Temporary or ‘temple’? Archives buildings and the image of archives in Australia

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Abstract

Archives have often been housed in temporary buildings in Australia. The classical Greco-Roman temple as building inspiration, favoured in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was abandoned because of the pre-eminent need to solve storage problems. From the 1960s onwards buildings were constructed to serve the public as well as to meet statutory requirements to preserve records. Public understanding of archives and their contribution to society has been steadily growing, and the association between building and service has developed. As archives increasingly become available in digital form, what is the future for archives buildings now that access to archives is becoming a matter of virtual rather than physical visits?

Introduction

This paper describes the efforts of governments in Australia from the early twentieth century to address the issue of the physical preservation and storage of their archives. Before the turn of the century, the six Australian colonies were frontier and nascent industrial societies each with its own capital city, growing at different rates according to their fluctuating economic fortunes. Arrangements for library accommodation in the capital cities were makeshift or delayed until other priorities could be met or the necessary funds found. On federation, the new Commonwealth Government was not concerned with its legacy or with making policy for its records. The first efforts towards the preservation of Commonwealth records occurred during World War I, when the journalist and official war historian CEW Bean raised the issue of preserving records relating to Australia’s participation in the war. Bean wanted a building and one of the purposes of the Australian War Memorial, eventually completed in 1941, was to preserve records as well as to commemorate participation and sacrifice in war.

Until well into the twentieth century, government archives were located administratively and physically within their respective state libraries. Hence the early history of Australian archives buildings is that of library buildings: the collections that would become the La Trobe Library in Melbourne and David Scott Mitchell’s collection in Sydney contained archival as well as published materials. Over time, state governments and the Commonwealth Government were to take various routes to locate and build structures suitable for archives rather than libraries.
The temple as inspiration and motif

Australian library and museum buildings constructed in the nineteenth century invariably emulated classical European temples in their design and displayed classical facades to the world. Examples include Victoria’s Public (later State) Library in Melbourne (from 1856) and the former State Library of Queensland, originally built as a museum in 1879. The impressive Domed Reading Room in the Melbourne building was modelled on the British Museum’s reading room in London. These buildings were intended to be public statements of pride in their purpose and contents. Constructing a suitable building was a condition of David Scott Mitchell’s donation of his extensive collection of published and manuscript material relating to Australia to the New South Wales government. The Mitchell Library building in Sydney has classical features outside and inside. It was described as a ‘worthy shrine’ and ‘national monument’ on its opening in 1910. Later extensions to the Public Library of New South Wales presented a full Antipodean classical statement with a grand marble staircase inside and ornamented doors facing the outside world. ‘Every nation has its shrines’ ran a 1945 appeal for citizens to donate their documents to the Library, explicitly linking the gravitas of the building to its role as a home for ‘records of significance concerning Australia’. It was not only libraries and not only in Australia that the temple was a guiding motif. The National Archives building in Washington was designed and constructed in the “temple” style with symbolic intent in the 1930s.

Sent to Europe by the new Federal Government to look at archives buildings in the early 20th century, Frederick Bladen had been impressed by the palaces, chateaux and other impressive edifices he saw that served as archives. No action towards a building resulted from this early foray. In fact, an archives agency for the national government did not emerge for several decades. The Commonwealth National Library, a hybrid of national library, parliamentary library and national archives survived in the one organisation until 1960 when the National Library Act established the library as a statutory authority and separated the archives function from the library. From the late 1920s, the story of buildings for this institution is linked to the history of Canberra as national capital. In the 1930s, a temporary home was built for the National Library in the style known as ‘stripped classical’. This style entailed more restraint and less imposing exteriors than the sandstone classical of the older major public buildings in Sydney (the Art Gallery and the Australian Museum as well as the Library) and the Public Library in Melbourne. ‘Stripped classical’ was also used in the Institute of Anatomy building which was much later reborn as the home of the National Film and Sound Archive in 1984. The builders of the new city of Canberra generally eschewed the full classical design, preferring modest structures with rendered facades and art
deco features, found notably in the provisional Parliament House building and its associated office buildings, East and West Block.8

The temple representation in later twentieth century modernist idiom appeared in the form of the National Library of Australia’s distinctive new building, completed in 1968. This building has a highly visible location and its shape and marble columns are reminiscent of the Parthenon. At the same time this building was planned and constructed at the southern end of one of the two bridges over Lake Burley Griffin, the Commonwealth Archives Office struggled on in the conglomerate of sheds which served as its national headquarters at the southern end of the other bridge. No new building was yet envisaged for the archives: in the early 1980s the land on which this temporary home stood would be required for the grounds of the new National Gallery.

Temporary

In the post-war years, governments began to search for practical solutions for managing their archives. Indeed, the development of specifically Australian systems for dealing with custodial issues concerning Commonwealth archives was predicated on both the challenge of dealing with ever-increasing quantities of records and the complexities of government administrative arrangements.9 By the 1950s, there were urgent reasons for archives to improve and plan more confidently for the storage of the archives of government. The buildings used for government archives were temporary, makeshift homes in adapted-for-use buildings that were often poor quality and in unsuitable locations. This was not unremarkable in a country where buildings from the local school to the national Parliament were temporary.a

In New South Wales, the presence of the archives in the Library building was one of the sources of pressure on storage space and part of the ongoing struggle to find enduring solutions to the problems of storing and providing access within the Library’s building envelope adjacent to the State Parliament.10 In Victoria, too, over the decades there were battles to find suitable space for archives.11 Likewise, the records of the Commonwealth were spread around Australia and needed to be housed locally for retrieval by local staff. A national network of repositories began to develop, using a mix of converted and purpose-built repositories.12 It was difficult for the heads of archival institutions to put the case for new buildings as public servants in charge of usually small and low profile government agencies. Their efforts to secure adequate accommodation for their current and future holdings demonstrated the priorities of Australian government archival

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*a The first Parliament House served its intended purpose until 1988 when it was replaced by the permanent structure higher up the hill. Old Parliament House is now the home of the Museum of Australian Democracy.
agencies in the 1960s as they sought to establish institutions and identities independent from libraries.\textsuperscript{13}

From temporary to permanent

The facility built in Brisbane for the State Archives of Queensland was the first example of a purpose-built archives repository in Australia.\textsuperscript{14} The requirements included a site well away from the flood-prone Brisbane River, but not too distant from the city centre with ease of access to government agencies and also to public transport for users (showing in this case that public use of archives was a factor in planning). The site was deemed suitable because its chief neighbour was a prison and there was enough land for a future expansion. The building faced west, so allowances had to be made for additional shade from the sun. This building was constructed from practical materials and its exterior was of roughly finished concrete: the emphasis was on functionality, not beauty.\textsuperscript{15} The building served the needs of the Queensland State Archives for twenty-five years.\textsuperscript{b}

In NSW, the Archives Act of 1960 stated that a repository was to be established, but progress was slow. The older and more valuable records were still housed in the Mitchell Library. Many other government records were stored in former woolsheds at Shea’s Creek (near Sydney airport) which were described as ‘unsatisfactory and unsafe’ by the Archives Authority who were worried about fire risk.\textsuperscript{16} A site was found at Kingswood, some 55 kilometres from the city, but it took another ten years before the State Government could find the funds to start work. As former State Librarian Russell Doust recalled, politicians were not interested in preserving government records and even less in providing access. At that time the now usually compelling argument about saving public money by consolidating dispersed records under one roof did not hold sway with the NSW Public Service Board.\textsuperscript{17} However, the development of a system of regional repositories did alleviate some of the pressures on Sydney.\textsuperscript{18} The University of New England in Armidale and Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga have former library buildings to house their own archives and government records for which they have responsibility under the regional repositories arrangements.

As well as the Government Records Repository at Kingswood, another archives building was constructed in Sydney for the Archives Office of New South Wales. This was the Globe Street building in The Rocks near Sydney Harbour. Apart from the 1968 Queensland State Archives building and the warehouse at Laverton near Melbourne purchased in 1975 and converted for storage and research uses by the Public Record

\textsuperscript{b} This building no longer exists, but the site and its surrounds have been redeveloped as a community space and Eco Sciences precinct, with part of the former Boggo Road prison becoming a museum.
Office, this was one of few new comprehensive archives buildings in Australia. Designed for its site, it was built into the hilly landscape and blended architecturally with the old and the new in the area longest settled by Europeans in Australia. Occupied in 1979 by the Archives, the purpose of this building was to be the public face of the archives and to provide storage and conservation services. Over time, the balance of storage activities moved to Kingswood and there were practical and preservation reasons to cease the transport of records to and from the City for use in the reading room. Financial exigencies ensured that space in the building was ceded bit by bit to other government agencies (and commercial tenants) until mid 2012 when the last State Records staff left. The result is that there is no longer a major archival building in central Sydney. This is significant if a symbolic presence matters. Central Sydney has the State Library, the Art Gallery, the Australian Museum, the Australian National Maritime Museum and the Powerhouse Museum, among others, as embodiments of their respective legislative mandates and upholders of institutional missions, but no archives.

When an archives building was built to the requirements of an archival agency in conjunction with public construction authorities, there was no guarantee that it would be well-received. The main daily newspaper in Brisbane described the new Queensland State Archives building as the ‘ugliest public building’ built in the city since World War II. In his organisation’s and his own defence, Bob Sharman may have had the recently-opened National Library in mind when he wrote in late 1968 that

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\text{[i]t is admitted that the building is not a noble edifice like the Parthenon – but it is certainly more useful. Marble was not used in its construction: nor was it placed at the top of impressive steps, with classical columns seeming to reach to the heavens. Practical considerations demanded a building which was level with the street.}^{21}
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Modern expectations of national archives buildings

What should a national archives building look like? When Australian archivists began to put the case to governments for new buildings to deal with the urgent and ever-growing problem of the quantity of records to be stored, they turned as usual to international sources for advice. Some of these sources supported the practical Australian agenda. In Queensland, Bob Sharman acknowledged the work of Victor Gondos including his critique of problems with major new repositories in the United States not allowing enough space for expansion. Others highlighted the symbolic, for example the Canadian archivist W Kaye Lamb who advised the Australian Government

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\(^{c}\text{The name of the archives agency for New South Wales changed from the Archives Office to State Records in 1998 on the passage of the State Records Act 1998.}\)
in 1973 that a building should be ‘attractive in appearance, fine in quality and adequate
in size: a symbol and visible evidence of the institution’s existence and importance’. 23

Some time later, Jean Favier emphasised the connection between a nation’s archives and
its identity:

In people’s eyes, new archive buildings are the place where our civilization
recognises its past in perceiving its present… Nobody in search of information is in
any doubt when it comes to choosing between a miserable shed where nations who
no longer remember lay their past to rest and these palaces of history, whose stone,
concrete, steel and glass express an essential part of the dignity of man.24

For Michel Duchein, the right sort of building could have a role in changing public
perceptions of archives. He considered that

In most countries, the general public and civil servants are only too ready to regard
archives as a jumble of dirty, useless old papers. A new building in a modern style
can help greatly to overcome such prejudices.25

As far as national archives were concerned, Australia was still in the shed era almost
until the end of the century.

Library buildings serve multiple purposes and they convey multiple meanings through
their outward structures and the activities than occur inside, as Alistair Black has
demonstrated.26 In Australia the relentless growth in the quantities of government
records needing to be managed and stored, either for the short term (temporary records
sentenced to be destroyed) or preserved for the long term (records of archival status)
was to remain the overriding consideration in the provision of archives buildings for
some time. Ted Ling argues that it was frustrating that government archives were
expected to aim for both ‘imposing facades and limitless storage capacity’. He quotes
the eminent American archivist TR Schellenberg who noted that ‘while the monumental
features of an archival building are important, functional considerations are even more
important’ to support his own conclusion that it is function not facade that should come
first.27

In Canberra, the Commonwealth Archives Office sought a site in the Parliamentary
Triangle – the place for ‘headline’ buildings in the national capital – but was not
successful. A location was found and funds were available for a repository building in
Mitchell on the northern outskirts of Canberra. The old sheds by the lake were vacated
and the new repository occupied in 1981. In accordance with its nationwide
responsibilities, the Archives proceeded to build repositories in capital cities, from
Villawood (now Chester Hill) in Sydney to the last, East Burwood in Melbourne, completed in 1994. A suitable national headquarters building was eventually identified in Canberra – East Block – one of the original office buildings associated with the first Parliament House and designed by the same architect. The National Archives of Australia (NAA) received ten million dollars for a refit and the building was occupied in 1998.28 The building has helped to achieve profile and recognition for NAA, but not merely of itself. The efforts of its leaders and staff have been critical in making this happen.

By the late 1990s, government archives had developed considerable expertise in planning and constructing archives buildings, as Ted Ling’s book Solid, safe and secure: Building archives repositories in Australia (Canberra, National Archives of Australia, 1998) demonstrates. There had been considerable progress during the previous thirty years, when Bob Sharman had written that it was probable that ‘the only person who is competent to plan an archives building is one who has just completed the planning of one, and seen it erected and brought into use’.29 And new library buildings were no longer required to be constructed in the temple style. David Jones described the 1988 Macquarie Street extensions to the State Library of New South Wales as ‘elegant and functional’.30 However, the facades of existing “temples” needed to be maintained, while their interiors were refurbished and updated as the major redevelopment of the State Library of Victoria buildings in the early years of this century has amply illustrated.

Trends in archives buildings

In 1995, Australian Archives announced a major change in its approach to managing records storage. It informed agencies that it would no longer accept temporary value records for storage and that they would have to assume this responsibility themselves (usually achieved by outsourcing to commercial storage providers). This was part of a program of evaluating all holdings of Commonwealth records in its repositories across Australia. This change meant that Australia’s largest archives would not need to plan to meet open-ended requirements for storing paper records nor to have nor such a mix of building types to store different types of records according to whether they were to be retained for the short term or the long term. It also signalled that in future the concentration would be on Commonwealth records of continuing value, confirmed in the change of ethos ‘from warehouse to treasure house’.31 The 1998 refurbishment of East Block in Canberra thus perhaps represents the apogee of the ‘public face’ archives building – staff and public programs, with a repository in easy reach.32 By contrast, in New Zealand the national archives presence is concentrated in the centre of the capital city in a converted warehouse building that has visibility and proximity to government agencies and other cultural institutions.33
Some state governments pursued the repository distant from the city centre approach, including New South Wales (discussed above) and Queensland which acquired and built on a large site 19 kilometres from the city, opening its first building in 1993 and a second stage in 2008. Conversely, Victoria left its outskirts Laverton site and worked with NAA to build a joint facility that serves storage, preservation and public functions and is both close to public transport and not too distant from the city centre. This facility opened in 2000 (NAA has since adopted this model of co-location in Adelaide, Darwin and Hobart where it shares premises with the relevant state or territory archives). In summary, archives buildings in Australia are not what they once were. Although there are still many unsatisfactory and unsuitable buildings housing the nation’s private and public archival heritage, there is a body of expertise, supported by legislation, regulations and a standard to guide organisations intending to adapt existing buildings or to erect new buildings for archives.

A place for using archives

Finding space to store records was the usual imperative for government archives, rather than providing a welcoming place for scholars and others to undertake research. This may have been related to the fact that Australia, following Britain’s lead, moved from a 50-year to a 30-year rule for public access only in 1972. Before this time, research using government archives by the public was infrequent. Modest, if any, facilities were provided to accommodate this activity. As Peter Tyler observes in his history of State Records, in the 1960s most citizens of New South Wales probably had little idea that there were official archives. Until the genealogy boom developed in the 1970s, it was true that seeking to use those archives was an experience shared by few. Then the pressures on archives staff providing service to readers intensified. Baiba Berzins described the pace of life on the shared reference desk in the Mitchell Library (before Globe Street) thus: ‘[i]t was hard to be an educator, a reference archivist and a counsellor in such a public situation, especially when often there was a queue of twenty or more people anxiously waiting their turn to receive attention’.

Archives, unlike libraries, have not traditionally operated or been perceived as places where the user is the centre of attention. For example, Luciana Duranti in ‘Archives as a place’, published in 1996, delineates the history of archives as a place of custody and preservation for public offices creating archives, not as one whose functions include supporting or enabling access by the public. On the one hand, broad benefits to society may result from the use of archives, as a report on the United States National Archives noted, : ‘[t]hough only a small percentage of Americans enter the doors of the National Archives, the research conducted there touches the lives of most citizens’. This report goes on to describe such research as having a ‘multiplier effect’ in helping
Americans to see their country and their history, so that most Americans may be perceived to be indirect users of the National Archives. On the other hand, there is the negative perception of archivists as gatekeepers hampering the freedom of the research process in their assiduous defence of unfair access policies. Ann Pederson has linked this tendency to the general failure of archivists to communicate to their superiors and the public the value of the profession and the contributions archivists make to society.

Today there is another more benign stereotype; the helpful archivist who guides the innocent user through the difficult passages of the complex finding aids to reach the records they wish to consult with a minimum of fuss and a maximum of amazing knowledge. This is what we see regularly in programs like *Who Do You Think You Are?* (WDYTYA). Consequently, if viewers realise that research is rarely instant and that not every story can be unravelled, they are likely to have developed a more nuanced understanding of archives and archivists. So, despite their rose-coloured lenses, it can be argued that such programs have provided the public with more understanding of what archives are and what archivists do. Indeed, the WDYTYA *Encyclopedia of Genealogy* is full of helpful tips of a kind that would have been extremely valuable for both users and archivists in the pre-digital days.

Archives buildings are now associated with the provision of public access. This is an indication that the building efforts of the past several decades which were inclusive of facilities to welcome public use have succeeded. Today, when records are available in digital form, archival reference no longer relies on direct personal contact between the archivist and the user in an archives building. However, if the research experience is to be maximised, it requires substantial change to introduce a service model that enables the archivist to better understand the information needs and research methods of their users. But managing such change can prove problematic for archives leaders as they seek to move more comprehensively into the digital age. It was the loss of reading room services, not the likely reduction in the level of service to government agencies, that drew opposition from the archives profession and its supporters when National Archives of Australia announced in late 2009 that its offices in Adelaide, Darwin and Hobart were to close.

Taking the National Archives of Australia as his example, Paul Macpherson has argued that the emphasis on services to readers in reading rooms has been misplaced and has effectively continued the phenomenon of privileged use for a minority which pre-dated the 30-year rule. He advocates the cause of online users who may never set foot inside an archives building and whose needs he considers are not being adequately met. Macpherson’s case has a financial edge: his estimate of the cost of providing online access is one fifth of the amount spent on providing and maintaining reading rooms.
Over the last two decades or so, government archives have carefully developed associations between archives buildings and services to the public. This profile is important and is closely related to the emergence of a ‘public programs culture’ in archives that underlines the fact that undertaking research is not the only public use of archives buildings. Members of the public now visit archives to view exhibitions and to attend cultural events, and some are involved in consultative forums or as volunteers. These activities take place in centrally located landmark buildings where these exist and in the more distant multipurpose repository with public service points in other cases. Interestingly, major libraries and archives have both adopted a preference for grand-scale offsite warehouse facilities to store and service remaining demand for less frequently used physical materials.

Yet despite their achievements on many fronts over the last few decades, archives remain institutions whose role is not widely understood. The post-custodial role of archives, while not new to archivists, does not feature in public discourse about the future of archives. Similarly, debates about how digital records can best be managed to ensure their authenticity happen generally within the archives profession and not in wider public forums. Sue McKemmish has suggested that governments might re-direct the funds once spent on buildings towards digital recordkeeping projects. However, attempts by government archives authorities to secure adequate initial funding for their digital archives programs have not been particularly successful, as Emma Buckley has documented in her survey of Australasian efforts so far. Thus a new version of the campaign in the mid-twentieth century to convince governments of the value and significance of their archives may be needed. Gains won by archives in establishing their worth appear to be insecure: a new minister or a new round of government cutbacks can still undo hard-won progress by archives and their leaders. Despite some encouraging signs in public appreciation, archives are rarely as prominent as libraries, galleries and museums; and thus they remain possibly easier targets for reductions.

**Conclusion**

Today, the choice for archives buildings is not between temporary and “temple”, but rather for flexible facilities. Archives buildings must be utilitarian and provide efficient storage services, but they must also be places of welcome for the public. They must serve the needs of those who will create and use archives now and in the coming decades. We are some distance from an entirely online archives world and existing archives buildings need to continue to serve storage and public functions and to house

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For example, the National Library of Australia’s Hume Store and the National Archives of Australia’s plans for a single mega-repository to house records from New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria.
the staff who provide the services for these functions. But how many new buildings will be constructed and what they will look like? The focus is no longer on convincing politicians and facilities managers to fund buildings fit for purpose for the nation’s archives. The temple versus temporary tension may have been resolved with the construction of the 1990s generation of buildings, but the treasure house versus digital services provider tension remains. It may yet emerge as a determining factor in future debates about how Australians understand their archives.

3 Jones, A source of inspiration and delight, p.53.
4 Jones, A source of inspiration and delight p.108.
5 Adrian Cunningham, ‘Archival institutions’ in Sue McKemmish, Michael Piggott, Barbara Reed and Frank Upward, editors, Archives: Recordkeeping in Society, Wagga Wagga, Centre for Information Studies, 2005, p. 45.
12 Ling, Solid, Safe, Secure, p.16.
16 Tyler, State Records, p. 30.
17 Quoted by Tyler, State Records, p. 35.
20 Tyler, State Records, pp.72, 81-83.
25 Duchein, Archive buildings, p.29.
26 ‘Cathedral of culture, citadel of science: the public library building in Britain since 1850 as monument and machine’, paper delivered at Buildings, books and blackboards: intersecting narratives conference, RMIT University, Melbourne, 29 November 2012.
27 Ling, Solid, Safe, Secure, p. 15.
28 Ling, Solid, Safe, Secure, p.17.
30 Jones, A source of inspiration and delight, p.6.
32 Ling, Ling, Solid, Safe, Secure, p.17.
33 Chris Watson and Helen McNaught, “The best bit is when you come in and they have just made the coffee”: the Post Occupancy Evaluation of the National Archives Building, Archives and Manuscripts, vol. 26, no. 1 May 1998, pp. 46-57; Ling, Solid, Safe, Secure, p. 26.
35 Russell, A matter of record, pp. 142-145.
37 The standard appears as Appendix 1 in Ling, Solid, safe, secure, pp. 136-138.
38 Tyler, State Records, p. 31.
39 Baiba Berzins, The Mitchell Library Reading Room: A personal memoir about the 1960s to the 1980s, Australian Library Journal, vols. 3 and 4, November 2007, p.318. Until the mid-1970s, the Mitchell Library Reading Room was also the service point for the Archives Office of New South Wales.
44 Mary-Jo Pugh, Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts, Chicago, 2008, pp. 3-4.
49 Cunningham, ‘Archival institutions’, pp. 44-47.
http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/futuretense/reinventing-archival-methods/4421526#transcript