This paper about St Vincent’s Church in Redfern demonstrates how, under the right leadership, an institution as old as the Catholic Church can change and adapt to the needs of its community, and how, once that leadership has gone, the older institutional model can quickly re-assert itself.

Late 1971, just months before Whitlam came to power, Father Ted Kennedy established an innovative team ministry at St Vincent’s, Redfern. In no time both the presbytery and the church became a refuge for homeless Aborigines. When necessary the church served as home, labour ward and mortuary. Any money was directed to food, funeral costs and other urgent necessities; the bare floorboards and peeling paint eventually coming to signify the new commitment to simplicity and social need. Minimal physical changes to the interior layout and art works reflected what might now be called an intangible heritage, namely the growing culture of social activism, inclusiveness and creativity. The State Heritage Inventory (City of Sydney) notes the close connection of the church with the Aboriginal community of Redfern as part of its social significance.

In 2002 a new authoritarian regime was installed by the church hierarchy which systematically erased many signs of the Kennedy era – both in the physical fabric of the building and within the Aboriginal community. Those remaining from the Kennedy-era congregation lament the changes to both the physical and social fabric of St Vincent’s Church.

This paper also looks at the heritage industry in New South Wales and whether this institution with its legislation and heritage inventories can protect the identified social significance of the Aboriginal church community at Redfern from the changes wrought by the new authoritarian church regime.
This paper considers the evolving history of St Vincent’s Church, Redfern, since the early 1970s, with particular focus on the way changes to its interior enable a co-examination of the impact of two powerful institutions: the Catholic Church and the NSW heritage industry as part of the institutional planning processes at local and state levels. In their own spheres, one might think of both as die-hard institutions, but our contention is that modifications to the interior of St Vincent’s provide insights into institutional conservatism and change. Contestable, almost irreconcilable, theologies within the Church, as played out at St Vincent’s, have put to the test new thinking on social significance within the heritage industry. We begin with an overview of some institutional rethinking since the early 1960s, and then demonstrate how these changes have been given visual expression in the interior space of St Vincent’s, highlighting how the heritage industry has responded, and might in future respond, to the changes.

Institutional and historical contexts

In order to understand some of the issues that lie at the heart of this paper, it is necessary to provide a brief background to changes within the Catholic Church since the Second World War, because their impact on the church interior at St Vincent’s is perhaps more explicit and controversial than in many other churches. In October 1962 Pope John XXIII inaugurated the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) to review relations between the Catholic Church and the modern world, a process concluded by his successor Paul VI in December 1965. In addition to encouraging mass to be said in the vernacular rather than Latin, Vatican II urged priests to work more cooperatively with the laity and embrace ecumenism through dialogue with other faiths. In Australia, most parishes followed these recommendations by dropping Latin for English and bringing forward the altar so the priest could face the people. Some went further and started to dialogue with other Christian denominations. But other recommendations, such as dialogue with non-Christians, standing up for justice issues (e.g. opposing the Vietnam War), or encouraging new music and art, was rarely in evidence. An exception in late 1960s Sydney and, it would seem, Australia, was the response to all this by two Sydney priests: Roger Pryke the Catholic Chaplin at Sydney University then Manly, and Ted Kennedy, Pryke’s successor at Sydney University who moved briefly to Neutral Bay before arriving in Redfern with two other priests in December 1971.1

In 1971 inner city Redfern had long been associated with low-income people, including Aborigines, who sought employment in the extensive rail maintenance workshops.2 In the 1960s Aboriginal numbers swelled in Redfern following the Freedom Rides, reforms to anti-Aboriginal sections of the constitution in the 1967 Referendum, the massive walk-offs from discriminatory reserves from the late 60s onwards, and repressive legislation under the Queensland Bjelke-Petersen government which forced many to flee south. Mounting Indigenous activism triggered key structural changes for self-determination beginning with the establishment of the Aboriginal Legal Service in 1970, the Aboriginal Medical Service in mid 1971, both located in Redfern, and the establishment by radicalised Aboriginals from Redfern of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra on 26 January 1972 with demands for self-determination, the right to proper education, health and legal services, decent housing
and prison reform. These initiatives, which demonstrated the capacity of Aboriginal people to manage and deliver services essential to their people, transformed wider Australian perceptions of Aboriginal people. All of these events significantly impacted on the Kennedy years in Redfern.

Changes to the Redfern church interior during the reformist Kennedy era (1971-2002/5) demonstrate the extent to which Euro-centric Catholicism, transported to Australia in the early colonial years, showed itself open to institutional transformation. The forces for change came both from within the church and from daily contact with the Redfern Aboriginal community.

It should also be noted that church interiors come under the purview of diocesan (bishop’s jurisdiction) committees plus the National Liturgical Art and Architecture Board. These committees include clergy, church bureaucrats and lay members with some expertise in art or architecture. Their role is to ensure liturgical compliance, although a member of the national committee informed us that church cultural heritage is primarily about the people and the way the art and spaces reflect the lived culture of the people: the material fabric of a church and its artworks is deemed important when it reflects the culture of the people and sustains them in their memories of that culture. This interpretation, as we will see towards the end of this paper, suggests convergence with current thinking within the heritage industry on cultural and social significance.

The building and its interior, 1971-2002/5

The Cadigal land on which St Vincent’s Church now stands was first granted to Dr William Redfern in 1816, and eventually acquired in 1853 for the Catholic Church by the Benedictine Bishop, John Bede Polding. The foundation stone for St Vincent de Paul School-Church was laid in Redfern Street in March 1885. The polychrome brick building, designed by architects (Joseph) Sheerin and (Jack) Hennessy, was opened on 18 January 1886: like many of their buildings it was “a blend of neo-Gothic and [neo] Romanesque styles.” 1902 additions...
include a choir gallery extending the church to the northern (Redfern Street) boundary, and a second porch near the NW corner to balance that on the other side. Minor additions in the early 1930s, providing a confessional on either side of the nave, complete the architectural changes.

Apart from incremental changes from normal wear and tear the church looks very much as it did in the 1930s (Figure 1). For many years the interior also remained virtually unchanged, with the congregation entering from one of the porches at the northern (Redfern St) end to sit in a pew facing the altar in front of the southern wall (Figure 2, left). Although no significant changes were made to the built fabric of the church interior, from the 1970s new internal arrangement of altar and pews, plus new altar and other elements, reflected theological and community change (Figure 2, right).

The arrival of Kennedy and his fellow priests saw offers of practical assistance and hospitality to the needy, as well as in-principle support for self-determination. Before long, large numbers of people were fed and bedded in the presbytery and a church hall. In March 1972, following the eviction of 15 people squatting in derelict housing in Redfern, the priests gave the squatters accommodation within the church. With over 100 people seeking accommodation, a Council Eviction Order was served on the presbytery. A very direct outcome of this situation was a delegation, led by Bob and Sol Bellear and including Kennedy, to the newly-elected Whitlam Labor Government (elected December 1972), to
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seek a long term solution for Aboriginal housing in Redfern. This pragmatic activism resulted in the formation of the Aboriginal Housing Company in July 1973, associated with the area now known as The Block (and destined for redevelopment as the Pumulwuy Project).

Meanwhile, with neither money nor any desire to substantially change the church building, pre-Vatican elements – gold sacred vessels, pietistic statues, and the altar separated from the people – were removed by mutual consent (Figure 2). Within the radically-realigned space a new altar (Figure 3, left) carved, constructed and painted by sculptor Tom Bass, was positioned in the middle of the Church. Pews were arranged on three sides of the altar, bringing the celebrant into a more intimate relationship with the congregation. Various artworks, most donated by artists (including Martin Sharp), were placed on walls. Into the eastern recess formerly housing a confessional, Kennedy installed a new baptismal font using slabs of a dense igneous trachyte from Bowral, secured before this last remaining trachyte quarry closed in 1980. The site is important to the local Dharawal and Gundungurra peoples, and its rock, which polishes to a lustrous green finish, serves as the official vice-regal stone. Here its elemental rough-hewn qualities seemed to show in its simplicity how a revitalised church could accommodate creativity (Figure 3, right). A taller trachyte slab was made into a tabernacle placed at the back of the church where Aborigines tended to gather. The unpolished floor remained bare, save for a temporary covering of straw matting: carpet, it was felt, was too middle class.

To the community, incremental changes to the physical interior reflected a vibrant liturgy, social activism, creativity, and inclusiveness across gender, age and faith. Colonial heritage as expressed in the late neo-Gothic edifice was being transformed by Aboriginal encounters. To the wider community, as evidenced by a Local Environmental Plan (LEP) listing at the City of Sydney, these changes were seen as quintessential to the cultural heritage of the place. Evidently, long before Marcia Langton offered an inclusive and participatory definition of Aboriginality as essentially re/created through dialogue, Kennedy had demonstrated an instinctive affinity with her thinking, for he found his world both expanded – and questioned – by his daily contact with the Aboriginal people. These encounters reinforced his long-held questioning of clerical power that put the institution before people.

In 2002 ill-health forced Kennedy to retire, and the new Sydney Archbishop George Pell promised before two witnesses to appoint a priest sympathetic to Kennedy’s Aboriginal ministry and who would honour the spirit of inclusiveness towards the community at large. Pell’s short-lived first appointment proved to be incapable of interacting with people: no one in the existing church community felt welcome. One year later he appointed the first of many priests from the Neocatechumenal (Neocat) Way, a controversial Spanish sect that proved to be the very nemesis of all that Kennedy and the community valued. Neocat priests, and even parishioners (“missionaries”), were imported from overseas to establish carbon copies of communities established elsewhere. With no desire to undergo enculturation into Indigenous or settler cultures in Redfern, the movement immediately imposed restrictions on the existing community.
Despite feeling the chill wind of clericalism, the community continued its long-standing practice of contributing in fresh and creative ways where possible. There was a shift from being merely active to activists. A twice-weekly lunch, “Sharing the Meal,” was instigated in the back of the church to strengthen community relationships with the needy. Photos of Kennedy and Indigenous leader Shirley Smith (Mum Shirl) were affixed to the walls in order to make clear to newcomers the crucial role both had played in the formation of the community. In March 2004 a community member launched the “Church Mouse” website (church-mouse.net) to document abuses and resist po-faced clericalism by maintaining “an eclectic public record of the history and curious goings on in the parish.” It was quickly selected for archiving (August 2004) by the State Library of NSW as having a design and content “of state significance”15 and facilitated links to other communities experiencing Neocat problems. Lines from a poem about the church by sympathetic visiting priest and poet from New Zealand, Jim Considine, were written in chalk on the front wall during Easter 2004 (Figure 4). Thereafter a pattern of clergy erasure and parishioner re-chalking and spray

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Fig. 4 Exterior wall of St Vincent’s in Redfern Street, 2004-9. Text reads: “crucified on every city sidewalk/the Aboriginal Christ should be free/in his own church among his own people/in Redfern”. Text by Jim Considine, visiting priest and poet from New Zealand, in solidarity with the community. Photographs by Len De Lorenzo.

Fig. 5 Mural, July 29, 2006. The text is an excerpt from a speech delivered by Pope John Paul II in Alice Springs in 1986. Photograph by Catherine De Lorenzo.
fixing continued until November 2009 when the priests permanently removed it by painting the wall with anti-graffiti paint.

The most remarkable outcome of the immediate post-Kennedy years was the installation in July 2006 of a mural that asserted joint Indigenous and Vatican II values as quintessential to the place (Figure 5). The mural bears Aboriginal motifs around a papal statement acknowledging Aboriginal spirituality. Sydney Morning Herald reporter David Marr revealed the story of how the parish priest was thrown off-guard when he turned up to church the previous Sunday to find the community had entered the church undetected and worked feverishly with artists to complete the mural the previous afternoon16 – a story that prompted the paper’s cartoonist Cathy Wilcox to have the testy parish priest retort: “We can’t have this kind of defiant act uniting the congregation!”17

As strongly as the Redfern church community sought to maintain the spirit and evidence of the Kennedy era, the more concerted was the effort by the new regime to assert clerical power. The Neocatechumenal Way placed fake Persian carpets under the altar and replaced original local artists’ works with cheap reproductions of neo-Mediaevalist icons by their founder Kiko. For a while the church interior reflected the progressive and regressive elements. In the last few years, however, Archdiocesan maintenance monies have been used to make more permanent changes to the interior: peeling walls and ceiling were painted and adorned with gold trims; timbers, including rare Australian cedar posts and Kauri pine pews, were lacquered blackish brown; pendant lighting replaced with chandeliers and abundant LED strip lighting; sanctimonious statues affixed to ledges; and bare boards estapoled. Paintings and other works taken down to allow for the repainting have been stolen, damaged or barred from being rehung. A commercial kitchen was installed without required Council approval at the back of the church. The long-term community had to raise its own funds to have the (deliberately) damaged Bass altar and the mural restored by qualified conservators, an action made possible, surprisingly, by a letter from Cardinal Pell to community members insisting that these two major art pieces belonged to the church and had to stay.18 However, a new ornate marble altar has been repositioned at the end of the nave, with the Tom Bass altar sidelined into an alcove. Such is the power of the local parish priest.

The heritage industry as institution

This section of the paper looks at the way St Vincent’s Church has been identified and protected through the institutionalised heritage listing process currently in use in NSW, and then discusses whether the social and spiritual significance of the church has been adequately addressed and protected through this process.

While the birth of the heritage industry in NSW had a number of progenitors within the community over many decades, the formalising of legislative procedures for protecting places of heritage significance, and the beginnings of institutionalised heritage, began with the passing of the NSW Heritage Act in 1977 and the publication of Australia ICOMOS’s Burra Charter in 1979, both organisations balancing and reinforcing each other. Since then, a data base of statutorily-listed heritage items in NSW has been gradually populated with items
protected by heritage schedules to local environmental plans (LEPs), regional environmental plans (REPs) or by the State Heritage Register which lists items of particular importance to the people of NSW. As of February 2015, the NSW heritage database contained over 27,000 listed heritage items of which over 1,650 are of state significance.19

The St Vincent’s Church group is currently listed as item 1348 of local significance on the City of Sydney LEP 2012.20 The listing, updated in 2009, recognises not only the church’s historical significance as a Victorian gothic church and its aesthetic contribution to the streetscape, but its social significance to the local community, specifically citing the period from 1972 to 2000 when Ted Kennedy “started to provide shelters and food for Aboriginal people.” The recommended management parameters cover alterations to the exterior, preparation of Heritage Assessments and/or a Conservation Management Plan before undertaking major works, and that “The principal room layout and planning configuration as well as significant internal original features including ceilings, cornices, joinery, flooring and fireplaces should be retained and conserved.” Recommendations on how, or even if, the stated social significance should be conserved are not included, presumably allowing for an understanding of the social significance to emerge during the more comprehensive Conservation Management Plan process.

The Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter defines “cultural significance” as including “aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value”21 and the NSW Heritage Division of the Office of Environment and Heritage cites these four values, with spiritual included as part of social value, in their publication, Assessing Heritage Significance.22 Of the four values – aesthetic, historical, scientific and social – social significance has been the hardest to define and protect, and therefore the easiest to neglect. In fact, a discussion paper on social significance, first published by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) in 2001, found that “in the great majority of heritage assessments carried out over the last 30 years, the category of the social has been treated by heritage professionals in Australia as dispensable altogether.”23 Considerably more attention has been paid to social and intangible significance in the ensuing decade, particularly by Australia ICOMOS who established the National Scientific Committee – Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2014.

The growing understanding of the complexities and importance of social significance in Australia has been paralleled by a similar growth in understanding at a world heritage level, evidenced in the Nara Document of Authenticity of 1994. The Nara Document states that a place “can only truly be considered heritage if the community has an emotional attachment to it.”24 It gives social value priority over archaeological, architectural, art historical etc. values. The NPWS document, cited on the NSW Government’s Environment & Heritage website, concurs with this assessment, concluding that:

the social can be said to be ‘greater’ than the aesthetic, the historical and the scientific: not only does it envelop the other three, they cannot be ‘thought’ outside of the social (we are social beings, society is an environment [in which] we act and think).25
The recent history of St Vincent’s Church shows it to be a place which has developed a strong, healing and creative bond with the local Redfern Aboriginal community. This bond was recognised as being of social significance in the updated Heritage LEP listing in 2000 and subsequently included as such on the NSW heritage database. Since 2003, however, for reasons previously stated, St Vincent’s has now become a place where the recognised social significance of the church to the local community is under considerable threat. In fact, St Vincent’s Church represents a place where the social significance is under vigorous contestation. To the church hierarchy, the significance of St Vincent’s lies in representing the hierarchical order and status of the church as an institution with the parish priest having no obligation to work with, let alone devolve power to, the local community. To the local community built up during the Kennedy years, the significance of the church lies in its history of hospitality, informality, creativity, and participation in the tangible changes to the physical fabric of the church during these years. The church hierarchy does not currently acknowledge the social significance of the Ted Kennedy era and therefore sees no need to consult with the local community when changes are made to the leadership, congregation and physical fabric of the place. The question this paper finally seeks to pursue is whether the intangible/social values of the Kennedy era at St Vincent’s can be adequately assessed and protected using the mechanisms established by the heritage industry in NSW and Australia over the past 35 years.

Reluctance is evident amongst official heritage agencies, at local and state level, to interfere in what is seen as an internal church matter, which the church itself should resolve. For heritage agencies, if the church as owner of the property changes its method of operation and even changes its congregation, this is not a matter for external interference. However, as has been evident over the past decade of witnessing the failure of the church institution to protect children within its care, and the subsequent need for state intervention, so heritage agencies can no longer fail in their duty to protect the heritage and societal values they have been mandated to uphold.

If the social significance of St Vincent’s to the local community can be considered the most important aspect of its heritage, encompassing the other criteria of aesthetic, historic and scientific significance, then how can this significance be recognised and asserted/protected/conserved? Certainly not by having the significance assessed or imposed on the community by external heritage professionals, and not by having the community’s attachment to the church, as evidenced in the 1972 to 2000 period, de-valued, ignored and replaced by the church hierarchy. If the social significance is to be understood and adequately assessed, then the social processes by which St Vincent’s has become meaningful to the whole Redfern community, as well as Aboriginal community, need to be studied in a way that fully involves the community themselves, and whereby culture becomes the “mobilizing of group identities.”

St Vincent’s Church is a particularly complex case, from a heritage assessment perspective, because it encompasses not only social/spiritual significance, which has generally failed to be adequately addressed by heritage practitioners, but also Aboriginal significance,
which has generally failed to be adequately understood by European Australians. While it can be clearly maintained that such fragmentation of social significance by race is totally inappropriate, current legislation in NSW and Australia defines quite separate management regimes for Aboriginal and non-indigenous heritage. Pre-contact sites are recorded and protected under the NPWS Act (1974) – far more so than post-1788 sites. This has been based on the assumption that Aboriginal heritage pre-1788 is more important than that of the later period, which has led to an environment in which the significance of heritage places to Aboriginal people in present day NSW, and the authenticity of contemporary Aboriginal culture more generally, has not been taken seriously by white Australia.28 Government policy since 1996 has sought to redress this imbalance by allowing the NSW Heritage Act to be used to protect items and places of significance to Aboriginal people, especially post-contact places that may not receive coverage under the NPWS Act’s relic-based approach. This has resulted in an increase in the number of Aboriginal places represented on the State Heritage Inventory and an increase in the number of Aboriginal studies funded through the Heritage Assistance Program, including oral histories and community based projects.29 Over the last two decades we have also seen architects, and architectural historians, wrestle with ideas of cultural entanglement, syncretism and biculturalism within indigenous-related architectural design.30

With such positive steps being taken within government to address the lack of visibility being given to contemporary Aboriginal places of significance in the community, there should be little impediment to moving forward to acknowledge the significance of the St Vincent’s Church community and to ensure its protection. The old way of thinking whereby culture was likened to billiard balls, with European culture bumping into non-European culture without merging,31 needs to be replaced with the notion of cultures becoming entangled with each other, borrowing from each other and re-working for their own purposes:

Communities do not just happen, they are built. The involvement of local people in efforts to record and conserve their heritage may be seen as a factor in building and maintaining strong, functional communities. The devolvement of heritage management responsibilities to local communities should be viewed as a means to facilitate the work of building community identity.32

St Vincent’s Church interior reveals the need for both the Catholic Church and the heritage industry to acknowledge cross-cultural community engagements within their precincts. This paper has questioned the ability of these two institutions to adequately protect those people and places they are charged with protecting. Has the Catholic Church adequately protected the social legacy of the Ted Kennedy era as expressed by the congregation, and has the heritage industry adequately protected the social significance of the Ted Kennedy era through the listing processes? Does either institution possess the ability to change and redress previous neglect?


The above comment is based on hand-written notes from a telephone conversation between De Lorenzo and [name withheld] on August 15, 2014.


Marcia Langton, *Well, I Heard It on the Radio and I Saw It on the Television ... An Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking by and about Aboriginal People and Things* (North Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1993). Note that shortly after Kennedy’s appointment to St Vincent’s, Langton also worked in Redfern, as a member of Black Theatre in nearby Cope Street. See Darlene Johnson’s film, *The Redfern Story* (2014), 54 mins.


Kennedy, *Who is Worthy?*


Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, 2013, article 1.2.


Byrne et al., Social Significance, 7.

Discussion between City of Sydney Heritage officer and members of church property committee and congregation, February 11, 2014.


Byrne et al., Social Significance, 60.

Byrne et al., Social Significance, 112.


Byrne et al., Social Significance, 46.

Byrne et al., Social Significance, 46.