Fitzroy North - 111-139 Queens Parade and 433 Smith Street (former gasworks site)

statement of evidence
Miles Lewis

panel hearing commencing 23 April 2018
Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
Government Land Standing Advisory Committee
1. My name is Miles Bannatyne Lewis, of 34 Napier Street, Fitzroy. I am an architectural historian and conservation consultant. As a historian I specialise in the cultural history of building technology, and I have made a special study of the history of prefabrication. I attach a short curriculum vitae.

2. I have been asked by the 3068 Group to present evidence in relation to the J H Porter iron building on the subject site,¹ and will address its form and history, its cultural and technical significance, and the factors involved in conserving it. Photographs in this report are my own, and the sources of other illustrations are stated *seriatim*.

3. The J H Porter building is located in what has until now been the City of Yarra Council depot at 111 Queens Parade, Fitzroy. It is registered on the Victorian Heritage Register, no H2243, pursuant to the Heritage Act 1995. It is listed by the City of Yarra, and classified by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria).

4. The building is a simple arch-roofed shed with walls clad in heavy gauge vertical corrugated iron, with cast iron stanchions of cruciform section, and other elements of wrought and cast iron. It measures 5.75 by 9.13 metres, and is open on one side where a former wall has been

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¹ This brief has evolved through discussion, following an exchange of emails between myself and Chris Goodman of the 3068 Group, on 30 March 2018.
removed. It has suffered some damage and alteration to its base, apparently in the process of moving it to the present site, where it has been set upon concrete.

J H Porter brand on a stanchion [rotated].

Porter Brothers & Stuart brand on a window head.

5. The building was manufactured by J H Porter of Birmingham, England, whose brand appears on it, together with one brand of the partnership of Porter Brothers & Stuart which existed only briefly in 1853-4. A similar confusion of the two firms occurs in two lithographs of 1853 to which I will refer. It thus appears that the building dates from about 1853 and would have been imported at that time, but where it first stood is unknown. Our next information is that it was removed to the present site during the early twentieth century. It does not appear at the present location in the plans of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board
of Works of 1896 and 1900,² and the earliest evidence of its presence is a photograph of about 1944.³

6. The building is important generally as an example of nineteenth century prefabrication in iron, and specifically as the only known surviving work of J H Porter.

7. The practice of prefabrication is an old one, but in the nineteenth century it was adopted widely, and was associated with industrialisation and with specific technical improvements. This phase can be seen as one of the outcomes of the Industrial Revolution. As a result of the gold rush, Victoria received more such buildings than any other place in the world. No examples are known to survive in the other major areas of receipt, San Francisco and the Crimea. Fires apparently destroyed all examples in San Francisco, and the buildings in the Crimea were removed at the conclusion of the war. There are, however some examples in other Australian states, and isolated examples in some other parts of the world. The majority of those in Victoria are from Britain and are of timber or wrought iron, but other countries are represented – other Australian colonies, New Zealand, Germany, Switzerland and Singapore – and so are other materials such as zinc and cast iron. The phenomenon of prefabrication in the nineteenth century is a truly remarkable one, and I am in process of preparing a proposal for the UNESCO World Heritage listing of the Australian examples, including the subject building.

² MMBW plans 029, 160 ft to the inch [1:1920], 1896; and MBW 1213, 1900.
³ Production of Munitions by the Metropolitan Gas Company 1940-1944 (Metropolitan Gas, Melbourne 1944), pl 24.
8. The manufacturer of the building, John Henderson Porter (1824-1895), was an engineer of some importance. He worked at first for his father, was involved at a very early stage in the galvanizing (or zinc coating) or iron, and managed one of the first factories for the process in Britain. He then established himself as a prefabricator of iron buildings, being only the second person to do so on anything other than an *ad hoc* basis. His first known exported building went to Hong Kong in 1844. Others, either roofs or complete buildings, were sent to the West Indies, Ceylon, St Petersburg, and the Cape of Good Hope, as well as to many parts of Britain. In March 1848 Porter took an English patent for ‘Improvements in iron girders, beams, trusses and supports for buildings, bridges and other structures, and in rendering the floors of buildings fire proof by the use of iron.’ By July 1853 he seems to have moved his business entirely to Birmingham, and at about this time to have entered into a short-lived partnership, for lithographs of buildings

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*Practical Mechanic's Journal, I (1848-9), p 48*
in 1853 bear the name of Porter Brothers & Stuart, as referred to above, and in 1854 that firm is listed at Gas Street and the Spring Hill works, Birmingham. After about 1855 there is a period of obscurity, possibly indicating difficulties with the business, but Porter continued or resumed operations and produced structures including cast iron lighthouses for the Russian government and wrought iron framed ones for the Spanish government. In 1862 his firm constructed the Lambeth Suspension Bridge London, to the design of Peter Barlow. From 1867 to 1875 Porter was engaged with James Duncan in the ultimately unsuccessful manufacture of beet sugar. Then, as a consulting engineer in London, he was active in the softening and purification of water by the Clark process, patenting his own improvements from 1876 onwards. It became known as the Porter-Clark process, and it occupied him until his death.

Buildings in Victoria which could be specifically attributed to J.H. Porter included:

- The subject building.
- A warehouse formerly at 71 Little Malop Street, Geelong, dismantled in 1971, some fragments of which are now or were recently held in storage at Sovereign Hill, Ballarat.
- Two schoolhouses to the design of A E Johnson, built at Sale and Bulla in 1854, which have disappeared.
- Six further schoolhouses designed by Johnson, ordered by the National Schools Board in December 1853, and put up from 1854 to 1858 at Port Melbourne, South Melbourne, South Yarra, Bacchus Marsh, Port Albert and one unknown location. All of these have disappeared, though in about 1970 I saw a stanchion probably from that at Port Albert, and there are some fragments probably from the same school, at the property 'Wood Cot Park', Myrtle Point.

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5 Post Office Directory of Birmingham, with Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Staffordshire, &c (London 1854), pp 24, 875, 948.
6 Minutes of the Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers, vol 124, January 1896 p 442.
• An iron store in Thompson Street, Williamstown, attributable solely on the grounds of appearance, which was extant in 1959 but subsequently demolished.

• John Hood’s druggists store, corner of Russell Street and Flinders Lane, removed or demolished in 1901.

• A building at the corner of Flinders Lane East and Place, a little west of Swanston Street, removed or demolished in 1886.

• A building made in 1853 for the Melbourne timber merchant Edmund Westby, erected at an unknown site.


10. There exist two copies of a lithograph of the Edmund Westby building showing it to be on the same basic system as that at Fitzroy. The lithograph dates from 1853, and one copy is labelled as the work of Porter Brothers and Stuart of Birmingham, while another is credited

7 The illustration is labelled ‘Corrugated Iron Warehouse 150 ft x 40 ft. Constructed by Porter Brothers & Stuart. Birmingham, 1853’ and is signed by Day & Son, lithographers to the Queen. State Library of Victoria.
only to Porter of Birmingham. Another lithograph of similar quality shows J H Hood's druggist's store in Melbourne, as the work of Porter Brothers and Stuart, but subsequently corrected to give the credit to Porter alone.

11. The subject building is the only known work of J H Porter standing in the world, and is of international importance. It is little known, because it has been accessible only by special arrangement, but in March last year it was visited by a party of scholars from Kyushu University and Kyoto Prefectural University, Japan, consisting of Professor Yoshitake Doi, Dr Tomo Inoue, Dr Yasuko Kishi, Professor Masakazu Tani and Ms Atsuko Yano.

12. The most important issue in relation to the conservation of the building is the undesirability of moving it. The *Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance*, known as the *Burra Charter*, is the authority on issues of conservation in Australia and is recognised by the Australian and all state governments. It specifically addresses the cultural significance of ‘places’, as distinct from ‘buildings’ or ‘structures’, because the significance is seen to inhere not just in the visible building but in the associated archaeological remains, the physical surroundings or context, and the intangible associations of the place.

13. When a significant building is moved its significance may in some cases be almost entirely destroyed, but in others it may be only moderately reduced. There are some grounds for regarding the latter situation as applicable here. Firstly, the building is a prefabricated structure which was not designed for a specific location, and its technical importance may survive any change of site. Secondly it has already been moved once in its lifetime, and it has been associated with the present site only for about eighty years.

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8 National Library of Australia, Rex Nan Kivell collection, NK 478: the catalogue details
14. I am not persuaded by these arguments. It is true that the components will be of technical interest however preserved, but in any reconstructed form the evidentiary value of the building will be largely compromised. It will be impossible to know whether traces of surface finishes relate to the process of removal or to its prior history, whether bolts and fixings are authentic or are replacements, and so on. And as to the argument that the building has been on the present site for only eighty years, that is still considerably longer than the total history of the many buildings on the Victorian Heritage Register which post-date World War II.

15. A further and very important consideration is the fact that the removal of the building would severely damage and possibly destroy it. Development plans regularly propose the relocation of buildings, but this is very rarely successful. This building could not be dismantled by

incorrectly refer to ‘Nixon’ [for ‘Messrs’] E Westby & Co.
unscrewing the nuts and bolts, which are now fused. The corrugated iron cladding would almost certainly have to be discarded and replaced, which itself would be to turn the structure into a fake. The reassembly of the components would required unsightly splices, the drilling of new holes and much other damage. This is not speculation, because we have the example of the building by the same maker, formerly at 71 Little Malop Street, Geelong. This was carefully surveyed by the engineer P F B Alsop, dismantled and placed in storage by the Geelong Historical Society, and ultimately transferred to the Sovereign Hill Museum at Ballarat. The Museum failed to erect it and entered negotiations to sell it to a private enthusiast, Mr Adam Mornement. But there was by now only a random pile of components, quite beyond redemption, and Mornement abandoned his plans.

16. The alternative approach to removal is not to dismantle the building but to transport it whole, either in one piece or sawn into truck-size elements. But this is difficult in a structure based upon cast iron components which are liable to snap under the least distortion or strain. The National Trust moved a prefabricated building from 59 Arden Street, North Melbourne to a site in South Melbourne in the 1970s after sawing it into two pieces. This was a timber framed structure, and presented far less of a problem than would an iron frame. But after forty years or more the cut between the pieces has not been fully repaired and the building stands derelict and in a deteriorating condition.

17. I understand that the City of Yarra has proposed to remove the building to a public park. This would be to subject it to vandalism and graffiti which would destroy any residual integrity it possessed. The ideal location for such a building is within the precinct of an institution which can make some use of it and provide reasonable security. A good example of this is a prefabricated iron and timber building by
Robert Walker of Glasgow which is preserved and used as part of Glamorgan prep school at 19 Douglas Street, Toorak.

18. In conclusion, this is a building of international significance, of which there are few in Australia. The present proposal would destroy it. The ideal solution would be to leave it where it is, for use within the proposed school as a shelter shed or similar. Whatever is done with the building it will be occupying public land, and it would be very short-sighted to say that for the purpose of maximising the development potential of the present site it should be moved from one piece of public land to another. It should simply be regarded as an encumbrance upon the site, like any other encumbrance, and provided for accordingly.

19. I have made all the inquiries that I believe are desirable and appropriate and no matters of significance which I regard as relevant have to my knowledge been withheld from the Panel.
APPENDIX A: ILLUSTRATIONS

Head and foot of a stanchion: Miles Lewis.

West end, exterior of south window and interior of north window: Miles Lewis.
West end, exterior and interior of door: Miles Lewis.
APPENDIX B: CURRICULUM VITAE

Architectural historian, Emeritus Professor in the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Melbourne; Honorary Life Fellow of the Comité International d’Architecture Vernaculaire; Fellow, International Advisory Council, Royal Institute of Architects, Singapore; Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities; past president of the Town and Country Planning Association of Victoria; past president of the Society of Architectural Historians Australia and New Zealand; past president of Australia ICOMOS; past president of the Council for the Historic Environment. Visiting Scholar in Historical Archaeology and Architecture, University of Sydney 1990-1991; participant in the Tianjin Urban Conservation Study, China, 1991-4; Auckland University Foundation Fellow, 1996.

Editor and principal author of *Architectura* (London and New York 2009), Author of books including *Victorian Primitive*, *Don John of Balaclava*, *The Essential Maldon*, *Two Hundred Years of Concrete in Australia*, *Victorian Churches*, *Suburban Backlash*, *Physical Investigation of a Building*.

UNESCO/ICOMOS World Heritage referee in relation to Central Prague, Czech Republic; Tojo Toradja, Indonesia; Yazd, Iran; Macau; Jaen Spain; Galle, Sri Lanka; Damascus, Syria.


Member of the Order of Australia [AM], 2002: *For service to architectural history, heritage protection and urban planning, particularly through policy development and professional organisations*. 2003 Centenary Medal: *For service to Australian society and the humanities in the study of architectural history*.

Other Appointments, Activities and Memberships

Other memberships: International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS); International Confederation of Architectural Museums (ICAM); Society of Architectural Historians (USA), Association for Preservation Technology
(USA/Canada), Royal Victorian Historical Society, Construction History Group (UK), Newcomen Society (UK). Referee for Getty Grant Program, Australian Heritage Commission, Australian Research Council &c.

Peer reviewer for the APT Bulletin (USA).

National Trust of Australia (Victoria): Honorary Life Member, and at different times member of Council, member of Executive, founding Chairman of the Technical Advisory Committee, Maldon Committee, Chairman of the Churches Committee, and member of a number of other committees. Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Victorian Chapter: member of various committees and Chairman of the Public Services Board of the Chapter 1976-78.

Commonwealth Government: consultant to the Department of Housing and Construction on a survey of accommodation of aged persons, 1974; member of the Project Co-ordinating Committee on Historical Archaeology 1975-1978; member of the Technical Advisory Committee of the Australian Heritage Commission from 1978.


Consultancies, direct or as a sub-consultant to firms of architects and planners, have included the Tianjin Urban & Regional Design Institute; Commonwealth Department of Housing and Construction; Australian Heritage Commission; the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Tasmania; the State Planning Commission, Western Australia; the City of Adelaide; the Victorian Ministry for Planning, Historic Buildings Council, Government Buildings Advisory Council, Land Conservation Council, Docklands Authority, State Electricity Commission, and Major Projects Division; the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, and the Municipalities of Ballarat, Chewton, Coburg, Daylesford & Glenlyon, Fitzroy, Hawthorn, Melbourne, Port Melbourne, St Kilda, Sandringham, South Melbourne, Werribee and Yackandandah.

Major Addresses


- George Hondros Memorial Lecture: 'Reinforced Concrete in Australia'. Faculty of Engineering, University of Western Australia 1991.

- Public lecture: 'The Culture of Australian Building'. Faculty of Architecture, University of Sydney 1990.


Consulting, expert witness, or refereeing services to bodies including the Getty Foundation, USA; Unesco World Heritage list; Tianjin Urban & Regional Design Institute, China; Japan ICOMOS; the Länsstyrelsen Gävleborg, Sweden; Australian Heritage Commission; Commonwealth Department of Housing and Construction; National Parks and Wildlife Service, Tasmania; State Planning Commission, Western Australia; the Victorian Ministry for Planning, Heritage Victoria, Historic Buildings Council, Government Buildings Advisory Council, Land Conservation Council, Docklands Authority, State Electricity Commission, Urban Land Authority, and Major Projects Division.