

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, HERITAGE, AND REDISCOVERING A SENSE OF PLACE IN NORTHBRIDGE, PERTH, AUSTRALIA

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the richness that has been discovered in Western Australia's capital city, Perth, through the Northbridge History Project (NHP)—a five year initiative whose role was to revitalise the city authentically by drawing on its diverse histories. Containing sites of recognised cultural heritage significance, Northbridge in Western Australia has undergone significant infrastructural and generational change in the last twenty years, bringing with it dislocation of its identity. Discovering and making available the histories of this diverse area in an Electronic Archive (EA) has created a new sense of identity and community engagement, bringing awareness that the area's living cultural heritage is valuable and has much to offer the city as it seeks to position itself as Australia's Indian Ocean gateway. The NHP drew upon the best practice of various Charters on Cultural Heritage Interpretation to guide its activities. At the time of its establishment, the EA proposed by the NHP was groundbreaking and the extensive community consultation undertaken thought to be difficult because of disparate interests. In 2010, Neil Silberman, President of International Scientific Committee on Interpretation and Presentation (ICIP) and lead author of the Ename Charter wrote:*

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*I am deeply impressed by the vision, scope, and real world results of the Northbridge History Project. It is one of the finest examples of successful community engagement in heritage that I have ever seen. This is heritage intended not just for tourism or historic preservation, but also to improve the life of a community and to recognise the dignity of its people and their memories. No small achievement. In doing so, the Northbridge History Project offers a valuable model for multicultural urban communities throughout Australia and indeed everywhere in the world.<sup>2</sup>*

**Keywords:** cultural heritage, urban, cities, history, community, sense of place, ICOMOS charters

## INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the rationale and activities of the Northbridge History Project (NHP)—an initiative whose role was to revitalise the city authentically by drawing on its diverse histories. It shows how the NHP drew upon the concepts outlined in the *The Australia Icomos Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Heritage Significance* (The Burra Charter), 1999; the Council of Europe *Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*, 27.X.2005 (Faro Convention); the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, 17 October 2003; and, the ICOMOS *Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites*, 10 April 2007 ratified Quebec, Canada 4 October 2008 (Ename Charter) to guide the Project's structure, activities and outcomes.

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<sup>2</sup> Neil Silberman, President, ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites quoted in Department of the Premier and Cabinet. *The Northbridge History Project Report 2005–2010*. <http://www.northbridgehistory.wa.gov.au/uhtml/documents/NorthbridgeHistoryReport2005-2010-UPLOAD.pdf>, accessed 31 Oct 2010.

## RATIONALE

Northbridge is a small lozenge-shaped area, roughly a square mile in size which forms approximately one third of Perth's Central Area.<sup>3</sup> It is home to the Cultural Centre: the Art Gallery, Western Australian Museum and State Library share a central spine. It has also been home to over 50 nationalities as evidenced by the structures they have created—a mosque, cathedral, temples, and various churches. Today, it is Perth's premier restaurant and entertainment district.

Established in name in 1981 as the result of a public competition, the area is characterised by its proximity to the Central Railway Station in the south, the Perth Cultural Centre in the east and the Mitchell Freeway in the west. Prior to 1981, the area was variously known as North Perth, West Perth, North of Perth, North of the Line and Little Italy. The area was first settled in the early 1830s and its fortunes have ebbed and flowed in tune with the changing economic circumstances of the state. Originally the location of a series of interconnected swamps, rapid development of the area did not take place until the gold rushes of the 1890s. The resultant growth of the city, increased population and expansion of rail transport, saw the area flourish as a trade and light manufacturing hub. Repeated waves of migration from all parts of the globe ensured that the area reflected diverse ethnic, religious and occupational activity.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the reservation of land for a freeway led to a residential decline. Houses were converted to restaurants which led to the boast 'more restaurants per capita than anywhere else in the southern hemisphere' in the 1980s. In the mid 1980s to the early 1990s, burgeoning *al fresco* dining and a vibrant, cosmopolitan hospitality and arts scene saw the area become the entertainment precinct of Perth.

As is common with many inner city areas, the history of the Northbridge has been characterised by physical change and fluctuating fortunes. A proposed inner ring road (freeway) did not proceed and a cut-and-cover tunnel began construction in the late 1990s, causing dislocation of traffic and a slump in business confidence. Increased competition from suburban shopping centers and entertainment precincts and changes in the composition of the neighbourhood community, saw people move away. With a rise in anti-social behaviour and poor press about gangs, crime and

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<sup>3</sup> Gehl Architects, "Perth Public Spaces Public Life," (Perth: City of Perth and Department for Planning and Infrastructure, 2009), 13. The boundaries of the NHP extend further north than the official policy boundaries. This a reflection of the historical development of the area.

drugs in the area, there was an increasing feeling that Northbridge was losing its special and distinctive qualities.

In 2002, in response to these concerns, a report by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet called *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* recommended the preparation of a history of the area to 'understand and embrace the area's history to create diversity, interest and business and tourism opportunities'.<sup>4</sup> The NHP was used:

- To identify the different histories of Northbridge;
- As a resource for the authentic interpretation of Northbridge;
- To create community awareness, engagement and ownership of Northbridge through understanding its history;
- To develop an accessible history for the public so that they appreciate the uniqueness of Northbridge; and
- To deliver useable history for educational and tourism purposes.

Initially, the NHP conceived its role to be that of *using* the histories of the area but quickly discerned that because of generational changes, the custodians of the early to mid-nineteenth century history of the area were passing, and the histories were on the cusp of being lost. Thus, the *modus operandi* of the NHP quickly moved from *using* history to *gathering* history before it was to be used by the Project. However, discovery of authentic voices from the past is not as simple as it seems. Frequently, the overlay of scholastic or official voices conceals other voices, less vociferous or less well recorded. Community participation was recognised as essential to the success of the Project.

## HERITAGE

Community based histories have frequently been the poor cousin of heritage research despite their potential to be a rich source of material for establishing cultural heritage significance. Stories of the past, interwoven with artifacts such as photographs, documents and expressed heritage (stories, dance, tracing of lives) can inform interpretation with a level of

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Busch. *Northbridge: Shaping the Future*. Perth: Department of the Premier and Cabinet, March 2002, 71–72.

authenticity difficult to otherwise replicate. However, until comparatively recently, much interpretation has focused on the physical fabric of heritage *places*—specific places or sites. Our understanding of the way in which heritage has been viewed within the city context has been partly influenced by the way in which we have identified, articulated and conserved heritage in accordance with the Burra principles.

In 1999, the Burra Charter highlighted a new awareness of the importance of intangible heritage and its pluralities in its definition of meanings:

*Meanings* denote what a *place* signifies, indicates, evokes or expresses. Meanings generally relate to intangible aspects such as symbolic qualities and memories.<sup>5</sup>

The Burra model of interpretation of a place was underpinned by the tacit assumption that the interpretation was knowable—that it was able to be determined and articulated—and whilst differing interpretations were legitimate—there was an assumption that the interpretations were intrinsically embedded within the parameters of the *physical fabric*—that they were supporting of it and supported by it—that the referencing was if not circular at least ovate, encompassing some slight stretching here and there to accommodate *isms* as they arose—post industrialism, multiculturalism, indigenism, feminism, post-modernism and more recently, post-colonialism.

Since 1999, there has been considerable movement in the understanding of community based cultural heritage and intangible heritage and the value that non-place based cultural heritage can have and how this can, in turn, nourish and support our understanding and interpretation of places. In 2003, the UNESCO Convention proposed 'the recognition of less tangible aspects of cultural significance including those embodied in the use of heritage places, associations with a place and the meanings that places have for people'.<sup>6</sup> There evolved an understanding that the very fluidity of understandings that a community embodies, can enrich and strengthen traditional scholarship in heritage.

What happens if we untie our understanding of cultural heritage from its site specificity—make it a more loose rendition of cultural memory? Do we, having removed its spatial specificity, lose the essential identifiable

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<sup>5</sup> Australia ICOMOS. *The Burra Charter. The Australia Icomos Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Heritage Significance*. Burra, Australia: ICOMOS, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> UNESCO. *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Paris, 17 October 2003.

components of cultural heritage significance as we currently express it and move solely into the realm of cultural rather than cultural heritage significance? How far can we expand the meaning of site? Can it cover the whole city?

Cities are, by nature of their constructed environment, ideal places in which to explore the nature of tangible heritage—the very issues that the Burra Charter enumerates/articulates so adeptly. In Western Australia, there are three key heritage organisations operating in relation to the constructed environment. They are: the Heritage Council of Western Australia which has responsibility for identifying and protecting places which are deemed to have cultural heritage significance of importance to the State and qualify for entry into the State Register of Heritage Places; The National Trust of Australia (W.A.) which owns and conserves places which have been vested in it and runs interpretive programmes associated with those places; and, recently, Heritage Perth Inc (2009)—formerly the City of Perth Heritage Appeal—has been recast to raise funds for heritage promotion rather than conservation and runs a promotional program called 'Look Up Perth' which draws attention to facades.<sup>7</sup>

However, the constructed environment, although may not be immediately obvious, relies heavily on the context provided by intangible heritage. The significance of a building is not in the bricks and mortar *per se*, even when beautifully executed, but in the context that the values of the society (the intangible values) that give relevance and empower it to be remembered. Otherwise, it is meaningless. Stonehenge becomes just another pile of rocks; citadels become glorified caves; and churches are huge but with empty spaces, devoid of meaning.

As the opening page of the Ename Charter cites: "These earlier ICOMOS charters stress the importance of public communication as an essential part of the larger conservation process (variously describing it as "dissemination," "popularisation," "presentation," and "interpretation"). They implicitly acknowledge that every act of heritage conservation—within all the world's cultural traditions—is by its nature a communicative act".<sup>8</sup> This is fundamentally different from being entertained because the process requires an input (time, thought, interest—if not yet understanding) from the community. As a result, there is a type of ownership that occurs wherein the cultural heritage becomes embedded in the psyche as personally meaningful. This engagement, if ongoing, leads to a sense of connection—

<sup>7</sup> [www.heritage.wa.gov.au](http://www.heritage.wa.gov.au); [www.ntwa.org.au](http://www.ntwa.org.au); [www.heritageperth.com](http://www.heritageperth.com)

<sup>8</sup> The ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Interpretation and Presentation (ICIP). *The Icomos Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites*. Ename, Belgium, ratified Quebec, Canada 4 October 2008; ICOMOS, 10 April 2007, Principle 6.

be it a place or a more diffused area. The release from specific 'place' in the defined sense of the word to a broader 'sense of place' or *genius loci*, paradoxically tends to personalise heritage and create a sense of engagement able to construct personally meaningful connections to an area. In turn, this psychological commitment informs other decisions about the places (or areas) creating an understanding of its form and, subsequently, its function. This leads, in turn, to good citizenship—a key desire of government but a relationship which must be fostered individually via personal experience.

From the outset, the NHP made it clear that the Project was not concerned about identified heritage places *per se* but about the community culture of the area which was diffused in both its physical and psychological boundaries, depending on which community group was being engaged.<sup>9</sup> We shied from the word 'heritage' so that people would not think we were only interested in 'important' buildings. Thus, the Project moved beyond the interpretation of physical fabric to a broader understanding of the interpretation of the cultural significance, which included the cultural connection not only to specific places but also to an area or set of values. Such an approach in this diverse area also brought with it a wide range of vested interests.

## STRUCTURE

The NHP was established by the former Premier of Western Australia, Dr. Geoff Gallop, in his role as Head of Government, as a reflection of the importance of the area as a significant portion of the Capital. Its' brief was to capture the history of Northbridge before it was lost and to use the history to revitalise Northbridge—producing practical outcomes for business, tourism and urban redevelopment in the area.

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<sup>9</sup> This has not prevented the NHP from publishing research about buildings associated with particular communities. Kirrily Jordan and Jock Collins, "Cosmopolitan Northbridge: A Changing Inner-City Ethnic Landscape," in *Hidden Histories of Northbridge. Selected Northbridge History Project Studies Day Papers*, ed. John N Yiannakis and Felicity Anne Morel-EdnieBrown, *API Network* (Bentley: Network Books, Curtin University, 2009).

NHP sought to address four key areas in its Strategic Plan:<sup>10</sup>

1. Disaffection about the area. In part, this had been driven by perceptions of neglect from Government exacerbated by repeated changes in plans for the area. There were also complaints about a lack of connection to city with the railway, in particular, seen as a divide that prevented Northbridge from playing a more active role in the life of the city.
2. The area perceived as 'crime ridden' and 'dangerous'. Negative press reports of crimes, combined with limited information available to counterpoint negativity, was contributing to a monocultural view of the area. Lack of understanding of importance of the area to aboriginal community was reflected in mounting tension between traders and indigenous people in the area. Lack of knowledge of the complexity and diversity of the area did not assist decision makers.
3. The area not considered an asset to the city. Infrastructural disruption during the construction of the 'Tunnel' led to increasing degradation of physical attributes of the area and a significant disruption to business. Lack of profitability was reflected in diminished maintenance of building stock in the area. Concurrently, a strong emphasis on night-time entertainment activities created a monoculture resulting in the predominant visitor demographic shifting from 'family' to 'youth'.
4. Loss of identity and lack of interpretation. Although the area was home to a range of migrant cultures, there was a lack of awareness of its uniqueness in Western Australia and Australia. There was limited knowledge of Northbridge's diversity and complexity and the contribution its inhabitants had made to the development of the state. Little understanding of its history meant there were few resources for authentic interpretation.

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<sup>10</sup> The following points are drawn from the unpublished Northbridge History Project Strategic Plan, June 2005 reproduced in *The Northbridge History Project Report 2005–2010*, 7–9. Further information detailing the actual programmes may be found in the same document on pages 9 ff and the outcomes from pages 13 ff.



Many of the issues were inter-related and a multi-faceted approach was conceived to deal with them effectively. It was proposed to:

- Change perceptions—increase business, public and local community confidence by creating new interest in the area.
- Counter-act negative publicity—contextualise the area in the state's growth and development by providing interesting stories to the media.
- Use history as a point of difference and attraction—increase engagement with area's difference to improve Northbridge's competitive advantage over suburban centres.
- Provide information—for tourism and marketing of the area.
- Uncover uniqueness—interpret Northbridge authentically as a key element of the Capital City.
- Make visible interpretation—work with City of Perth, East Perth Redevelopment Authority and the Town of Vincent to embed historical interpretation in Northbridge as a place of cultural interest.

It would do this by:

- Community engagement—consult with the community of Northbridge to ensure the maximum participation in, and support for the Project.
- Gather history of Northbridge through working partnerships with the stakeholders of Northbridge, including volunteer assistance.
- Partner with other agencies and organisations to increase awareness of Northbridge's history and to bring resources to the Project.
- Make information visible to stakeholders in urban renewal, interpretation and business activities in Northbridge and the broader community.
- Make information available electronically via the Northbridge History website—initially in the Department of the Premier and Cabinet and, later, through the State Records Office.

- Develop policies and protocols for the appropriate documentation and copying of primary materials in an electronic format.

In a community where expectations would run high and diversity of interests needed to be acknowledged, a comprehensive 'community consultation process' was proposed with a formal consultation plan to guide it. In December 2004, 26 key stakeholders with an interest in Northbridge were approached to form the Premier's Northbridge History Reference Panel, on the basis that they would champion the process and provide advice and feedback to guide the consultation. These individuals included the Lord Mayor of Perth, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Perth, Chief Rabbi of Western Australia, Commissioner for Police, Mayor of Vincent, Presidents of the Ethnic Community Council, Chinese, Greek, Italian, Vietnamese, African, gay and lesbian communities as well as Director-Generals or Ministerial Representatives of government agencies in the area. The Community Consultation plan was launched by the Premier of Western Australia at a morning tea in his suite on 1 June 2005. In the plan, a five year Project was proposed and the process for both initial and ongoing community consultation was outlined in full, including a diagram of the structure (Figure 1).

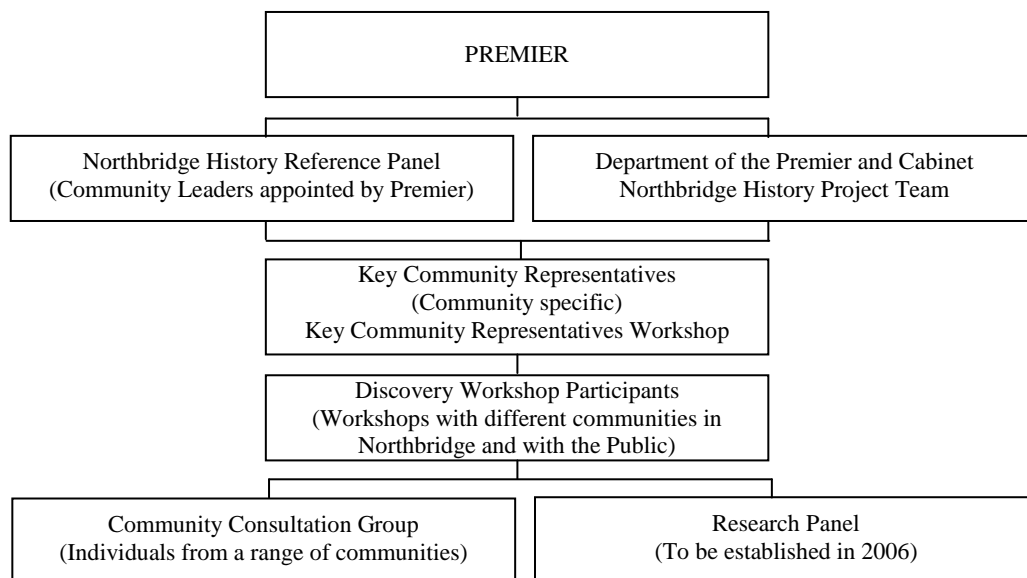


Figure 1: Diagram of the Community Consultation Structure

As part of the Discovery Workshops, we asked people to indicate if they would like to become part of a Community Consultation Group. The Community Consultation Group was a key element for the Project and each

was strong community based and 'hands-on' in discovering resources and information as the NHP progressed. The NHP team worked closely with the members of the Group. People could participate by researching the history of their community in Northbridge or those themes and subjects which the Discovery Workshops uncovered.

The information from the Discovery Workshops was used in several ways, including:

- To inform the NHP team of the issues, activities, topics, themes, subjects and resources that participants wanted to see included in the NHP.
- To assist the NHP team to select the most appropriate ways to progress research and writing about Northbridge.
- To discover available resources for research purposes.
- To find out how the community and public would like the results of the Discovery Workshops to be used.
- To create a Summary Document to guide further research and investigations into the history of Northbridge.

The Consultation Plan was also clear about what the NHP could not do. We encouraged a range of people to tell their stories on the basis that, even where information was not directly used in the Project, knowledge of it had the potential to make the researchers aware of sensitivities and community concerns that should be investigated. A direct commitment was also made:

- To be fair, honest and open in our communications with them.
- To treat them and their views with courtesy and respect.
- To not resile from covering all aspects of the history of the area of which we are aware.<sup>11</sup>

The consultation phase took a full year, allowing ample time for the community to become involved. Engagement at every level of community participation, both formal and informal and including participation by the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 7.

general public was accommodated. Scoping workshops sought advice from communities, businesses and residents of Northbridge as to their expectations of that which a history would contain and how it would be used. Workshops were initiated with each of the Panel members' constituents which mapped out the boundaries of 'Northbridge' as each group saw it.<sup>12</sup>

These findings were taken to broader audiences for further clarification as there was potential concern that individual communities would be overly nostalgic and antiquarian in focus. We sought advice as to their expectations of what an archive would contain, how it would be used, information they think may be able to be used in history research, how the information could be used by the broader community, and whether they would like to personally participate in gathering information and doing research. As such, it fulfilled the objectives of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage which recommended 'the need to involve people in the decision-making process, particularly those with strong associations with a place. These might be patrons of the corner store, workers in a factory or community guardians of places of special value'.<sup>13</sup>

By engaging with the community over an extended period, the NHP showed interest in, and understanding of, the complexity of the area and a commitment to treating all participants equitably, and community concerns seriously. The formal consultation document was an important methodology to maintain open communication and facilitate the widest possible participation in the Project. It ensured participants knew how their contributions fitted into the overall project and that the process was transparent, open and inclusive.

Four months after the launch, the Faro Convention was signed which contained the following clauses in Article 12b:

'Access to cultural heritage and democratic participation: [will] take into consideration the value attached by each heritage community to the cultural heritage with which it identifies'; and, 'recognize the role of voluntary organizations both as

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<sup>12</sup> Although external boundaries were somewhat diffused, there was a remarkable constancy about the 'inner' core area—although it was somewhat broader than the Government's policy boundary and covered two local government authorities.

<sup>13</sup> UNESCO. *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*.

partners in activities and as constructive critics of cultural heritage policies'.<sup>14</sup>

As such, it was a timely endorsement of the approach taken.

The process outlined in the diagram has been very successful for NHP. Four phases were implemented since 2005: community consultation (2005/2006); photographs, documents and oral histories (2006/2008); and mapping (2008/2009). A high level of community engagement has ensued and the proposed Community Consultation Groups have instead become Steering Committees chaired by the respective Reference Panel members. These Committees will continue into the next phase of the Project—Interpretation—which is scheduled to begin in 2009/2010. It exemplifies Principle 6 of the Ename Charter which advises to 'Encourage inclusiveness in the interpretation of cultural heritage sites, by facilitating...the involvement of stakeholders and associated communities in the development and implementation of interpretive programmes'.<sup>15</sup>

## OUTPUTS

These principles are also being expressed through key outputs the NHP has achieved including an Electronic Archive (EA), Curriculum, Northbridge History Studies Days, and Mapping.

### Electronic Archive (EA)

As community consultation progressed, it became obvious that the material would need to be wide ranging and, to make it relevant and easily accessible, in an electronic format. There was a sense that if the material was 'not online' it 'wouldn't exist'. As a result, the website that was initially for information purposes was edited to create an Electronic Archive (EA) so as to both gather and present material for research and commercial purposes (with permission).

Effectively, the EA became a primary source archive to be used for research purposes. This conforms to Principle 2.1 of the same Charter: 'Interpretation should show the range of oral and written information, material remains, traditions, and meanings attributed to a site. The sources

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<sup>14</sup> Council of Europe. *Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*. Faro, Portugal, 27.X.2005, Article 12b.

<sup>15</sup> The ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Interpretation and Presentation (ICIP). *Ename Charter*. Principle 6.

of this information should be documented, archived, and made accessible to the public'.<sup>16</sup>

It contains oral histories (transcripts and audio files), photographs, documents, research papers, electronic books, PDFs of displays and curriculum materials. To date, there are 1292 images, 100 oral histories and 298 documents. This represents about 40 percent of the items provided to the NHP. Much of the material is private material and had never been made publicly available until the EA. There has been a high level of commitment to the EA, brought about in part because of the use of electronic images, rather than gathering original from family collections, has meant that people do not feel threatened that objects will be removed from family control. In an area where there has sometimes been a patchy relationship with government agencies, this process has helped to build trust. Images and documents are, instead, scanned at high resolution (1200 or 2400 dpi) 'on the spot' at community events or the donor's homes (using portable scanners). As a result, donors have felt very comfortable in providing access to family photographs and documents. There is a sense that these histories are being preserved for the sake of Northbridge.

The structure of the EA is very simple. All of the materials are documented in a Microsoft Excel database and are presented online via fully searchable PDFs. Users are able to select a community group or search through all the records (pictures, transcripts and audio files) using a keyword. The use of keywords means that alternate spellings can be included and indexing is not artificially constrained by staff selections. Material can be searched by media or group or across all categories. For example, a search on the word "milk" brings up 50 resources including oral histories, photographs and documents from which to explore the various memories of cows, kindergarten and war-time propaganda photography. In the future, the search function will be Geographic Information System (GIS) enabled.

NHP's searchable EA is accessible via the website ([www.northbridgehistory.wa.gov.au](http://www.northbridgehistory.wa.gov.au)). In order to emphasise that the EA is an archive of primary sources available for research and non-commercial purposes, agreement to the terms has to be completed (by pressing a button) for every search. A small and slightly tedious process but one that ensures that—as far as possible—it is clear that the materials are to be used within the terms of the Copyright Act of 1968.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, each page of the downloadable PDFs carries a similar clause.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* Principle 2.1.

<sup>17</sup> *Commonwealth of Australia: Copyright Act, Act No. 63 of 1968 as amended.*

Although all donors sign a comprehensive authority for the NHP to use their material, as a mark of respect for individual sensitivities and, in anticipation that some donors may pass away in the short term, a quite lengthy iterative process is undertaken to ensure that each donor has physically signed off on each item and each page of an item prior to it going online. Such trust has been generated by this model that donors had not to date objected to any use proposed for their sources—including some rather *avant-garde* proposals for the Northbridge Festival in 2007 and 2008.

As Northbridge is in a period of rapid change, the EA is itself becoming a cultural artifact and, in some instances, the only repository of material about certain aspects of the area's history.

## Curriculum

Article 12b of the Faro Convention advises that programmes should 'take steps to improve access to the heritage, especially among young people and the disadvantaged, in order to raise awareness about its value, the need to maintain and preserve it, and the benefits which may be derived from it'.<sup>18</sup> The NHP has addressed this by developing curriculum materials for both students and adult education. Through 2006 and 2007, there was nationwide criticism about the lack of teaching of history in schools. In Western Australia, the history of the state had not been taught in high schools for many years. With awareness that those under the age of 35 are a key demographic in the ongoing vitality and rejuvenation of Northbridge, the NHP and Department of Education and Training developed 'Shaping the Future with History' Curriculum Materials teaching Western Australian history in the first four years of high school using Northbridge as the exemplar. This material showcased the diversity and richness of the area, while creating a new raft of users for the EA. The curriculum has been rolled out to all public, private and independent schools across the state. It is simultaneously teaching skills while embedding a different perspective of Northbridge from which to contextualise negative publicity.

The production of a CD which contains the same material also enables adults to self-guide their way through the material, giving them basic historical skills and tools with which to analyse historical sources and read the urban environment. These materials are encouraging research not only into Northbridge but also in local history and the identification of places of cultural heritage significance in communities across the state. As Article 13a of the Faro Convention states: '[Understanding] cultural heritage

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<sup>18</sup> Council of Europe. *Faro Convention*. Article 12b.

and knowledge [will] facilitate the inclusion of the cultural heritage dimension at all levels of education, not necessarily as a subject of study in its own right, but as a fertile source for studies in other subjects'.<sup>19</sup>

Gaining an understanding about Northbridge's history in this way will give people the opportunity to see the area in a completely different manner. Rather than the stigma of an area 'in decline', Northbridge will be seen as an area of complexity, diversity, changing fortunes and difference, with layers upon layers of history that is entwined with the history of Western Australia.

### **Studies Days**

In 2007, the Northbridge History Studies Days were launched—inviting community and academic participation to raise the level of informed debate about the area—and thus, change perceptions of its value as an area of cultural heritage significance. The aim of the Studies Day is fourfold:

- To contextualise Northbridge in its past and, in doing so, create a better understanding of the area's uniqueness and how it can be used as a catalyst to revitalise the city.
- To increase the understanding and appreciation of the diverse histories of Northbridge and how they have shaped this area of the city.
- To acknowledge the many histories of the area, including aboriginal history.
- To raise the level of knowledge about the history of Northbridge and Perth generally.

The Studies Days have consistently sold out with some 180 attendees enrolling in response to very generous airtime (radio and television) which has been provided by state media covering the history of the area.

A mixture of presenters—six from academic and six from community—deliver papers and the day is sponsored by the City of Perth, Town of Vincent, TAFE Central and the History Council. The audience ranges from policy and decision makers to historians, other local government officers and people with long connections to the area. In line with Article 12a of the Faro Convention: 'Access to cultural heritage and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Article 13a.



democratic participation to encourage everyone to participate in the process of identification, study, interpretation, protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural heritage; and, public reflection and debate on the opportunities and challenges which the cultural heritage represents'.<sup>20</sup>

Leading scholars have presented diverse investigations about Northbridge in terms of its Aboriginal heritage, natural environment, urban form, migrant entrepreneurship, heritage places, labour history, film and art, specific cultural groups, bureaucratic importance, deviance and recollections of it being a place of difference and adventure. This responds to Article 13c of the Faro Convention which is to 'encourage interdisciplinary research on cultural heritage, heritage communities, the environment and their inter-relationship'.<sup>21</sup>

Panels then address questions from the audience and many interesting issues are raised and new information shared which, in turn, is prompting more studies. This conforms to Principle 1.2 of the Ename Charter: 'Interpretation and presentation should encourage individuals and communities to reflect on their own perceptions of a site and assist them in establishing a meaningful connection to it. The aim should be to stimulate further interest, learning, experience and exploration'.<sup>22</sup>

Primary sources, speakers' papers are available online at the EA and selected papers have been published by Curtin University and Network Books.<sup>23</sup> This conforms to Principle 2.1 of the same Charter: 'Interpretation should show the range of oral and written information, material remains, traditions, and meanings attributed to a site. The sources of this information should be documented, archived, and made accessible to the public'.<sup>24</sup>

## Mapping

The third phase of the NHP is mapping. In community meetings, this takes place with an oversized map into which pins are pushed to map cultural geographies and hidden pathways through the city. This is a dual methodology—it both collects and engages. It provides opportunities for contributors to share memories and histories and gives the community a

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Article 12a.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Article 13c.

<sup>22</sup> The ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Interpretation and Presentation (ICIP). *Ename Charter*. Principle 1.2.

<sup>23</sup> John N. Yiannakis and Felicity Anne Morel-EdnieBrown, eds., *Hidden Histories of Northbridge. Selected Northbridge History Project Studies Day Papers* (Bentley: Network Books, Curtin University, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> The ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Interpretation and Presentation (ICIP). *Ename Charter*. Principle 2.1.

sense of engagement and ownership of the area. The pins give NHP information which is then mapped and also put online as a document in its own right and the very process of mapping creates a new cultural resource within the community—that of a sense of ownership of their cultural heritage and of pride in the area. The process also refreshes memories which then contribute more richly to the oral histories and engender further mapping. The maps will contribute to a better understanding of the community interaction and overlay this with the daily patterns of human life as they intersect with the hidden patterns of the city. In particular, women's lives in Northbridge have particular patterns that will be explored in this stage when the maps are presented electronically via GIS.

## **EXTERNAL LINKS**

The NHP has also created an environment in which the resource gathered by the Project can be made available to third parties for non-commercial uses to revitalise Northbridge and, in particular, the Project has sought to establish links with organisations external to it who can benefit from the EA and NHP's expertise.

### **Northbridge Festival**

The NHP provided a major theme for the 2007 and 2008 Northbridge Festivals through images and historical information for use in posters, advertising, signage, the Festival Programme and the Festival launch. In part, the images were used to rebrand the Festival to make it more attractive to an older demographic. However, in 2007, over 1000 young people with a demographic of 18–35 participated in a History Hunt where they identified heritage places through binoculars from the top of a Northbridge car park. Complemented by a retro-50s caravan in the main Festival area to collect *vox pops*, the Project had a distinct impact. Bookmarks, posters and crosswords featuring Northbridge's history have engaged a younger audience as has radio coverage on some of the more alternative radio stations. This has increased the knowledge of the area for the participants and contributed a younger perspective to the EA.

### **Interpretation**

Using the resources of the EA for interpretation in Northbridge was the final phase of the NHP. To date, the communities have developed walking tours

and moves are afoot to commemorate particular sites. Pod casts were researched and a high level Interpretative Steering Committee, with Mayoral representation is being established. Local government authorities have set aside funds and an Interpretive Working Party comprising scholars, designers, artists, business operators and developers is planned. Together with the existing Steering Committees, this will provide a robust group of people with whom to engage to create dynamic and relevant interpretation in Northbridge. In structuring the shape of the Interpretation phase, Principles 6.1 and 6.2 of the Ename Charter are being employed as NHP draws upon 'the multidisciplinary expertise of scholars, community members, conservation experts, governmental authorities, site managers and interpreters, tourism operators, and other professionals should be integrated in the formulation of interpretation and presentation programmes'.<sup>25</sup> Care has been taken to ensure that 'the traditional rights, responsibilities, and interests of property owners and host and associated communities should be noted and respected in the planning of site interpretation and presentation programmes'.<sup>26</sup>

In summary, the outreach activities of the NHP can be précised by Principle 7.4 of the Ename Charter: 'Every interpretation programme should be considered as an educational resource for people of all ages. Its design should take into account its possible uses in school curricula, informal and lifelong learning programmes, communications and information media, special activities, events, and seasonal volunteer involvement'.<sup>27</sup>

## Replicable

The Project has also been designed to be replicable so as to 'facilitate exchanging, developing, codifying and assuring the dissemination of good practices'.<sup>28</sup> Processes of and standards for documentation, electronic recording and community consultation have been documented in a package called 'Collections without walls: creating a digital archive based on the Northbridge History Project'. Additionally, templates and toolkits developed are pending for a roll-out to small regional centers via Museums Australia. Training workshops have been run in the Museums sector and the model is also in the process of being adopted by international groups who see the EA model as a high quality but cost-effective alternative to a local museum with sufficient flexibility to be able to be implemented at a small scale and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Principle 6.1.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Principle 6.2.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Principle 7.4.

<sup>28</sup> Council of Europe. *Faro Convention*. Article 17c.

adapted to particular needs. As such, the NHP is adhering to Principle 7 of the Ename Charter: 'Develop technical and professional guidelines for heritage interpretation and presentation, including technologies, research, and training. Such guidelines must be appropriate and sustainable in their social contexts'.<sup>29</sup>

## Multi-lateral

Article 13b of the Faro Convention: 'Fostering multilateral and trans-frontier activities, and developing networks for regional co-operation in order to implement these strategies'<sup>30</sup> has also driven the development of broader synergies for the NHP. A fully interactive GIS is in the final stages of being planned whereby cross-linking of the archive and an interactive presentation will allow a virtual rendition of the history of the area for interpretation, policy making and research.

The NHP has in place, industry and academic partners to create a spatially enabled research portal in which to integrate the EA with other Government resources and to create a global presence for Perth online. Called *Virtual Perth*, it is the subject of an Australia Research Council Linkage Grant for an integrated GIS of Perth displaying sources and interpretation of historical, current and 'future' Perth. Using GIS, it will use spatial enabled research data to create deep research and interpreting Perth and Northbridge. It will integrate datasets from State Government and key industry partners. Local partners are NHP, Landgate, Department of Planning & Infrastructure, City of Perth, Town of Vincent, Heritage Perth, Heritage Council, State Records Office and Police, Curtin University, The University of Western Australia and Murdoch University. Transfrontier partners are Sydney University Archaeological Computing Lab and University of California Berkeley ([www.ecai.org](http://www.ecai.org)).

## Community Extensions

Other community extensions of the Project have resulted in; the Chinese community committing to building a repository for their cultural artifacts and to better record storage; the Police funding the Police Historical Society to archive their records; an exhibition of Early Jewish History; an exhibition of Italian photographs in local business windows; a re-enactment of the

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<sup>29</sup> The ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Interpretation and Presentation (ICIP). *Ename Charter*. Principle 7.

<sup>30</sup> Council of Europe. *Faro Convention*. Article 13b.

1888 journey of the Sisters of Mercy to St Brigid's Convent; and the establishment of both MySpace and Facebook sites by the gay and lesbian communities to collate information for the EA.

This had the potential for some communities to strengthen their appreciation of their heritage in Northbridge. Dr. Keith Shilkin AM, former President of the Jewish Community Council of WA and a Member of the Jewish Steering Committee wrote:

"The stimulus that was afforded by the Project to the Jewish community to document its important history within the Northbridge precinct was a wonderful opportunity that almost certainly would have otherwise been lost to it...The recording of the rich history of all the communities of Northbridge who have together contributed to building our WA society is a story well worth telling. I am confident that the real value of your work and that of the entire Northbridge team will continue to bear fruit into the future".<sup>31</sup>

The Polish Community staged an exhibition, funded and opened by the Polish Consul who flew from Sydney for the event:

"On behalf of the Polish community in Perth we feel that we owe you a debt of gratitude for the way you managed to open our hearts and our minds to the possibilities of remembering and accepting the history of our parents and grandparents and be able to pass it onto our young generation. Many of their accomplishments spanning over a hundred years were uncovered and will be available in the electronic archives to be used in the future".<sup>32</sup>

The owner of the longest running gay and lesbian nightclub in the southern hemisphere used involvement in the Project to recast his business decisions:

"The process has not only been fascinating and edifying, it has been inspirational. It has been a great pleasure to work with you and your team. Your professionalism and passion for the subject matter has helped crystallise many thoughts that I have

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<sup>31</sup> Dr. Keith Shilkin AM, former President of the Jewish Community Council of WA, Member Jewish Steering Committee quoted in *The Northbridge History Project Report 2005–2010*, 83.

<sup>32</sup> Halina T. Szunejko OAM, President, Polish Community Council of WA, quoted in *The Northbridge History Project Report 2005–2010*, 15.

had about the district and its role in our city. Being involved in the Project has caused me to re-assess my role and that of my business in my community (gay & lesbian), the Northbridge community and that of the greater city. It has helped me understand where we have come from, where we find ourselves now, where we might go in the future and the incredible opportunities that the future presents...My involvement in the Project has informed my dealings with all levels of government and given a context for discussions of planning and development. Furthermore it has informed ideas of planning and development of our own business...Because of this, Northbridge is where we intend to stay (and we had thoughts of moving Connections), it is where we intend to develop new business and where we intend to continue to work to develop a community that is culturally rich, diverse and indicative of the city we aspire to live in".<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Through the process of uncovering Northbridge's history, developing relationships with the community and others, the Northbridge History Project (NHP) is changing perceptions about the area. There is a growing awareness that Northbridge has a cultural character that is distinct and unique.

The power of history is being used to shatter common perceptions of Northbridge as a crime-ridden entertainment district with no unique qualities. Instead, the lives and experiences of the people of Northbridge are being given a voice through the Electronic Archive (EA). Discovering and making available the histories of this diverse area has created a new sense of identity and community engagement, bringing awareness that the life of the city is played out against the backdrop of the built environment but the soul of the city comes from its context within the cultural fabric.

Discussion of physically melding the area seamlessly with the city has changed and instead, there is increasing awareness that the area's living cultural heritage is valuable and has much to offer as the city seeks to position itself as Australia's Indian Ocean gateway. This is underpinning changes in perception of the area by government and policy makers in

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<sup>33</sup> Tim Brown, Managing Director Connections Nightclub and Member Gay & Lesbian Steering Committee, correspondence, *The Northbridge History Project Report 2005–2010*, 31.

which the heritage of the area is more than that which is represented in the streetscape.

"I was struck by the importance that people place on acknowledging and celebrating the past and the things they have shared with others, whether that's work or study. The spirit of these shared things does endure beyond buildings to linger in the places around us—as it does here in Northbridge—but we all have a role in maintaining and honouring these collective memories to realise their true value to our communities".<sup>34</sup>

The NHP followed principles of interpretation and engagement with the community that were wide ranging, inclusive and authentic in approach. The Ename Charter, ratified in 2008 (approximately half-way through the Project) defines interpretation as:

"The totality of activity, reflection, research, and creativity stimulated by a cultural heritage site. Although professionals and scholars play important roles in this process, the input and involvement of visitors, local and associated community groups, and other stakeholders of various ages and educational backgrounds is essential to transforming cultural heritage sites from static monuments into places and sources of learning and reflection about the past, as well as valuable resources for sustainable community development and intercultural and intergenerational dialogue".<sup>35</sup>

Neil Silberman, President of ICIP and lead author of the Ename Charter wrote:

"I am deeply impressed by the vision, scope, and real world results of the Northbridge History Project. It is one of the finest examples of successful community engagement in heritage that I have ever seen. This is heritage intended not just for tourism or historic preservation, but also to improve the life of a community and to recognise the dignity of its people and their

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<sup>34</sup> Neil Fernandes, Managing Director Central Institute of Technology quoted in *The Northbridge History Project Report 2005–2010*, 65.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.enamecharter.org/faqs.html>, accessed 30 Oct 2010.

memories. No small achievement. In doing so, the Northbridge History Project offers a valuable model for multicultural urban communities throughout Australia and indeed everywhere in the world".<sup>36</sup>

David Lowenthal wrote that "a fixed past is not what we really need, or at any rate not all we need. We require a heritage with which we continually interact, one which fuses past with present".<sup>37</sup> This is precisely what the NHP is doing. [www.northbridgehistory.wa.gov.au](http://www.northbridgehistory.wa.gov.au)

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<sup>36</sup> Neil Silberman, President, ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites quoted in *The Northbridge History Project Report 2005–2010*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 410.



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## **APPENDIX**

Appendix for the Northbridge History Project is downloadable from the link:  
<http://web.usm.my/ijaps/articles/appendix-northbridge.pdf>