**Project Proposal**

**Cultural value of dated commercial buildings**



Tolonen, J. (photographer). (2012). Council House, Retrieved from October 1, 2014 from <http://inkwirenews.com.au/2012/10/05/perth-through-a-lens/council-house/>

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### 1. Introduction, Aims & Significance

I propose to conduct research on the cultural value of commercial buildings between contemporary and heritage status in Perth Suburbs. My research will be a critical photographic documentation and exploration of dated commercial buildings at risk of demolition in Perth suburbs due to the current developments. I will explore the difference between cultural, heritage and commercial value and the notion that lack of perceived value prompts a building to loose its place in the landscape. The aim of the research is to explore the role buildings play in occupying the landscape and changing value based on timely perspective.

Due to the scope of topic and limited time I propose to focus my research on dated commercial buildings located in central Perth. My creative component will record sites which are at risk of demolition while my written component using secondary data sources (due to time constraints) will focus on ‘cultural value’ and buildings in Perth that have been successfully repurposed to create sustainable new value.

This research holds significance because of the transitional period of urban development Perth is currently experiencing. This transitional period is similar to the rapid expansion Perth city experienced from the 1960’s until the 1990’s. Prompted by the 1960’s mineral boom this expansion tested the value of many existing buildings as land was sought to build new commercial structures, many buildings deemed as dated and holding limited value were demolished. Perth city is again seeking land to build new developments on and many of the buildings built during the 1960-90’s boom are now in dated stage where they lack value making them at risk of demolition. It is this relationship that I aim to explore through this research.

On conclusion of this research I intend to have created a body of photographic work that serves as an accurate documentation of commercial buildings in Perth at risk of replacement through modern development. I hope this body of work draws attention to the concept of perceived value and our unnecessary need to replace buildings with something that will itself be demolished when it looses its perceived value. It is my intention that the images compel us to view buildings for the possibilities they hold now they are removed from the category of original use.

2. Research Questions

### What is the cultural value of commercial buildings between contemporary and heritage status?

### What role does photography play in the changing landscape?

### Would it be more sustainable and cultural sensitive to repurpose these buildings?

### 3. Literature Review - Cultural value of dated commercial buildings

3.1 Introduction

My research aims to question the cultural value of commercial buildings between contemporary and heritage status. It will be a critical documentation and exploration of dated commercial buildings at risk of demolition in the Perth suburbs due to the current redevelopments. I will explore the role buildings play in occupying the landscape and the lack of perceived value these buildings hold.

Between the status of contemporary and heritage status commercial buildings fall into a dated status combined with a decline in perceived value. At this time buildings are at the most risk of being demolished. During this time buildings are transitioning from contemporary structures, which hold high commercial value to heritage structures, which are protected due to a historical value. This transition takes approximately 80 years; during this time many buildings fall into a dated status resulting from a lack of perceived value. Many buildings do not survive this transition and are replaced by contemporary buildings, which are sure to meet the same fate.

This process which humanity has conducted for numerous years has heightened in today’s world of consumerism and obsolescence. This raises a number of issues around preservation of future history and sustainability which Whitman aptly summarised in 1845, “The very bones of our ancestors are not permitted to lie quiet a quarter of a century, and one generation of men seems studious to remove all relics of those which proceed them” (Belasco, Folsom & Price, 1945, p. 213).

The following literature review will be organised thematically in context with the three questions my research will address: Buildings and Photography (What is the cultural value of commercial buildings between contemporary and heritage status?) Wasteland and Modernity, Cultural value of buildings (What role does photography play in the changing landscape?) And Sustainability and Repurpose (Would it be more sustainable and culturally sensitive to repurpose these buildings?)

3.2 Buildings and Photography

Giblett is positive that landscape photography is the main way in which people form relationships with the landscape, “I define landscape photography as the creative, photographic inscription of the visual appreciation for the surfaces of the land in the three major aesthetic modes of the sublime, the picturesque and the beautiful” (2012, p.15).

According to Craig Stevens of the Savannah College of Art and Design, the French government officially recognised the role photography played in the landscape when, “in 1851 [it] recognised the power of photography to visually archive great examples of architectural history and initiated the Heliographic mission, thereby establishing photography’s role in the documentation of manmade structures” (Vanden Brink, 2009).

Picon (2000) states that in urban landscapes the absence of borders allows a change in tradition that recognises the shift of representation of the landscape: “with regard to the landscape tradition, a shift has nevertheless taken place. Photography has largely replaced painting” (p.69). He says contemporary photography portrays the city as a territory of emptiness as “the framings that they propose have a greater capacity for instability, and this instability resonates well with that of a limitless landscape”(p.72).

Tolonen observed an accidental beauty in the construction of housing and industrial spaces saying as they often feel like accidental works of ar,t he then noticed that the “accidental beauty existed in sites of deconstruction also” (2012, p.25). Giblett recognized this visual phenomenon also: “the camera objectifies the land as landscape and thereby renders it as a visual phenomenon, reproduces in an aesthetic of surfaces and lays it out as a kind of cadaver for the heightened perceptions and viewing pleasure…who is enlivened in and by the process of taking and viewing photographs” (2012, p.17).

I am interested in the photographic works of Robert Adams and Eugene Atget who turned their lens away from nature and to the constructions happening on the landscape. They employed a similar aesthetic to Ansel Adams, but instead of the natural beauty of the landscape Atget focused on the empty city of Paris and Adams on the developing suburbia creating a different type of beauty through tension.

Benjamin (1928) described Atget as seeking out whatever bits of a rapidly-disappearing Paris he could find in a post-Haussmann era: “Atget banished people from his scenes of Paris and with them ‘the last vestiges of cult value in the medium.” He looked for what was “unremarked, a forgotten, cast adrift.  And thus such pictures . . . work against the exotic, romantically sonorous names of the cities; they suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship." Benjamin defines aura as the “unique experience of, and sense of distance from, the appearance of an object in time and space”. Early photography produced aura partly as a function of cameras with slow shutter-speed and long exposure times.

In a recent study conducted by the Productivity Commission (PC), the Australian Government’s independent research and advisory body, claimed that “a number of participants pointed to both the short and long term benefits of using digital technologies to record the details and history of heritage properties.” The report referenced the Mechanics’ Institute of Victoria case that:

despite losing about 550 of its historic buildings in Victoria, the Institute had developed the ‘Big-Mech Database’, which contains core material on all known Institute buildings. Currently, this database comprises some… 3000 images of buildings and building plans. However, while it may, at times, be a useful adjunct, virtual reality is not likely to be an acceptable substitute for the physical conservation. (2006, p.16)

I understand the issue I am addressing of demolishing dated buildings only to replace them with something that will itself be demolished when it looses its perceived value is an ongoing issue and something that will personally be an ongoing project for myself. With the limited time I have for this research I will focus on commercial buildings located in inner Perth suburbs with the time limit of six months in 2015 for recording of those buildings.

3.3 Wasteland and Modernity

Picon believes the landscape of the city has paced itself with mass consumption designing a product with an artificially limited useful life, “that which works wears itself out and stops being useful. And everything wears itself out, or almost, in the cityscape of today” (2000, p.76). Picon discusses the connection between functionality and obsolescence with regards to the death of the building into ruin, saying obsolescence inhibits the dignified death objects previously experienced, “In traditional landscapes, the productions of man, surrender themselves progressively to nature in the form of the ruin” (2000, p.76).

Tolonen (2007) highlights the relationship between modernity and wastelands describing them as a wilderness of industrial modernity. He acknowledges that the term ‘wastelands’ is generally used to describe the undesirable elements of modern society. Berman (1982) describes modernity as simultaneously progressive and destructive yet Tolonen suggests the destructive side of modernity is often disregarded and suggests it is “necessity to re-engage more thoughtfully with the process and manifestation of destruction” (2007, p.4).

The process of destruction has increased in rapidity. Nietzsche’s *The Twilight of the Idols* (1889) links modernity of the West with the way in which we now live:

one lives for the day, one lives very fast, one lives very irresponsibly: precisely this is called ‘freedom.’ That which makes an institution an institution is despised, hated, repudiated: one fears the danger of a new slavery the moment the word ‘authority’ is even spoken out loud. That is how far decadence has advanced in the value-instincts of our politicians, of our political parties: instinctively they prefer what disintegrates, what hastens the end.

The 2006 report states that over recent decades, many public buildings and infrastructure have become redundant due to the loss of client population, asset rationalisation, mergers and technological change, The NSW Heritage Office commented:

Over the last 30 years there have been major changes in the delivery of government services within the community. This has resulted in the redundancy of many government properties from their original use. (PC, 2006, p. 72

Vanden Brink, a landscape photographer of abandoned buildings in Central America, sees these buildings as representatives of our transient lives and inability to stop the passing of time:

they are statues, memorialising the transitory nature of life. Ironically we are moving too fast, erecting the next building and developing the next big thing, to notice these icons or consider what they can teach us about our values. (2009, p.7)

Christopher (2004), also a landscape photographer, describes the consumerist modern city and its effect on the landscape as:

a time where every spare plot of land is being developed and redeveloped, a time when cookie-cutter, prefabricated homes and businesses are the general rule. The failures of the past are being ignored and repeated, and many valuable pieces of our common past are falling to the wrecking ball every year.

3.4 Cultural value of buildings

In *Wastelands: landscape photography modernity* Tolonen quotes Lefehvre (1991) that “we are actively involved in the production of space.” Tolonen sees a fault in our relationship to the space around us and how we see it as a limited role in the setting for human action instead he sees it as “ The spaces we create and live in assist in telling the story of who we are” (2007, p.25).

According to Christopher (2004), this process of demolition :

may be considered inevitable but it speaks of a certain carelessness and wastefulness on our part not to acknowledge and explore these fragments together while we still can. Every factory complex that is demolished erases a valuable part of the heritage of the community it helped create.

According to the report by PC (2006), these cultural values are important because places of cultural significance:

enrich people’s lives, often providing a deep and inspirational sense of connection to community and landscape, to the past and to lived experiences. They are historical records that are important as tangible expressions of Australian identity and experience. Places of cultural significance reflect the diversity of our communities, telling us about who we are and the past that has formed us and the Australian landscape. They are irreplaceable and precious” While the identification of heritage can be inherently subjective, classification of the degree of ‘cultural significance’ introduces an additional degree of subjectivity. (p.6)

Author Whish-Wilson (2013) expresses the extent to which Perth was demolished during the heedless, progress-driven decades of the late 1900’s. Whish-Wilson states that as Perth develops it looses the human stories attached to the iconic but not always appreciated buildings. He asserts that iconic buildings that are 20-30 years away from heritage protection could be easily destroyed and lost to future generations if we do not change our perceived values.

In an article titled ‘Perth goes boom’ published in *The Monthly* Robyn Annearas (2014) writes, “It’s only natural, given the force-of-nature scale and speed of Perth’s ongoing development and past acts of philistinism, to fear that the city’s heritage must be overwhelmed. As a local, Whish-Wilson knows what’s been lost, and his city seems diminished as a result.” Annearas believes there’s a growing prestige in heritage buildings for:

What counts as heritage is where the battles still lie. And, of course, even to talk in terms of heritage belittles those aspects of a city that locals like Whish-Wilson value for their familiarity but which, lacking filigree credentials, will always be prey to development.

Tolonen highlights the effect naming has on the value of a space stating labeling land as waste limits further readings of its future possibilities, “it dismisses any enhanced reading of the site on assumptions of limited value based on its current lack of utility. But this assessment is also lazy; it promotes insignificance and limits the potential of future intervention” (2007, p. 26).

I agree with Giblett that photography holds a strong role in our relationship with the landscape and I hope by recording these buildings using photography I able adjust the way these buildings are perceived and intern restore a sense of value of these structures by highlighting the issue that cultural value is perceived value and open to interpretation by the individual.

3.5 Sustainability and Repurpose

Tolonen highlights our dismissive response to wastelands and waste in general, “by avoiding dismissive responses wastelands can emerge as potential spaces of improvisation.” He states if we rethink the way we view these spaces we will see that wastelands are spaces that are “no longer identifiable as a particular type of functional space.” This means they are no longer restricted to their original purpose of use and have a “greater potential as sites of free play as their function is not clearly pre-determined”(2007, p.4).

Sola-Morales identifies photography as the privileged medium for representing the city landscape and aptly described such space as *terrains vagues*. The “relationship between the absence of use, of activity, and the sense of freedom, of expectancy. He notes this knowledge is “fundamental to the understanding of the evocative potential of the city’s *terrains vagues*” (1995, p.120).

By making some of the abandoned industrial sites in Ruhr compatible with surrounding urban design:

these resonances dissolved into the ordered urban fabric diminishing their affective properties. Civic authorities in the Ruhr eventually responded to the concerns of the local population and began incorporating the unique qualities of the industrial wasteland into the urban environment. (Tolonen, 2007, p.25)

I agree with Sola-Morales that photography plays an important role in representing the city landscape. My research on Perth will demonstrate that these dated buildings hold potential for the landscape and value can be restored through reuse of these buildings.

The territory of emptiness of the big city is also a territory of consumption:

The contrasts that structure this territory are incarnated, consequently, in the face-off between two places invested with a strong emotional force: the shopping center and the garbage dump. It is between these two poles that entire sections of the contemporary urban experience are organized. Buy and throw away: this elementary cycle marks the rhythm of the days and weeks. In a city without perceptible limits, completely devoted to mass consumption and its consequences, the contrast between commercial spaces and garbage dumps might well have replaced—on a level more symbolic than real, of course—the old opposition between center and periphery. (Picon, 2000, p.75).

The PC report highlights the main roadblocks of repurposing, “In urban areas, most historic heritage properties are located close to the centre of major cities and some stand on very valuable blocks of land. Accordingly, the opportunity cost pressures on these places for renovation and redevelopment keeps rising” (2006, p.18).“Many redundant public properties have either been demolished, sold (or leased) to private owners or undergone adaptive reuse. There have been many examples of adaptive reuse of these assets which have successfully maintained their heritage values” (2006, p.72).

Christopher (2004) asserts before sites of interest are demolished he advocates for “rehabilitation and reuse by emphasizing the cultural importance of preservation. Through gallery showings, public presentations, and published articles it is my hope to reach out to those who might originally have seen an abandoned site as an eyesore and encourage them to rethink their estimations and strive to foster civic pride and partnership in these vestiges of bygone eras - thus looking forward to a future where we can build on our past rather than erasing it.”

Tolonen (2012) questions whether images have the ability to truly transform our relationship with the land? While Giblett calls for a style or genre of photography for environmental sustainability that shows people working (with) the land in sustainable ways, “this mode, genre or style of photography comes up against the limits of landscape photography and portrait photography and operates in the interstices between them”(2012, p.16).

Giblett promotes a photography that works to environmentally sustainable ends. He sees an opportunity to promote natural habitats and sustainable industrial practices, “this style of photography could produce photographs focusing on landscapes and land uses that exemplify principles and practices of environmental sustainability” (2012, p.21).

Tolonen believes landscape photography will undoubtedly have roles to play in future, “Its largest role today is that of agitation and illustration… Current form would suggest such historic responses do little to encourage transformations, not just adjustments, in the way we engage with the land. Instead, we will probably need to rely on tragedy and crisis to bring about change. In the meantime, landscape photography cannot escape this context, event when it is enveloped in form. The persistence of this threat will continue to shape landscape photography” (2012, p.26).

**3.6 Conclusion**

Research in this area is continually developing; there is a sound theoretical base to cultural value of spaces in general but lack of specific definition. Tolonen and Giblett have hugely contributed to literature around wastelands and the role of the landscape and photography. I am aware of the reuse of buildings in Perth by a initiative called SpaceMarket owned by architects Nic Brunsdon and Beth George. I believe there may be some unpublished research conducted in this area by Brunsdon so it is intension to explore this.

There exists a solid framework around heritage buildings but there is a large gap in research for buildings which aren’t yet classified as heritage status, I aim to fill this gap by focusing my research on the dated commercial buildings in inner Perth which have not gained written research.

### 4. Methodology

4.1 Research plan

As it currently stands at most Australian universities the ‘thesis’ in a doctorate from the faculty of Arts is both studio work and an exegesis. “Documents from such institutions define the PhD as a ‘substantial and original contribution to knowledge’, that ‘may be presented in one of two forms: a conventional written thesis, or a thesis comprising creative work and a supporting written exegesis’ (Schon, 1995, p.25). The exegesis and creative practice viewed as alternative ways of knowing are the chosen methodology for this research.

Sullivan (2006) stresses it is important that part of practice-led research involves making sense of the information collected so that it can be translated into interpretive forms able to be communicated to others. I plan to use the exegesis as a carefully written explanation of the role buildings play in occupying the landscape and changing value based on timely perspective.

I have chosen gather data through photography as the most suitable method to represent the research topic as it enables me to document in a visual form something which cannot be physically referenced in the future. The developed image will be suitably captured on the dated technology of a film camera in an attempt to be as true to the origin of the photograph.

4.2 **Practice-led Methodology**

Practice-led research has in the last three decades emerged as a recognised methodology sitting alongside quantitative and qualitative methodologies in a third paradigm but often borrows quantitative and more commonly qualitative methods. The role of methodology was fairly established in terms of conventional research but had been left unexamined for practice-led research. Painter (1996) asserts that practice as research acknowledges fundamental epistemological issues that can only be addressed in and through practice and a connection is not always assumed between the apparatus of research and the written word.

During its development it was described as practice-based, practice as research, arts-based research, artistic research, creative research action research and artography although the most common and accepted now is practice-led research. Sullivan (2010) described the emerging methodology as:

Art practice is a way of researching through the practice of making art. Such making is not just doing, but is a complex informed physical, theoretical and intellectual activity where private and public worlds meet. Art practice is the outcome of intertwined objective, subjective, rational and intuitive processes. Considered in this way, art is a discipline, informed by the conceptual and linguistic conventions of its culture and history (Thomas cited in Sullivan, 2010, p.78).

Sullivan (2006) thinks contextual art practices make use of a method best described as ‘thinking in a setting’ making use of the visual work to create deeper thinking on the subject. Traditional research methods like ‘data collection’ are naturally done by practice led researchers through image retrieval and information gathering and can be adapted to the art methodology.

From the perspective of the artist-researcher notions of data collection are necessarily expanded because there is a creative imperative that demands existing knowledge is less of an a priori condition framing inquiry and more of a stepping o, point for imaginative interrogation during art making. Consequently, for the artist-researcher, ‘data creation’ becomes a crucial component in the research process (p.50).

**4.3 Previous use of Practice- led research at ECU**

Juha Tolonen conducted his thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy via an extended body of practice led work and accompanying written texts in 2007. His work titled Wastelands: landscape photography modernity was conducted in the faculty of Education and Arts at Edith Cowan university.

Tolonen (2007) described his thesis as having two distinct but connected halves. He explained the connection of these two components as “Text and image are applied to the subject of wastelands; the former works to raise the status of wastelands while the latter gathers visual fragments of wastelands to harness a picture of contemporary modernity. The two combine to create a practical and poetic, a social and fianeurial picture of wastelands” (p.5). He used his abstract to express his methological stance on his subject stating that a certain positioned is adopted in this examination.

Tolonen segmented his thesis into part 1- text and part 2- images and used blended methods. The text component is distributed as two main findings of the research, two case studies and introduction/ conclusion. Each pairing took up a third of the written component. In his disclaimer he described his work as a speculative survey. Tolonen explored his subject in a primary first hand account linking to literature on modernity and landscape to give context to the photography component. He understands how these two parts can work together “photography is a reductivist technology: it not only isolates the wasteland from its social and historical contexts but also narrows engagement with the space to the sense of sight”(p.172).

**4.4 Data collection methods**

Primary data will be collected by photographing a collection of dated commercial buildings. I will use the external viewpoint to mimic the view the public would have of the buildings and shoot in a landscape, flat, scientific style as when photographs are taken for record purposes, creating an uncomplicated documentation. I will shoot on colour film, then develop and scan for ease of communication with supervisors.

This body of work will be supported with archival images and secondary data on cultural value, commercial buildings and repurpose of buildings. I will address the sustainable possibilities of repurposing the commercial buildings by photographing previously at risk dated buildings that have been successfully repurposed to create new value.

**Practical e**quipment required

Medium and 35mm format camera

35mm and 120mm colour film (Kodak Portra)

Developing and processing access/ darkroom

### 5. Project Timeline & Scope

5.1 Deadlines

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| November 7 | Submit Project Proposal to unit Coordinator |
| November 21 | Lodge Ethics Declaration |
| November 30 | Wait for ethics approval |
| December - June | Conduct research and write exegesis |
| June 30 | Submit |

5.2 Project Timeline

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| November 7 | Submit Project Proposal to unit Coordinator |
| November 21 | Receive Feedback |
| November 21 | Lodge Ethics Declaration |
| November 25 | Secure equipment |
|  | Set up darkroom to develop film |
| November 30 | Ethics approval |
|  | Research buildings at risk & visit site |
|  | Finalise list of buildings to photograph |
|  | Shoot test roll ensure consistency |
| December 1 | Start research on buildings and repurposing |
|  | Photograph buildings |
|  | Develop and scan photographs |
| Jan 1 | Image selection with Max Pam |
|  | Second round of photographing |
|  | Gather secondary data to support photographs |
|  | Image selection with Max Pam |
| February 1 | Start writing exegesis |
|  | Weekly feedback from supervisor |
| March 1 | Write exegesis |
|  | Weekly feedback from supervisor |
| April - May | Edit |
| June 30 | Submit |

5.3 Project limitations

Overall this is a large area of research, which encompasses an ongoing project. I am not aiming to argue demolition is bad or good for the city but instead looking at the cultural value buildings hold and sustainable alternatives to demolishing them. In order to complete this project in the required time I do not aim to record every dated commercial building but instead will choose strong examples of dated commercial buildings at risk in Perth and collect data by photographing them externally over a period of three months. I will spend the remaining time writing the exegesis and selecting photographs to be part of the body of creative work. That task is achievable in the given time to complete the G77 Master of Professional Communications.

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