, they highlight questions about the heritage value of graffiti in the cultural landscape.

The Old Observatory's lead linings revealed some surprising scribbles and engravings in the Spring of 2009. With a little elbow grease and a metal brush the contractors working on the second highest point of the National Trust's headquarters in West Perth, discovered that previous tradesmen had had left their mark on the structure. In all, twelve separate graffiti elements including dates, names and initials dating as far back as 1932 were discovered on the projecting rounded oriel roof.

Dr Jacqui Wilson, University of Ballarat academic and graffiti specialist said it was not unusual for graffiti to remain hidden for a long time.

"A lot of graffiti is done in transitory areas and often it's not done for the purpose of viewing," she said.

According to Dr Wilson, the motivation to create graffiti takes many forms including a sign of self affirmation.

"It's important in terms of the graffiti's identity, and it's saying 'I was here, this is part of me.'"

The Old Observatory is not the only National Trust building in Western Australia to feature graffiti. An hour and a half east of Perth, former prison cell walls are detailed with elaborate calendars and art works, including depictions of cowboys. The work of inmates, this graffiti has been covered with perspex protection as part of their interpretative values at the York Courthouse Complex.

According to Dr Wilson, graffiti delivered in communal places such as prisons often relayed stories and revealed social orders.

"The graffiti is often instructive, political, and includes hate, crime, and racist graffiti," she said.

"You'll often see a hierarchy of names being crossed out and replaced as well as layer upon layer of competing narratives and competing political histories."

That some of the York Courthouse Complex structures - including an elaborately decorated dunny - were demolished in 1984, is indicative that heritage values continue to shift over time.

This was evident also, as the world began to reflect on the 20 year anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Much of the remaining structure is still covered in politically driven graffiti. One documentary entitled *Where is the Wall?* screened on ABC 1 Nov 10 2009, detailed stories about the destination of the wall remnants, including the colourful doodles, and drawings. Much of the wall has been reduced to hoardable fragments, while some sections have been on-sold, but the heritage significance of the graffiti messages has shifted by the passing of time, by the walls removal, relocation and the fact that pieces of the once great divide have been reduced to tourist ornaments.

Similarly in Australia, the heritage value of graffiti has been fraught, rousing conflicting community opinions about how and whose heritage should be recognised and preserved.

In mid 2008, the heritage value of graffiti made headlines in Victoria and the National Trust was publicly criticized for 'condoning vandalism'.

The then Conservation Manager for the National Trust of Australia (Vic), Tracey Avery investigated a range of positive and negative community reactions. At issue was the perceived blur over the varying value of cultural landscapes. It wasn't the first time the heritage value of graffiti had arisen.

**ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT** | Plan depicts twelve individual graffiti elements located in the lead work of the Old Perth Observatory oriel roof, as discovered by contractors during recent conservation works (second pic): G Pickering. The 'Keon Graffiti' lasted a fortnight. National Trust (VIC)

**NEXT PAGE** | The Old York Courthouse Complex dunny demolished in 1984 featured cowboy designs on its walls. National Trust (WA). Political graffiti still adorns

# CONSERVATION

## FACELIFT FOR OLD OBSERVATORY

*Eric Hancock*



Repairs to the Old Observatory's oriel roof have been completed. G Pickering

The Old Observatory, as it is known today is both a striking and significant heritage building currently occupied as offices for the National Trust of Australia (WA).

The building was in fact the Former Government Astronomer's Residence and Offices and was formerly part of a complex of structures and equipment comprising the Perth Observatory and is the only substantial structure remaining. It was designed by Government Architect George Temple Poole in the Federation Free classical style and built in 1896. Prominent features are the tower and an oriel (projecting rounded) lead clad roof encircled with cast iron gutters.

After 103 years the lead was cracked and slipping downwards with a number of poor quality patches from past repair work. Leaks were rotting the curved cedar sarking boards beneath and damaging the ceiling below. Lead drooping into the cast iron gutters resulted in rusting and failure of the gutters.

With funding support from Lotterywest, conservation works were carried out in October 2009. One of the nineteen 950mm rounded gutter segments was taken to a foundry and used to construct a mould for casting of new gutter. Once installed the cast iron gutter looks and works exactly like the original. One original gutter segment will be stored in ceiling space for future reference.

A major aim of the work was to conserve and retain the existing lead cladding. Only the rotted sections of sarking boards were replaced and then all timbers were protected with a fungicide. Skilled tradespeople were able to rework the lead, repair cracks and replace each piece in original positions. A final sealing coat was applied and the rest of the oriel and gutters were painted. The finished conservation work is now an attractive part of the building and will be watertight for years to come.



Original brackets were reinstated during works on the roof.

G Pickering