

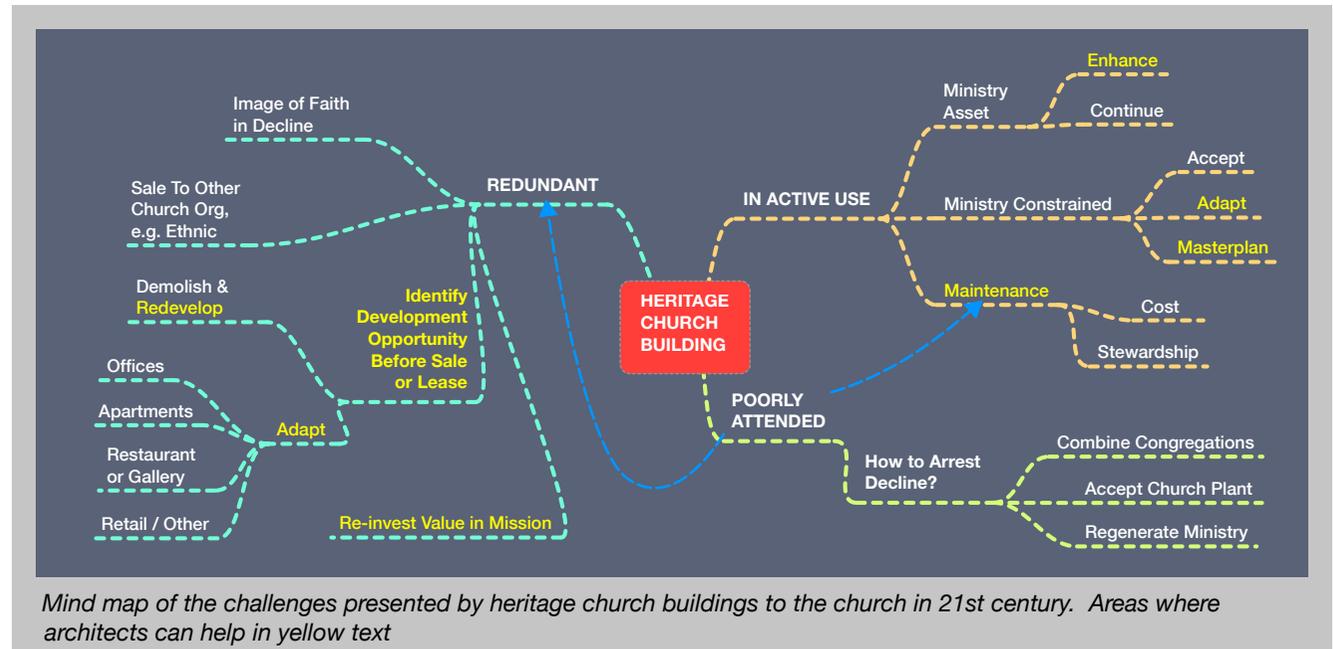
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*To the average person in the street, the mention of “church” conjures up images of grand heritage buildings, quite possibly in disrepair and visually impenetrable. For some who have dared to venture inside, they may represent a long bygone era, quaintly attractive but in a backwards time-warp. For others, they are sacred.*

## The Radical Heritage Church

Traditional church architecture, as we see it in Australia, developed from European stylistic approaches in the 19th century. However in Europe, these proud, grand architectural icons were once the landmark and focal point of the community. People navigated around the town by the spire or tower and the marketplace was out front. Retailing was on its doorstep.

But when Jesus said that Peter was the rock on which He would build his church, He was not talking about buildings or architecture. Once we take back Church to mean the community of believers, we can start to see the places in which the church has met for many years as its heritage building stock. For many of course, their heritage church building has become sacred and is consecrated. It has taken on a meaning for them that is



well beyond the shelter provided by a roof and four walls; it has become a place of encounter with God.

I suggest that Heritage Church buildings fall into one of three categories:

- In Active Use
- Poorly Attended
- Redundant

There are issues in which mission, ministry and architecture overlap within each of these categories.

### In Active Use

Church leaders have told me that their buildings often constrain their ministry. They consider them to be a necessary burden that they have to work within. Some

simply accept this and “do the best they can” within the restrictions of a cavernous and rigidly furnished worship auditorium, rooms that are not attractive to youth or children and a dark foreboding entrance. Others take the bull by the horns and ask an experienced architect to adapt the building to meet the needs of their specific contemporary mission, whilst at the same time refreshing and enlivening the heritage building.

Some Church leaders consider heritage building to be of benefit to their ministry, providing an atmosphere for their gathered church that is particularly conducive to their worship style. Change is not needed here, only maintenance.

But maintenance is required in every case. In so very many cases, regular maintenance, particularly of gutters

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and downpipes is not followed and what would have been a small cost becomes a huge catastrophic expense. Not only holed steel gutters and downpipes, but rotting roof timbers and stonework with washed out joints or worse. Good stewardship is the answer.

### Poorly Attended

It is here that the cost of maintenance becomes a particular burden and ignoring it is a slippery slope. Past solutions to declining attendance have been to combine congregations, closing down one or more nearby church buildings. More recently, regional leaders have asked a nearby successful church to “plant” a new congregation and take over leadership of a declining church.

Another way to arrest decline has been to regenerate the ministry, with new leadership or new members. Many currently well attended churches have been through low



Heritage church in Werribee with scheme for new entry foyer and new multi-purpose larger auditorium to enable 2 congregations to meet.

periods. We do not underestimate the challenges and difficulties with these options.

### Redundant

Closed, decaying or empty heritage church buildings present an image of a faith in decline. But this is balanced by growth in megachurches. However to demolish fine reusable heritage buildings is not a sustainable way of using the earth’s resources. New, ethnic language church communities are springing up in Australia and looking for buildings in which to meet.

Beyond this, if a sale is to take place, the opportunities for development and reuse should first be identified to ensure that the church gains maximum benefit from the sacrifice and investment made by its predecessors who funded the property many years ago. Occasionally the opportunities are obvious, but in many cases an architect with heritage experience can help to identify development opportunities and lift the value of the property by illustrating a scheme in the sales particulars or by obtaining a planning consent. Even if the planning consent is changed by an eventual purchaser, the reduced risk factor and protracted cost of finance during the planning application stage will improve bids.

All of this can maximise the value from heritage property in order to reinvest it in the mission of the church. As the church today and inheritors of these amazing buildings given to us by the church of the past, we owe it to them to maximise and use the value wisely for the future church.



New sound desk in heritage church as piece of new furniture

*Redeploying redundant property around an active church for child care, retail, cafe, gym or even apartments can gather the local community around it, putting the church back in the centre of the marketplace. A comprehensive masterplan can frame this holistically to benefit the church’s mission.*

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