

From Whelan the Wrecker to the circular economy

Emma Russell, April 2021



Whelan the Wrecker was synonymous with destruction – it became the go-to company for demolition if something stood in the way of a more modern or useful alternative. This was progress and economically sound - pulling down the old to make way for the new had been the way in Melbourne since the 1850s gold rush and it contributed to turning a village into a city.

Melbourne's post-WW2 building boom fast-tracked the demolition of industrial, commercial, public and private buildings to make way for modernity. But in time Melbournians began to look askance at this work. Many thought modernity lacked aesthetics and others were afraid of having the familiar, steady past whipped out from under their feet.

The 1950s became the era of the historical society; they cropped up all over Victoria determined to save local history and the character of precincts and towns. They were joined by the National Trust of Victoria and since then 'Save our Suburbs' and 'Friends of ...' groups have become part of the movement to preserve, conserve and share the aesthetic and historical values of their places.

Cultural heritage activists do valuable work and make strong arguments. But I wonder how much of people's legacies - their concerns, cultures, politics and day-to-day lives - are truly appreciated by us as we live and work in or wander through places?

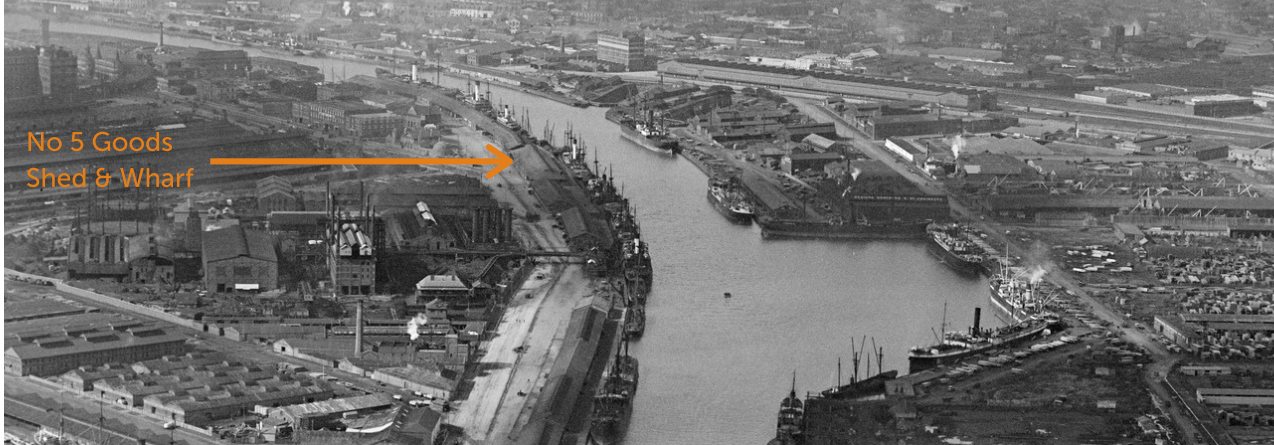
The real stories inside these old buildings are often granular, intangible and multi-layered and need to be told if, as a community, we are to appreciate and respect them.

If the cultural heritage argument for preserving the past doesn't hold up it's usually due to a lack of interpretation rather than a lack of interest.

But there are also sound economic arguments for preserving the buildings of the past – they offer affordable venues in which a range of small businesses can operate; provide for diverse and vibrant communities and precincts with multiple points of interest; encourage local foot traffic; and add to a precinct's tourism offerings (particularly with good interpretation on offer to arouse curiosity and appreciation).

Also, we now know that demolishing and replacing old buildings with new might have short-term business benefits, but it causes more material extraction from the ground, more CO2 emissions into the atmosphere and more polluting landfill, all of which leave a huge economic cost in their wake.





No 5 Goods Shed & Wharf

Down on the waterfront in the late 1930s the Melbourne Harbour Trust embarked on a reconstruction of the entire North Wharf, which was “probably used more than any other section of the waterfront”[1] (we’ve written about this waterfront [here](#)). Mr G A Winwood won the tender for this work, maybe in competition with Mr Whelan. He began by demolishing the original No. 5 North Wharf and Goods Shed, first built in 1895, and constructing a new one.

It seems unlikely that all of this shed was thrown into landfill – the Depression hadn’t been over long enough to have lost the thrifty habits of retaining, recycling and reusing. As Winwood was also a builder I’m sure he found ways to use much of the old shed, but I haven’t yet discovered what he kept and what he did with it.

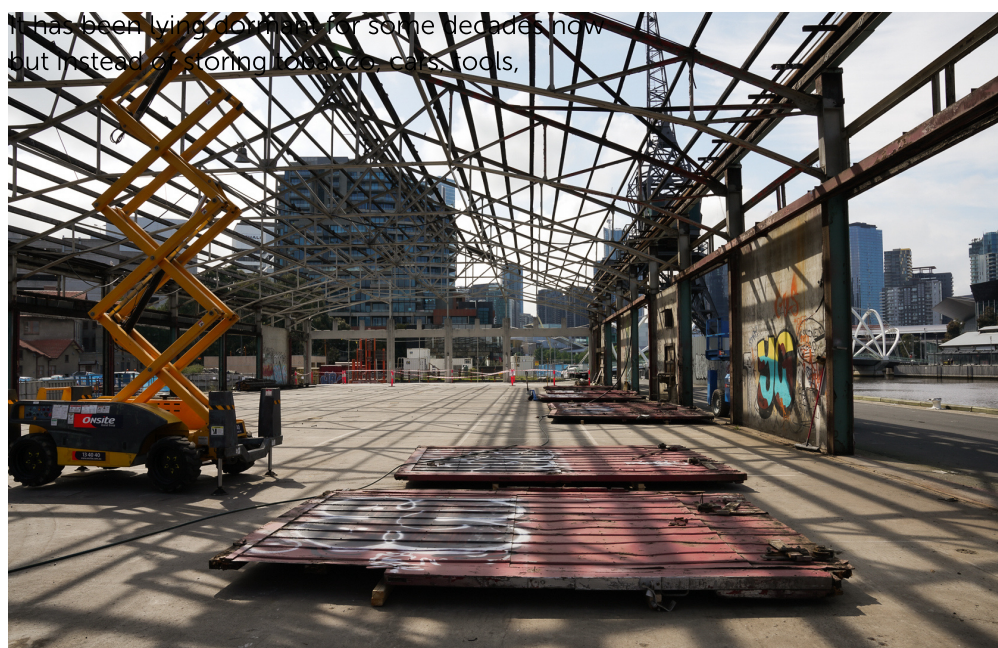
His new Shed No 5, next to the Mission to Seafarers, is now some 80 years old and is all that’s left of the once vibrant North Wharf. It’s the only place in the port of Melbourne where it is possible to see all the elements of a traditional (pre-containerisation) berth.

No 5 has been lying dormant for some decades now but instead of storing tobacco, cars, tools, timber, kerosene, paper, oil, iron, coal, sugar and barley, in 2024 it will host luxurious residences and Australia’s first 1 Hotel. The shed’s owner, Riverlee, describe what they’re doing as a process of ‘building with history rather than over it.’

Shed No 5 is now part of the circular economy. Riverlee replaced demolition with retention and have dismantled and will now be restoring and reconstructing nearly 2000 bluestone pavers, 20 timber sliding doors, 40 steel trusses and 105 steel window frames.

The next stage will be to research and reveal the stories of this shed as told by the wharfies, seafarers and other port workers and the archival records.

Through retention and interpretation Melbournians and tourists alike will be able to appreciate the enormous value – economic and cultural – of a simple old shed.



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You can see how retention is done carefully [here](#), without the vast quantities of debris and thick plumes of dust that come with old-fashioned demolition.

Text: [1] 'Port improvements planned', Argus, 17 November 1937, p.13

Images: Goods Shed No 5 x 2 - Riverlee; Whelan The Wrecker, Photographer: Lyle Fowler, 1962, State Library of Victoria, H94.150/63; Yarra and Port of Melbourne, Charles Daniel Pratt, 1930s, State Library of Victoria H91.160/524