

Changing Heritage Buildings and The Too Hard Basket

So why would you want to change a heritage church building? Nothing else in society has changed over the last 150 years, has it? Of course it has. But they are beautiful buildings of great significance; shouldn't we preserve them?

If they are continuing to do their job really well in society today, preserve them and maintain them. If people are deserting them and choosing to gather as large congregations in other places, we must ask why. Why is the building typology that everyone thinks of as the traditional church no longer naturally selected as the place where God's people gather? It has the benefit of being a place of prayer and spiritual encounter for very many years; some say the walls are imbued with prayer. There is spiritual significance.

And of course it is "Significance" that is the heart of heritage building value to society. It is how our heritage buildings are classified and there are several types of significance including the spiritual.*

It is possible to transform a heritage church building into a beautiful place for the whole life of today's church. A place for worship, for social gatherings including dinners, for lectures and conferences, for weddings and other celebrations, for Third World development festivals, for concerts and drama, as a venue for debate and webinar, as a place for art workshops, exhibitions and children's events. All these have been part of the life of God's people at St Aldates Church in Oxford over the past 19 years since the interior was transformed.



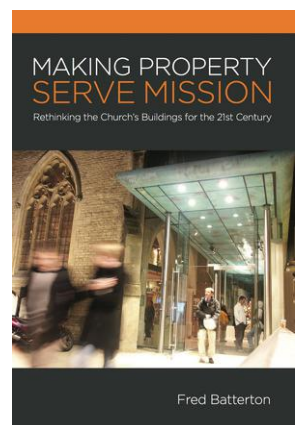
St Aldates in 2018

It was a respectful transformation, involving a new level floor throughout with flexible seating and full access for all. It was found to have elements dating from 950 A.D. with contributions from architectural periods since. The work was carried out with the full cooperation of the heritage authorities and is now one of several reinvigorated church buildings in the UK. It meets many of the needs of today's church and is used much more often than in the past. Having a meal with friends in its warm and beautifully lit heritage surroundings, listening to a speaker that you can hear clearly is a memorable experience. It was a great act of faith by the leaders of the church at the end of the last century. No too hard basket for them and certainly a significant experience for me.

Time to do one in Australia? Making buildings useful indirectly preserves them.

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* *The Burra Charter, Article 1: Definitions 1.2*



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