

Submission on Cultural Heritage and Urban Conservation to Draft National Urban Policy Consultation

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Heritage Workshop

Next Generation Conservation

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Draft National Urban Policy Public Feedback

I am making a written submission on the relationship between cultural heritage and the national urban policy. Positively, the national urban policy draft identifies cultural heritage as an area of relevance for the final strategy. However, the draft does not provide adequate weight to 1) the role and benefits of cultural heritage in shaping cities and 2) practical policy measures for cultural heritage to strengthen our urban environments.

I am a leading expert on the relationship between cultural heritage and urban development. I am the founder of a boutique conservation firm Heritage Workshop, based in Melbourne. I previously spent more than ten years affiliated to tertiary institutions, including Melbourne, Sydney, Deakin and London Universities. I have postgraduate qualifications in cultural heritage, urban history and geography. My accomplishments include the first scholarly historical monograph on Australian conservation called *Values in Cities: Urban Heritage in Twentieth-Century Australia*.¹

I have published and researched on many aspects concerning the intersection of cities and cultural, urban heritage. My work has examined past and future trajectories of national policymaking in this significant area. I recommend reviewing my 2024 open access book chapter called “Saving Heritage Policy: The Past and Future of Conservation in the Australian City” at <https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/australian-urban-policy>.²

Heritage first became a national policymaking priority with the election of the Whitlam Government in 1973. There were two strands to what was then called the ‘national estate’. The first strand concerned cultural heritage conservation (built, natural, Indigenous) and was taken up by the Australian Heritage Commission. These functions are now performed by the Australian Heritage Council and the Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water.

¹ James Lesh, *Values in Cities: Urban Heritage in Twentieth Century Australia* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

² James Lesh, “Saving Heritage Policy: The Past and Future of Conservation in the Australian City,” in *Australian Urban Policy: Prospects and Pathways*, ed. Robert Freestone, Bill Randolph, and Wendy Steele (Canberra: ANU Press, 2024), 125–45, <https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/australian-urban-policy>.

The second, and equally crucial, strand of heritage policymaking was, in 1972, held by the Department of Urban and Regional Development, and then its successors, today the Department of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Development, Communications and Arts. This specific interest in heritage policymaking, where it relates to urban and regional environments and landscapes, has waxed and waned over time.

I propose that the new national urban policy has a renewed focus on heritage. The benefits of heritage are manifold, including community resilience and wellbeing, climate adaptation, strengthened design outcomes, and enhanced planned environments.³ We also have a tremendous body of listed heritage that will impact how any national policy is achieved.

Heritage, broadly conceived, envelopes everything we have already built and planned – with a focus on listed or special areas and sites of cultural significance. No national accounts of heritage are kept (that is, at a local, state and national levels). But I would estimate possibly as many as half a million urban sites have a statutory relationship with heritage. That sheer scale is why heritage matters for the strategy, in addition to the learnings that can be drawn from heritage for non-listed places (e.g. adaptive reuse/retrofit, people-place relations, etc).

Unfortunately, there has been a lack of innovation in Australian urban heritage policymaking. National, state and local urban and heritage statutory bodies, consulting firms, not-for-profits, and community groups still rely on heritage frameworks that have not been substantively updated since the abolition of the Australian Heritage Commission (early 2000s).

This is putting tremendous pressure on our heritage places. It also leads to poorer urban environmental and social outcomes. Heritage places and adjacent areas not performing in ways that maximise developmental, community, design and environmental opportunities.

For example, heritage should be aiming to conserve cultural and social continuity, while enabling reasonable and quality development.⁴ But, our heritage frameworks too often seek to keep heritage places frozen and unchanged. So, heritage is not realising its potential to shape the development of cities and places, while sustaining cultural significance.

We are not using up-to-date heritage knowledge and expertise to shape our heritage areas or our cities more generally. My publications, a bibliography of which follows below, provide

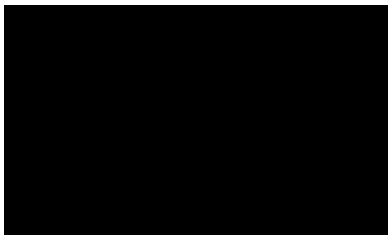
³ Heritage Council of Victoria has this year published an important piece on the benefits of cultural heritage: <https://heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/2024/04/valuing-victorias-heritage/>.

⁴ Rebecca Madgin and James Lesh, eds., *People-Centred Methodologies for Heritage Conservation: Exploring Emotional Attachments to Historic Urban Places* (Oxon: Routledge, 2021).

some guidance to ways that heritage has and might continue to contribute to better urban development outcomes. My recent book chapter “Saving Heritage Policy” has specific recommendations and pathways that would benefit the national urban strategy.⁵

Prioritising innovation in urban heritage would benefit the national strategy paper. My research and heritage practice has consistently demonstrated that heritage has unrealised potential to strengthen our cities and their listed and non-listed historical environments.

I am available to discuss this submission further.



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Key Relevant Peer-Reviewed Publications

1. James Lesh, *Values in Cities: Urban Heritage in Twentieth Century Australia*. Routledge, 2023.
2. Rebecca Madgin and James Lesh, eds., *People-Centred Methodologies for Heritage Conservation: Exploring Emotional Attachments to Historic Urban Places*. Routledge, 2021.
3. James Lesh, “Saving Heritage Policy: The Past and Future of Conservation in the Australian City,” in *Australian Urban Policy: Prospects and Pathways*, ed. Robert Freestone, Bill Randolph, and Wendy Steele (Canberra: ANU Press, 2024), 125–45.
4. James Lesh, “Melbourne’s Federation Square and its Heritage Discontents, 1994-2002”, *Fabrications* 31, no. 1 (2021): 109-138.
5. Kali Myers and James Lesh, “The Aboriginal Tent Embassy and the Limits of Values-Based Conservation”, *Heritage & Society*, no. 14(2–3): 267–284.
6. James Lesh, “From modern to postmodern skyscraper urbanism and the rise of historic preservation in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, 1969-1988”, *Journal of Urban History* 45, no. 1 (2019): 126–149.
7. James Lesh, “The National Estate (and the city), 1969–75: a significant Australian heritage phenomenon”, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25, no. 2 (2019): 113–127.
8. James Lesh, “Social value and the conservation of urban heritage places in Australia”, *Historic Environment* 31, no. 1 (2019): 42–62.

Additionally, since 2015, I have regularly contributed to public and media discussions about heritage. My articles are archived at my website www.heritage.city.

⁵ James Lesh, “Saving Heritage Policy: The Past and Future of Conservation in the Australian City,” in *Australian Urban Policy: Prospects and Pathways*, ed. Robert Freestone, Bill Randolph, and Wendy Steele (Canberra: ANU Press, 2024), 125–45, <https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/australian-urban-policy>.