Think • Vol 24 • No 71 • Autumn 2025, 47–53

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625100791

Urban Preservation

*Jon Langford**

Independent Author
*Corresponding author. Email: jonlangford41@outlook.com

Keywords: urban preservation; buildings; Agnes Heller; cities; utilitarianism

Abstract

Many cities have lost significant old buildings in a push for redevelopment. While there is a case for preservation, there can be, and often are, strong arguments for redevelopment. This article takes a philosophical look at the arguments found on both sides of the debate.

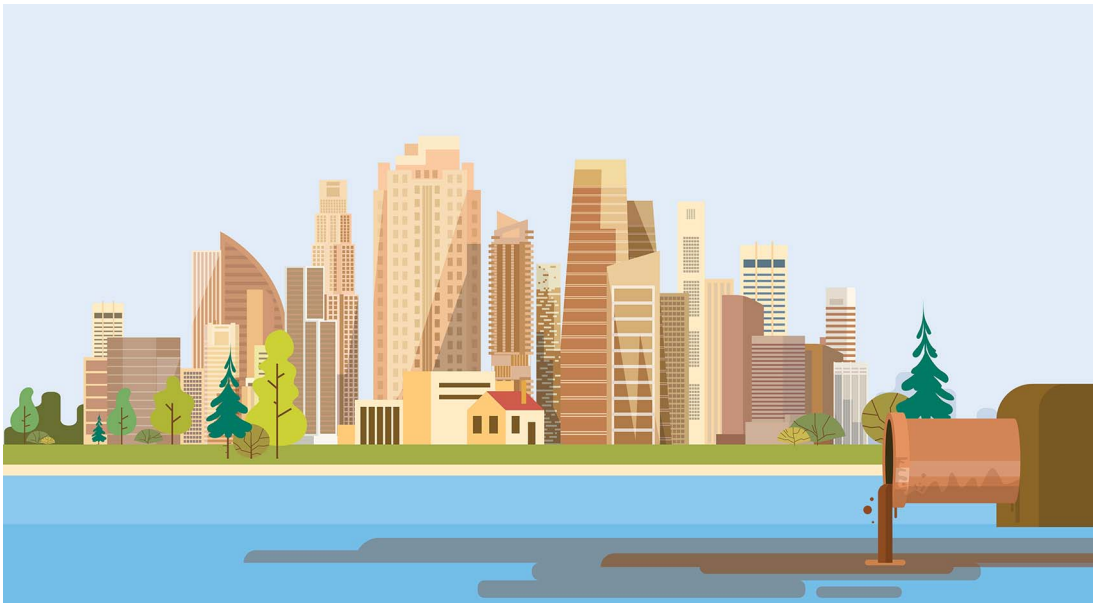
The philosopher Agnes Heller said that people seek refuge in Reason because of betrayal. I feel betrayed by the past authorities of my city, who oversaw the destruction of significant old buildings in the name of progress. In the mid-twentieth century, Melbourne had a wealth of Victorian buildings dating back to the gold rush of the 1850s, but by the time of the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games, the city's people were embarrassed by their heritage. They wanted to be up to date, and the succeeding two decades saw a rash of demolition. This article is an attempt to make sense of the outlook of the generation prior to mine. The turn to Reason (by which I mean the broad consideration of views and the weighing up of competing propositions) is one way of assuaging an abiding sense of loss.

I can illustrate this loss with an example. The Federal Hotel, built in 1888, was demolished in 1973 to make way for a modern office tower. It was originally called the Federal Coffee Palace and was part of a wave of such institutions constructed during the temperance movement (which aimed to ween people off alcohol). The 'Federal' was one of the largest Victorian-era hotels in the world: it had over 500 rooms and a grand four-storey atrium that tourists would come to see up to the time of its demise.

Things have changed since the 1960s and 1970s, and there is more desire in my city to preserve what remains of our heritage. There are many, now, who appreciate the 'old dirt' that survives, and this constituency demands recognition of their need for heritage sites. For such people, the detail on an historical edifice is pleasing, and there is grandeur in the motifs of European architectural traditions. Different styles evoke different historical periods and for those so attuned, old edifices can inspire wonder at the combination of simple technology and consummate skill evident in past eras. Historical consciousness itself is not merely an interesting diversion but is one way of relativizing current cares and concerns: it can provide perspective on life. Past triumphs and troubles can be a comfort in evoking the spiritual company of our forebears. Meanwhile, the familiar is a comfort to many: memories are stored in a known cityscape, which has been the backdrop for our personal triumphs and tragedies.

However, not everyone will appreciate a city's heritage, and perhaps the preservationist case is special pleading. There are other tastes in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625100791 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Credit: ProStockStudio/shutterstock.com

urban design and not everyone is interested in history or the familiar. Preservationists are just one constituency among others. While we may want to cater for various constituencies in a society, there are conflicting claims on any resource. An old building saved may mean the denial of cutting-edge design and amenity entailed in a new office tower. Some people's gain is someone else's loss. Given such trade-offs, it is difficult to argue that the predilection of a constituency for old buildings must be respected because of my three argumentative propositions (for aesthetic preference, historical awareness and the familiar). At the time of the demise of the Federal, the fashion was for new buildings, and few people seemed to care for the old. There is still a constituency for newness, as demonstrated by a businessman from Toronto who said to me there were still too many old buildings in Melbourne.

Taking account of people's interests is a version of utilitarianism. In this article I will estimate the prevalence of utility served by a proposition or fact. Here, I will be making a rough division between arguments that serve the interests of some people (making up a constituency) and arguments that serve nearly all interests and can be considered universal. I am not proposing to additionally estimate the relative weight or intensity of the interests identified, at least not in the main body of my argument. I am mainly estimating the extent of any given interest within the population of a city. Both types of propositions – those serving partial and those serving universal interests – can be compelling, but a 'universal' proposition will be stronger in terms of the utilitarian goal of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'.

An attempt at a universal argumentative proposition is the following: connecting with the history of a city is a powerful way of enhancing urban identity and can build responsibility for the city's progress. Preservation garners allegiance to the urban enterprise. If buildings are protected, historically aware people will have a stake in the city. If good examples of old architecture exist, more people may be encouraged to enjoy these aspects of life. If more people are concerned with a city's fate, there is a stronger constituency for ensuring desirable amenity for everyone in a city.

But urban identity can be enhanced by other means. Heritage lovers are just one potential group of recruits for urban care. At most we can say that preserving some buildings will gain this

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625100791 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cohort (heritage lovers) for the urban enterprise; but we must acknowledge there may be trade-offs in terms of the allegiance of other cohorts. The proposition has universal import in that all gain from the urban care offered by those who gain from preservation, but preservation itself is not the exclusive means to that end.

'However, not everyone will appreciate a city's heritage, and perhaps the preservationist case is special pleading. There are other tastes in urban design and not everyone is interested in history or the familiar.'

But what if we tweak this proposition and suggest a compromise solution where all constituencies have their need met to a limited extent? So, some buildings are preserved but others lost. Or perhaps a facade is retained while a new building is constructed within and possibly above this shell. Through such compromises multiple niche interests can be served. There may be some loss involved given competing claims, but moderate acknowledgement of every interest goes some way towards fulfilling needs and satisfying demands. Meanwhile, commitment and solidarity may be enhanced because various minorities and their wellbeing are honoured. A compromise solution also serves the interests of those who favour a fair distribution of gains.

But a compromise will be unsatisfactory for those wedded to a pure ideal: we cannot claim it serves universal interests. So, let me turn to another attempt at a 'universal' proposition for partial preservation. Well-rounded characters – who have developed many sides to their character or their means of enjoyment – are more likely to be resilient, and more likely to be able to hear a diverse array of viewpoints or empathize with a wide gamut of human experience. They are likely to be more urbane, more compassionate and more reasonable.

A city can provide for a limited number of sides to one's character: sports stadiums serve our competitive urge and our desire for bracing outdoor mass events; art galleries and concert halls cater to our aesthetic sensibility; different transit modes offer the enjoyment of movement in various ways; the phenomenon of a peopled public realm enables our identification with fellow denizens of the city, or even humanity as such. And then there is architecture; the new and the old. In some cities the old is universally protected, but some find this suffocating: the city becomes a museum. In other cities the old is substantially lost and those of us who treasure heritage are robbed of a major source of enjoyment.

The more aspects of our character served by our city, the greater likelihood that our various needs are met. To focus on architecture, good examples of the old and the new will enliven our sensibilities even for those who initially prefer the past or the present. Sometimes, what's available can expand our horizons. And if otherwise untapped proclivities are accessed, we will develop a broader array of enjoyments.

Of course, one must be open to different experiences to appreciate both the old and the new. But our environment can school us in such openness if it is sufficiently diverse and of adequate quality. And broad appreciation is a good means to achieve resilience. If mental health depends partly on the ability to savour the good things in life, then we need to ensure the maintenance of a broad array of such good things. Given finite resources of a city – finite conditions of wellbeing – it is beholden on us to maintain the variety of such urban capital. More people will thereby flourish, given the opportunities presented.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625100791 Published online by Cambridge University Press

These propositions depend on recognizing that heritage is at least potentially beautiful. Those who don't like old buildings might recognize that their opinion could change, or that others have a wider taste in architectural style. Melburnians in 1956 may not have agreed with this, but today it is more readily accepted. Nonetheless, these propositions are not based on a universally acknowledged preference or desire. Meanwhile, they may fail the pub test if people don't want to be told what is good for them. Having worked in both white-collar and blue-collar jobs, I well know that a lot of people will tell you where to get off if you presume to speak on behalf of their interests in a way that extends beyond the concrete. This doesn't invalidate the propositions about well-rounded characters and resilience, but it weakens their purchase beyond the pages of a philosophy journal. If we can't convince everyone assuredly that most may come to appreciate the old – along with the new – and thereby increase their wellbeing, we may have to bolster our case with the proposition about the sort of compromise that can serve niche interests, enhance social solidarity and promote fairness.

But to continue the analysis of propositions, I want to consider the economic gain that might be expected from preservation. Old buildings can help garner the tourist dollar. If a city has some old-world charm, people will want to spend time there, and this will bring in cash for the relevant services. Tourism is the largest industrial sector in some economies, so many stand to benefit from preservation of significant buildings. But to use an economics term, there is an 'opportunity cost' to preservation. This is the cost of the benefits foregone when we preserve the old and constrain development. Allowing demolition and subsequent development raises property prices, supports the construction industry and enables higher-density economic activity of benefit to other players. I'll revisit this counter case when I come to the propositions supporting redevelopment, but according to this line of thought, preservation helps some while hindering others. The interests served are not universal.

A more universal economic case suggests that the success of particular economic sectors benefits the broader economy through the circulation of wealth and the spur to general growth. Everyone gains from growth, whether to have a higher income, or to afford more extensive national parks, or to invest in green technology (economic growth may imply fewer smokestacks rather than more). But this argument for preservation and tourism applies equally to redevelopment: it serves universal interests but is non-exclusive regarding the means to that end.

Another universal argument for preservation focuses on the environmental costs of demolition and construction. Materials used in the construction of buildings account for around 9 per cent of overall energy-related CO_2 emissions (United Nations Energy Programme). Everyone has an interest in mitigating climate change, so this taps into universal interests. But this argument is not exclusive as the goal of mitigating climate change may also be achieved by high-density developments at public transport nodes (meanwhile, it should be noted that I am assuming people's rational interest in avoiding climate-induced extreme weather events: but this is not an expressed desire of everyone). Anyway, the final status of all pro-preservation arguments depends on the balance of counter-arguments, which I will consider below.

So, here is a summary of propositions in support of preservation:

- Some people have a predilection for old buildings based on aesthetic taste, historical awareness and the familiar (non-universal).
- Preservation, by enhancing city identity, encourages urban care amongst lovers of heritage (universal but non-exclusive).
- All constituencies should have needs partially met to engender solidarity and approximate fairness (non-universal given purists).
- In the context of various social goods, preservation contributes to well-rounded characters and their resilience (non-universal, and this argument fails the pub test).
- Heritage supports the tourism sector (non-universal).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625100791 Published online by Cambridge University Press

- Heritage and the tourism sector support the broader economy (universal but non-exclusive).
- Preservation is more environmentally sustainable (universal but non-exclusive).

'If they wish to demolish their old building, isn't that their prerogative? Private property draws on an innate sense of "mine" that we all share to some extent.'

Even though most of these propositions do not serve universal interests, they add up to a substantial case for preservation. But for our final judgement, we will have to weigh into the balance the counter-arguments (after all, one notion of 'rationality' is breadth of consideration). Firstly: what about private property rights? Don't private property owners have a right to do what they will with their property? If they wish to demolish their old building, isn't that their prerogative? Private property draws on an innate sense of 'mine' that we all share to some extent. Along with our sense of 'mine' is the proposition that property is a necessary condition of a free society, as argued by Richard Pipes in *Property and Freedom*. Overbearing authority is tempered where the people's right to their own is respected.

Our sense of 'mine' and the desire for limited authority entail near universal interests. But property rights are not absolute claims. There are limits to one's free rein over one's property: one must acknowledge the public interest to some extent. For example, burning off in a hot dry summer in the countryside may risk a bush fire: our actions should be regulated in such cases. Building a factory in a residential neighbourhood may legitimately be denied where it will create unwanted noise and pollution: we zone private land for this reason. Similarly, we place overlays on buildings and streetscapes to preserve the historic character of an area. Although some would advocate absolute property rights, the rule by which most want to live is that by which these rights can sometimes be infringed in the interests of the common good. The right to demolish buildings is restricted because preservation is sometimes judged to be in our interests, which brings us back to the argument at hand as to the grounds of that judgement.

A second argument for rebuilding is that some people have a predilection for new buildings. They can be lighter, they can evoke the modern world, and they are functional for today's purposes. For those who are alert to design excellence, quality modern things can prove we are still able to inspire wonder in each other. There is even a case to build new structures in each successive age, to represent that period's taste and technology. But, as we have mentioned, some prefer old buildings (sometimes adapted for modernity), so this argument for rebuilding is non-universal on account of the opposing constituency with a preference for old buildings.

Next, are another three propositions that mirror three of those considered in support of preservation. New buildings, by expressing the spirit of the age and enhancing urban identity, can encourage care for the urban fabric amongst those who like new things. Just like preservation, rebuilding can benefit everyone through the stake in the city felt by those who like the new, but this denudes the urban identity and care of those who like old things, so universal benefit is a non-exclusive argument. A second point is that those who like newness have an equal claim according to the proposition that all constituencies should have their needs at least partially met. Fulfilling the terms of this proposition will enhance solidarity and approximate fairness, which is a good for many (though this is a non-universal argument, given the existence

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625100791 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of purists). To round off the mirroring of opposing propositions, new buildings contribute to well-rounded characters and resilience given the coincident prevalence of some heritage (a non-universal proposition which fails the pub test).

Then there is the claim that new builds support the property and construction sector. Redevelopment of a city encourages the building industry and raises property values. But the argument has caveats. The tourism industry – one of the largest sectors in the UK for example – often depends on preservation, so the proposition is not universal. If we extend the argument to claim that rebuilding generates growth for the whole economy, the proposition does imply universal interests are served, but it is non-exclusive given the alternative opportunity. The matter is still one of swings and roundabouts: yes, we want general wealth; but rebuilding isn't the only means to secure it.

Another attempt at a universal proposition is the claim that building higher density at key sites capitalizes on available infrastructure. Melbourne is a case in point: it has good radial transit networks for its CBD. Demolishing much of the old city and building high-rise towers has maximized the usage of its train and tram network. This is good for the environment and enhances the pedestrian-friendly possibilities of the CBD: both results serve universal interests though the path to mitigating climate change is non-exclusive given the environmental benefits of preservation.

So, the summary regarding the case for rebuilding in a city is as follows:

- People have rights regarding their property (universal but not absolute).
- Some people have a predilection for new buildings based on aesthetic taste and desire for amenity (non-universal).
- Redevelopment, by enhancing urban identity, encourages care amongst those who want to be contemporary (universal but non-exclusive).
- All constituencies should have needs partially met to engender solidarity and approximate fairness (non-universal).
- In the context of various social goods, new design of good quality contributes to well-rounded characters and their resilience (non-universal, and this argument fails the pub test).
- Redevelopment supports the property and construction sectors (non-universal).
- Redevelopment supports the broader economy (universal but non-exclusive).

To assess the interests in preservation versus redevelopment, we need to compare the summary of propositions on each side of the argument. The case for substantial demolition is very strong and as presented so far, has one more supporting proposition than the case for preservation. But our final judgement will depend not just on the number of propositions but on their respective weight for us. On this score, we could elaborate on the arguments behind each proposition, but in the end, it comes down to the sentiments we individually have regarding, for example, the need to maintain the familiar, or the desire to protect property rights. In any case, I want to add another strong proposition in favour of committed preservation. Let me illustrate my sentiment with an extreme example. Nobody proposes demolishing Venice and rebuilding it. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, the city is unique in representing a specific high point in human endeavour with excellent architectural examples of the era. The Renaissance turned out to be of consequence for all humanity and Venice is one city that stands for that achievement – and does so partly because of its original intact form. Secondly, people vote with their feet. Venice is a major global tourist destination, and it is unthinkable to these millions of visitors that you would demolish it. Commitment to that city's survival is heartfelt for most people: we are all purists in support of preservation there. But the case goes beyond the fact that preservation of Venice serves near universal interests: for it is more a first principle than a matter of utilitarian calculus (unless we broaden our utilitarian view to include not just the extent of interests served, but also the relative weight

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625100791 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of those interests). There is a duty to protect Venice: we know in our bones it should endure. For Westerners at least, Venice is part of how we think of ourselves. Meanwhile, the strength of feeling makes this argument for preservation something of a trump card when it comes to certain cities or buildings. Demolition would result in the loss of priceless treasure forever. The argumentative proposition can be summarized as follows:

> Some old cities or buildings are of supreme significance and are admired by most people (universal and exclusive).

Most cities, like Melbourne, cannot lay claim to the fame of or favour for Venice, but heritage of significance can still sometimes be found in particular structures or vistas or districts. The Federal Hotel was a grand example of British nineteenth-century exuberance and confidence as found in the colonies. It was a talisman of the achievement of empire. Of course, that achievement depended on the expropriation of other people's lands, but we can still acknowledge and enjoy the beauty in cultural objects, whatever the ethical shortcomings of the society that produced them. To take another example, we can enjoy trains and train travel even though these were inventions of the same empire. All societies in all time have been ethically flawed in some respects. We needn't obsess about past injustice by rejecting a society's better expression. In the quality of the structure, and in its historical significance, the Federal should have had a winning claim to survival. And this should have been doable, even as we yielded to widespread demolition in the interests of capitalizing on the city's infrastructure. Melbourne, like many cities, could have best advanced with a balance between protection and rebuilding. There was a loss of balance in the 1960s and 1970s, and it was only in reaction to this that we denizens developed a preservationist constituency that saved quite a bit of what was left. There are, in my judgement, around six vanquished buildings in central Melbourne that should not have been demolished. There's only a handful to cry over, but cry I do.

Jon Langford

Jon Langford studied philosophy at Sydney University and has history, commerce and politics degrees from Melbourne and La Trobe Universities.

Cite this article: Langford J (2025) Urban Preservation. *Think* **24**, 47–53. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625100791

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Royal Institute of Philosophy. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625100791 Published online by Cambridge University Press