A fading present, a lost future past? Researching the heritage of modern shopping arcades

DIRK H. R. SPENNEMANN

Introduction

Although not quite as early as those in the United Kingdom (Burlington Arcade, London, 1810), shopping arcades are nothing new in Australia, as the Queen Victoria Building in Sydney (1898), and Australia’s oldest arcade, the Royal Arcade in Melbourne (1870) attest. These were purpose-built arcades to provide shop fronts for small businesses. While arcades were built throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was the period of the late 1970s and early 1980s that saw a spate of suburban and green-field shopping malls as well as a series of ‘Arcade Developments’ where large, single-owner commercial properties were converted into multi-tenant shopping arcades and mini malls.

The heritage debate on shopping malls and arcades has so far focussed only on the conversion of heritage buildings into such arcades and the relative merits of such secondary re-use, the visual and streetscape impact such malls and conversions have on adjacent properties, as well as on the adaptive reuse and conservation management of such structures. As these structures become worthy of heritage attention in their own right, we need to address the processes that allow us to evaluate their heritage significance. No work has been carried out, to date, on whether the standard processes of heritage management and assessment are actually suited for such structures or whether other techniques need to be employed.

The main difference between ‘normal’ commercial properties and the shopping arcades/malls is the fact that the latter have more than one tenant. Arcades and malls are a microcosm of the commercial market place: their combination of shops offer an insight into the social and economic environment of the locality in which they are situated. Compared to single-owner commercial premises, the shop spaces provided in the arcades/malls have a high level of turnover of tenants. While shops are often sold on and continue to trade in their area of business, others go under or move location, and totally different shops move in. The configuration of the shops
in a given arcade/mall is relatively fluid, which affects the overall composition and thus the ‘feel’ of the arcade or mall.

This paper presents a case study of the challenges faced when researching the tenant history of a comparatively recent shopping arcade. While based on a case study in Albury, New South Wales, the observations made here have applicability across Australia.

Case study: the ‘Hub Arcade,’ Albury, New South Wales

The property 528–530 Kiewa Street, Albury, New South Wales, was created in 1872 by James T. Fallon as part of a subdivision of allotments 8, 9 and 10 of section 12. It seems that the property remained vacant land until 1886 when John Hiram Crawford of Beechworth decided to consolidate his stabling business in one central location and for this purpose acquired the land 528-530 Kiewa Street. Section 12-1, Albury’s prime city block bounded by the main commercial street, Dean Street in the south, contains the main administration buildings such as the post office, the courthouse, the town hall (now Regional Art Gallery), the Mechanics Institute (demolished in the 1950s) and the telegraph office (now the Conservatorium). The stables, fifth address north of the main post office, faced Kiewa Street, which at the time was a major thoroughfare, then on the Sydney to Melbourne road.

The building erected for Crawford & Co was a double brick stables with a curved roof supported by posts 7 inches square. The building was 60 feet (18.3m) wide and approximately 100 feet (30.5m) long. It served as the hub for Crawford’s regional coach operations, providing stabling for 30 horses and the associated omnibuses, coaches and wagonettes. The advent of the motor car signalled the end of the coach lines. Even though cars were not frequent until after World War I, business became slower and slower. By 1919 Crawford & Co folded, selling off its remaining routes to smaller companies and individuals interested in taking up the mail runs.

After the demise of Crawford and Co the building seems, at one stage, to have served as an auction mart. In 1922 it was converted into a tyre service and motor garage. With different owners and lessees the property retained the use as a garage and motor car show rooms until 1975 (Fig. 1). During that time the building saw repeated changes to its internal lay out as well as substantial modifications to the front façade (large show windows).

The early 1970s saw an increasing demand for office space as well as shopping centres and arcades. In March 1974 the new owners proposed to demolish the building and to redevelop the site into a five-storey office building. This proposal was rejected because the design exceeded the permissible floor space ratio for the area. The existing building was then redesigned into a shopping arcade with ten shops on
the ground floor and two office suites on the mezzanine (completed in 1977). The front façade was hidden behind a metal siding façade with a cantilevered awning, effectively dominating not only 528–530 Kiewa Street, but also impacting visually on the neighbouring properties (Fig. 2). After the conversion into a shopping arcade, the property then became an investment property owned by various owners.\textsuperscript{8}

The modification to the exterior appearance of the building as well as the internal build-out were visually so severe, that the property was overlooked on the occasion of two expert-driven\textsuperscript{9} and one community-driven heritage study.\textsuperscript{10} Although historic research could demonstrate the significance of the structure and retention of the property was recommended in the heritage assessment,\textsuperscript{11} the building has since been demolished to make way for a museum and library complex.\textsuperscript{12}

As part of the final documentation of the property, the compilation of the tenant sequence of the shops, as well as the collection of photographic evidence of their previous appearance(s) was required.\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\end{center}

*Fig 1. 528–530 Kiewa Street in 1970 representing the appearance before the conversion.*

**The problem**

From an historical point of view, the nature of the owners of a shopping arcade/mall in such a circumstance is less important than the nature of the various lessees.
When compiling the use history of the property, as part of the initial study, it
was found that the use sequence of newly created shop units could no longer be
reconstructed in detail as the occupancy of the shops changed so frequently. The
easiest and most thorough access to such histories, through a perusal of the lease
agreements and rental records, was no longer possible because the previous owner
had destroyed them.

While on the one level one can argue that knowledge of the sequence and
nature of tenants is not relevant, as the building retained its use as an arcade of
shops, such a stance actually oversimplifies the matter. No one, when assessing a
streetscape over time would argue that the nature of the businesses conducted in the
respective individual buildings was irrelevant as the entire street was ‘shopping’ or
‘commercial.’ Yet this attitude seems to prevail at the shopping arcade level.

Methodologies for reconstructing property histories of arcades and malls

The ideal scenario for the reconstruction of tenant histories is that the property
management firm charged with administering the leases is in possession of a
complete register of past and present tenants. In such a case the problem is solved.
However, businesses only need to retain records for a period of seven years (for
taxation reasons). If such data are unavailable due to passage of time, however,
other processes have to be followed.

The (re-)construction of property histories is the staple of heritage management
and is commonly based on several lines of evidence:\footnote{\textsuperscript{15}}

- chain of property ownership based on land records
- evidence derived from council building files
- chain of residents based on electoral rolls
- evidence derived from census data
- evidence derived from trade directories, phonebooks and the like.

While these techniques are useful and, for good reasons, standard tools for
researching individual properties, be they residential or commercial, they are not
particularly well suited for researching the history of multi-tenanted arcades. Let
us review their applicability to the case in hand and the subject matter of malls and
arcades in general.

Chain of property ownership based on land records

The land records provide evidence of the owner of a property and any mortgages
and covenants that may have been placed on it. Land records are the standard line
of enquiry but have limitations as far as arcades and malls are concerned. In most cases, the leases of shop fronts would have been constructed through a subsidiary or holding company, and as such are commonly not entered in the property records. As exceptions exist, that line of enquiry should not be ignored — which is unlikely as the property sequence will have to be compiled at any rate in a heritage assessment of a property.

In addition to land records, researchers can consult the rate books held by the local council. Again, these records in most instances only list the owner of the property who would have been liable for the rates, but not the tenants. The only exception to this usually occurs where the tenants are in fact owners of parts of a multi-strata title.

Evidence derived from census data

Census data are useful for historic properties as they provide information on the nature of private residences and the number of inhabitants, both family and servants. In the case of commercial premises, however, they tend to fail, unless the owner or a tenant lived over the shop.

Chain of residents based on electoral rolls

Electoral rolls are person-specific and allow tracking the places of residence of individuals of voting age. Like census data, however, electoral rolls are meaningless
for the reconstruction of histories of commercial properties unless the owner lived on the premises or over the shop.

Evidence derived from trade directories, phone books and the like

Inclusion in many modern trade directories is subject to paid advertising. Thus many such directories are not comprehensive. The fact that most directories have moved to the World Wide Web provides ready access, but has also resulted in a relative impermanence of the sources. This was recognised early in other contexts. The National Library of Australia, through its PANDORA digital archiving project has archived selected sources, among them some directories. By nature of the volume of on-line published material, PANDORA has to be necessarily selective. That selectivity, however, has implications for future research into the history and heritage of trades, professions and retail outlets as much data will not be preserved.

Thankfully, the current official telephone books and their trade sections (Yellow Pages) are deemed to be formal publications and thus fall under the stipulations of the Copyright Acts. Therefore all phone books published in Australia are subject to the collection regime of the National Library of Australia. In addition, state and local libraries may collect subsets. In the case of the Albury situation discussed in the case study, the Albury History Room of the Upper Murray Regional Library had collected the phone books from 1979 onwards, but the run is incomplete. This collection was done due to the interest of the local librarian rather than an institutional policy.

The phone books have a shortcoming, however, as they are usually completed several months before the issue date and thus may not reflect the actual presence of a business on the premises. In addition, phone books are cumbersome sources when it comes to name changes of businesses (as the new owners may not choose to advertise in the Yellow Pages), and especially in cases where the business changed both name and function.

Council records

In theory the property files of councils contain data on the shops, both in terms of changes and alterations to the building, but also data on the tenants — especially if the shops underwent a change of use. Council records may also contain details on tenant occupancy of shops derived from health inspection reports (required for premises selling food).

Actual research for the case study, however, showed these records to be incomplete. Neither did they cover all changes of ownership, especially if the use stayed the same, nor do they cover changes of use where the new use was within
the permitted range. Yet it is the latter data on ownership changes that give a good indication of the economic viability of these businesses.

Despite these shortcomings, the council file on the property used for the case example was actually much more comprehensive than usual as it contained a great deal of documentation that had been assembled for the acquisition of the property by council.

All council files relating to properties are subject to the provisions of the Privacy Act and thus require the permission of the owner if they are to be consulted by people external to council business.

**Other government evidence**

All businesses are registered with the Office of Fair Trading in New South Wales. That office has the full information on past and present businesses, including their premises. While theoretically it would be easy to search the business database by the street address of the premises and thereby obtain a complete listing over time — at least as far back as the system is data based — the provisions of the Privacy Act prevent the Office from divulging such information.

In addition, there are fire brigade inspection records for fire safety compliance. These records are also subject to the Privacy Act, but with permission of the building’s owner, should be available for inspection. In the case example at hand, it appears that inspections were not fully carried out until council took over the property.

**Newspapers and other sources**

Newspapers are the most common source of information on businesses. However, most local and regional newspapers have not been indexed, and where they have been indexed, the indexes do not cover commercial advertisements and classifieds.

Modern regional papers have substantial classifieds sections. The Border Mail (Albury), for example, runs seventy pages of classifieds per week. While a search of the classifieds is a conceivable approach, it is an inefficient activity if projects are on a restricted time-line and the tenant search runs for a decade or more. Stratified or random sampling of dates in a given year is not a reliable method, as many shops do not hold standing adverts, and some do not advertise at all.

**Oral histories**

Oral history and personal recollections are a major source of information when it comes to the reconstruction of tenant histories. Given that at least the last tenants
tend to be known, it could be surmised that it would be easy to back track from these, identify previous owners, and thus backtrack progressively in time. That proved not to be the case in the Albury situation. The chain of evidence was frequently broken when tenants had taken over shop premises that had been vacant for a shorter or longer period. Another break in the chain occurred when former tenants had left the area altogether and could not be traced, in particular where their surnames were reasonably common. Name changes due to marriage compounded the matter. More surprisingly, some tenants could not recall from whom they had acquired the business, as they had not retained records for longer than they had to. The elapsed time, combined with the relative unimportance of that kind of information, was a further barrier.

In the event, a tenant history could be compiled, based on oral history and standard detective work. Basically, it was to some extent possible to work back from the present. The key informants proved to be long-term tenants who were able to identify other tenants, who then could be systematically tracked down — provided of course they were still alive. The main shortcoming, however, was that memories were of mixed quality, as is the case with much oral history research. This was compounded by the fact that most of the recollections were not life-central matters for the respondents, so that while some information about their own businesses could be sourced, recollections of contemporary businesses in the arcade were limited.

Photographic sources

At the commencement of the research it had been expected that each tenant would have at least one shot showing the proud owner in front of, or inside, the newly established business.

What was in particular surprising was the lack of photographic documentation that could be sourced. While the final acquisition of the arcade by Albury City Council necessitated a valuation report, which contained some photographs,\textsuperscript{20} earlier imagery was surprisingly scarce. Even though cameras had been cheap and ubiquitous in the early 1980s, few tenants had bothered to take photographs of their shops while they occupied them.

Outcomes for the Hub Arcade

Based on a triangulation of sources, — predominantly council property files, phone books and oral histories — it was possible to reconstruct most of the tenant history of the premises. The property 528-530 Kiewa Street shows changes in clientele once we consider the businesses trading in the arcade in the late 1970s and early 1980s with those of the late 1990s.
In the late 1970s and very early 1980s we find a fashion accessory shop, a gift shop selling brass and cane ware and a picture framers up front, with a sandwich bar, Medibank, and a credit union in the shops further into the arcade. That period lasted from late 1977 until about end of 1980. It was intimated to the author by some of the informants that the move of Medibank to an address in Dean Street and the closure of the credit union was the beginning of a decline, coupled with the closure of the gift shop selling brass and cane ware.

The next group of tenants has a very different composition. While the sandwich shop (and later coffee lounge) provided some stability throughout the life of the arcade (albeit under thirteen different tenants), the other premises were occupied by an electronics shop, a TV repair shop, a small tobacconist cum ticket sales outlet, and a second-hand clothes sales shop, but also a debt collectors, an amusement arcade and a tattooing parlour. An artist had also taken residence in the one of the back shops. While an application for a change of use to turn one of the shops into an adult aid and book shop was withdrawn after owners did not allow it to go ahead, it is indicative of the clientele the shops had been attracting.

In addition, for the same time there was repeated reference made to an illegal SP bookies shop, as well as a card gambling venue in some of the upstairs rooms. Due to pressure by several tenants, the amusement arcade was eventually shut down following allegations of drug sales and use and of sexual misbehaviour by clients.

A change in financial circumstances of the original owner and developer of the arcade saw a finance company taking over the ownership and management of the arcade. The composition of the tenants soon changed and, with the exception of the coffee shop, which continued to have a high turn over of tenants, became decidedly more upmarket. Present were an optometrist, and later a shoe shop, a hair dressing salon, a framing business, a beauty parlour, a dance paraphernalia supplier as well as a government department and a printer. With minor variations, that composition remained at 528–530 Kiewa Street until the end of the arcade.

Clearly, the nature of the shops and their clientele has an influence on the public perception of the 'neighbourhood' and its social relevance. While envisaged as an upmarket arcade, the move of two 'respectable' tenants, plus the economic failure of at least one other tenant at the same time, precipitated a decline of the arcade. Very soon it had a decidedly seedy flair. That was counterbalanced by both an upswing in economic activity and, it would appear, by a concerted effort by the new owner to improve the reputation of the arcade.

Implications

The case example presented here raises some major concerns that need to be
addressed by historians and heritage managers alike. If reconstructing a twenty-five year tenant history of a building that closed less than five years ago poses a problem today, how big a problem will this be in twenty or thirty years time? Moreover, the property under discussion had in essence only eleven shops that needed to be dealt with. Mid-size shopping malls have in excess of thirty shops, which will disproportionately compound the magnitude of the problem.

If future heritage managers are to have the ability to adequately assess the heritage significance of shopping arcades and malls, they needs to be able to have in hand a reliable set of data. Leaving this to serendipitous survival of records, as is the case at present, will endanger these opportunities. Processes need be developed to ensure that such data can be collected today and stored for future use.

Charles Sturt University

Acknowledgements: I am indebted to Denis Gojak, Kate Higgins, Elizabeth Roberts, Gary Smith and other participants on the NSW Heritage Advisors’ discussion list for suggestions on alternative data sources.

Notes
8 For previous section see Dirk H.R. Spennemann, *No. 528-530 Kiewa Street, Albury, NSW. An Historical Analysis of the Site and an Assessment of Heritage Values*, Johnstone Centre Report no. 189, Albury, NSW, 2003 — and historical references cited therein.
9 Ken Latona, *City of Albury Central Area Urban Conservation Study. A study prepared for*


11 Spennemann, No. 528-530 Kiewa Street…. Historical Analysis.


14 Spennemann, No. 528-530 Kiewa Street….Historical Analysis.


