Australia's Big Dilemma

Regional/National Identities, Heritage Listing and Big Things

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Abstract

Super-sized structures that mimic or quote smaller 'real world' things have been a feature of our landscape for many centuries. Largely as a result of the introduction of the motorcar, a new phase of structures with amplified proportions swept North America from the 1920s: roadside cafes, service stations and hotels utilised what David Gebhard labelled "programatic architecture" to capture the attention of passing motorists. This trend first appeared in Australia in the 1960s and peaked in popularity in the 1980s. Numerous "Big Thing"' (to use the common Australian label) have been constructed in the past decade, such as the Big Golden Gumboot in Tully, QLD (2003), and thus the trend continues. Recent years have also seen the emergence of a 'Big' dilemma for local and State authorities, as Australia's earliest Big Things start to decay, go bankrupt, or attract criticism for the outdated versions of Australian history and identity that they seemingly promote (as with the Big Prawn in Ballina [NSW]), the Big Lobster in Kingston [SA] and the Big Captain Cook in Cairns [QLD]). These roadside attractions have become significant landmarks with many layers of social, aesthetic and cultural importance at local and national levels, and their heritage value has begun to be acknowledged. In 2009 the Big Pineapple (Nambour, QLD) was inscribed on the Queensland Heritage Register, and as other landmarks have come under threat of closure or demolition, debate about the future of these structures has quickly followed. This paper will historicise Australia's Big Things and consider the emerging heritage dilemma, and in doing so will reflect on the changing socio-political landscape that these architectural features occupy.

Introduction
Super-sized structures that mimic or quote smaller "real world" things have been a feature of our landscape for many centuries. Largely as a result of the introduction of the motorcar, a new phase of structures with amplified proportions swept North America from the 1920s: novelty architectural forms were utilised to capture the attention of passing motorists. This trend first appeared in Australia in the 1960s with the Big Banana (Coffs Harbour, NSW) and has remained popular since. Recent years have also seen the emergence of a "big" dilemma for authorities, as Australia's earliest Big Things start to decay or go bankrupt. It is clear that communities expect authorities to intervene with heritage designation or funding. These attractions have become regional landmarks with many layers of social, aesthetic and cultural importance, and as historical artefacts they warrant our attention. This paper historicises Australia's Big Things and considers the emerging heritage dilemma, and in doing so reflects on the changing socio-cultural landscape that these architectural features occupy.

The construction of gigantic architectural versions of people, animals and objects is not unique to Australia, or to the past century. From the Great Sphinx of Giza (c. 2558-2532 BCE) and Colossus of Rhodes (280 BCE) to Lucy the Margate Elephant (1881) and the Statue of Liberty (1886), supersized quotations have long occupied a place in architectural history. Not all gigantic objects are alike, however: some were constructed for spiritual or political purposes, some as novelty objects, and others to communicate ownership or identity. The more recent manifestation, described by David Gebhard as "programatic" (his spelling)[1] and by Charles Jencks as "commercial bizarre" architecture,[2] is typically motivated by commercial ambitions, though—as will be shown in this paper—Australia's Big Things have a tendency to serve socio-cultural and commercial purposes simultaneously. Architectural critics such as Jencks, Robert Venturi and Ada Louise Huxtable have suggested that Big Things necessitated the invention of new architectural vocabulary that played upon notions of fake, fantasy and novelty.[3] Nonetheless, and as others have noted, there are critics who regard these "big" manifestations as tacky, unnecessary and of poor taste.[4] Though the present paper refrains from passing judgment on such views, it is pertinent to note that this debate over taste has infiltrated the discussion about heritage conservation. The Big Pineapple (Nambour, QLD) was given State Heritage designation in 2009, in part because of its deemed "aesthetic significance" (Criterion E, *Queensland Heritage Act* 1992), yet press coverage and subsequent commentary has revealed many are of the opinion that the structure is disappointing or off-putting.[5] One thing is certain: Big Things are divisive.

Defining and Cataloguing 'Big Things'
As a starting point for this discussion, it is acknowledged that there are several sub-categories into which Australia's Big Things could be sorted, and—depending on the definition—some examples that we might exclude altogether. In this paper, "Big Things" are understood as being inherently different from buildings that have some architectural features evocative of a real-world object. Big Things typically represent as close to a 360° exterior view of the object as structurally possible, and their exterior appearance is the key—and some might say only—point of their existence. David Clark, who published a selective illustrated catalogue of Australia's Big Things in 2004, used two criteria for his survey: the structures needed to be artificially made, and "bigger than the real thing they represent".[6] The latter criterion excludes the replica Uluru constructed at Leyland Brothers World (Karuah, NSW), for instance. This paper introduces a third criterion: the structures must have been built for their existing context. This eliminates objects such as Matilda the Kangaroo, the 1982 Commonwealth Games mascot that was relocated to a petrol station on the Sunshine Coast in 2009.[7] These were constructed for a different purpose and context, and they do not reflect the socio-cultural attributes of their present location with the same intensity as built-for-context Big Things. A fourth criterion could also be introduced that distinguishes between Big Things that have internal spaces or observation decks, and those that are simple statues or closed-off objects, though this level of detail is unnecessary for the present discussion.

The ubiquity of Australian Big Things in popular culture over the past sixty years might imply that they have been well documented, both individually and as a collective network, but this is not the case. There have been two publications that have partially catalogued this group, the aforementioned work of David Clark, and Craig Scutt's nostalgic *Little Book of Big Aussie Icons*.[8] Neither offers a comprehensive historical narrative that considers the socio-cultural motivations and ramifications that continue to affect these structures. Stephen Stockwell has gone some way towards addressing this, particularly from a political perspective, but says little about the future of these structures in a practical sense (i.e. heritage listings or government-supported attractions).[9] It is not surprising, given the divisive nature and broad recognition of Big Things amongst Australians, that the press has faithfully reported on the structures over time. Naturally this material is sporadic and heavily editorialised, but it will be cautiously integrated throughout the present paper. Using the definitions and criteria previously outlined, a widespread survey was undertaken with the assistance of a range of websites, newspaper and magazine articles (ProQuest, Trove and Factiva databases) and the previously mentioned works of Clark and Scutt.[10] This resulted in nearly 200 Big Things being collated, some of which have uncertain dates of origin or present statuses. Data from this process will be incorporated in the present paper.

Researching Australia's Big Things is complicated by their tendency to be built without architectural plans, and for the structures to regularly change hands between private individuals. Some creators, such as Attila Mokany (responsible for Goulburn's Big Merino [1985] and Taree's Big Oyster [1990]—see Figure 1, below—as well as Ballina's Big Prawn [1990]) have since passed, while other owners have sold their creations and disappeared into private life.[11] Australia is not alone in this limitation, as David Gebhard has observed in his discussion of Californian roadside architecture.[12] There is, nonetheless, sufficient evidence available to historicise Australia's Big Things, even if details of some of the individual structures have been lost. This discussion will first provide a general chronological history interspersed with reflections on some of the underlying socio-cultural motivations that prompted Big Things in Australia from the 1960s. The most recent era in this history is of particular relevance as new structures have been built over the past decade, while some of the earliest Big Things have come under threat of bankruptcy, dilapidation or demolition. With this in mind, the discussion will briefly examine the Big Pineapple (1971; Nambour, QLD) to illustrate the ongoing debate over such structures. The paper will conclude with a reflection on the historical trajectory of Australia's Big Things that considers the future of this network of landmarks.

Figure 1. Left: The Big Merino in 2011 (Source: WikiWookie, 2011; Wikimedia Creative Commons 3.0). Right: The Big Oyster in 2007 (Source: Stuart Edwards, 2007; Wikimedia Creative Commons 3.0).

Big Ambitions, Small Locations, Huge Country

The Australian landscape is no stranger to large structures and monoliths, with geological formations such as Uluru operating as sacred markers for millennia, and the more recent boom in industrialisation and agriculture introducing grain silos, smoke stacks and mining infrastructure to both urban and rural environments. Big Things, as defined in the previous section, did not appear in Australia until the Big Banana (Coffs Harbour, NSW) and Big Scotsman (Adelaide, SA), both built in 1963, however, though the structures had been fashionable across the U.S. from the early twentieth century. The delay in Australia's adoption of the trend is not surprising, however, as car production and ownership was much slower to expand in Australia than elsewhere.[13] It was not until the early 1950s that car-ownership began to boom in Australia, and by the mid-1980s, as Richardson has noted, Australia had more cars than dwellings.[14] Long-distance infrastructure suitable for holiday travel was also slower to develop than in Europe and North America. Major routes like the Pacific and Bruce Highways were sealed by the late 1960s (though they were prone to bad conditions in the early years), and caravan parks and motels rapidly increased between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s.[15] It is clear that the fashion of erecting Big Things in Australia was reliant on the adoption of the motorcar as the preferred mode of long-distance and leisure travel for the middle-class. The high numbers of car ownership in 1980s Australia directly correlates with the peak period of Big Things construction, as indicated in Table 1 (this data excludes approximately thirty structures with unknown construction dates). Moreover, it seems highly likely that the tradition of going on summer holidays to destinations in New South Wales and Queensland, reached by car along the Pacific and Bruce Highways, explains the dominance of both states in Big Things construction (also shown in Table 1).

	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	**Total**
NSW (& ACT)	3	11	14	10	10	6	**54**
NT	0	0	2	0	2	0	**4**
QLD	3	15	13	10	5	2	**48**
SA	1	3	5	3	5	2	**19**
TAS	0	1	2	0	1	0	**4**
VIC	2	1	6	5	3	2	**19**
WA	0	1	6	1	3	0	**11**
Total	**9**	**32**	**48**	**29**	**29**	**12**	**159**

Table 1. Totals of Big Things being constructed in Australian states and territories, indicated by decade: 1960s-2010s. The state or territory with the highest construction volume by decade is indicated with grey shading. (Source: Author, 2017).

There are other influences at play too. Australia is typically perceived as a "big" country with wide, empty spaces devoid of (non-Indigenous) culture. Twentieth century understandings of mainstream identity and pop culture were embedded with ideas about "the outback" and the ability of Australians to survive in or conquer this environment. There are echoes of the settler colonial mentality in this cultural trope: Australia was an "empty" landscape that needed to be claimed, demarcated and civilised. It is interesting that the U.S. and Canada, two nations that also adopted the Big Thing trend, share similar "New World" traits with Australia and are also romanticised as having big, empty spaces. Stockwell and Barcan have suggested a direct link exists between the erection of Big Things in remote places and the (still) turbulent relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous

Australians.[16] Others offer a more benign reading: Jim Davidson has argued that the trend is driven by a simple desire to fill the landscape,[17] while the artist Reg Mombassa has claimed that “Because European settlement was so recent, Australia doesn’t have historic buildings like in other countries and the Big Things are a way of saying ‘we’re here, this is our place.’”[18] A definitive answer on this issue will likely remain elusive, but it is important that we acknowledge the possible symbolism of these structures as devices of colonisation – intentional or otherwise.

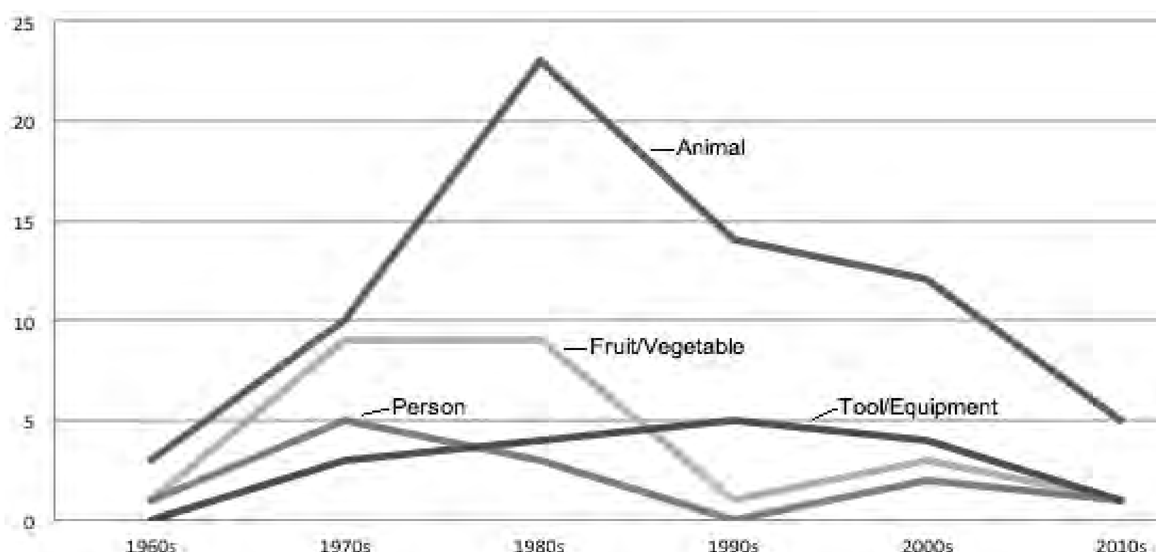

Figure 2. Types of Big Things constructed in Australia, 1960s-2010s. The ‘Person’ category includes historical figures, while the ‘Animal’ category includes insects and fish. (Source: Author, 2017).

Further insight can be gained by looking more closely at trends in the types of Big Things being constructed in Australia since the 1960s. Using the data collated for this research it has been possible to make tentative observations about construction trends, as shown in Table 1 (previous page), as well as patterns in type, shown in Figure 2 (above). Some types of Big Things, such as the “alcohol and consumable” and ‘sport and music’ groupings, have seen a relatively steady distribution, never exceeding a total of five such constructions per decade; as such, they are omitted from Figure 2. It is notable that “fruit and vegetable” Big Things reached a peak in the 1970s, however, while the “animal” subcategory (which includes birds, fish/crustaceans and insects) spiked in the 1980s and has remained the most popular type in the decades since. A closer look at the “fruit/vegetable” and “animal” types, as shown in Figure 3 (below), reveals a notable increase in the popularity of native animals in the 1980s-1990s, at the same time that introduced fauna was rapidly declining in representation. Introduced fruit and vegetable Big Things have also fallen out of favour in recent decades.

There are many ways we could interpret this information, and, as has already been noted, it is not possible to reach definitive conclusions due to a lack of detail concerning individual structures. Nonetheless, it seems likely that the increase in the popularity of native animals (peaking 1980s-90s and remaining prominent since) is at least partially associated with their tourist value as Australiana. It could also be argued that the inclusion of native animals in high-profile events and media of this era—such as the Brisbane Commonwealth Games (1982), World Expo 88, and films like *Crocodile Dundee* (1986), *Fern Gully: The Last Rainforest* (1992) and *Reckless Kelly* (1993)—reinforced their appeal and provided further incentive for their representation in the landscape. A case in point: of the five Big Crocodiles captured in the data, three were erected in the 1980s, one in the 1990s and one in 2001. It is possible to view the decline in popularity of introduced flora and fauna as an indication of Australian society’s shift away from the settler colonial mindset, or—even more optimistically—as a sign of

society's embrace of indigenous culture, but this would be difficult to support without a thorough investigation of the motivations for each construction.

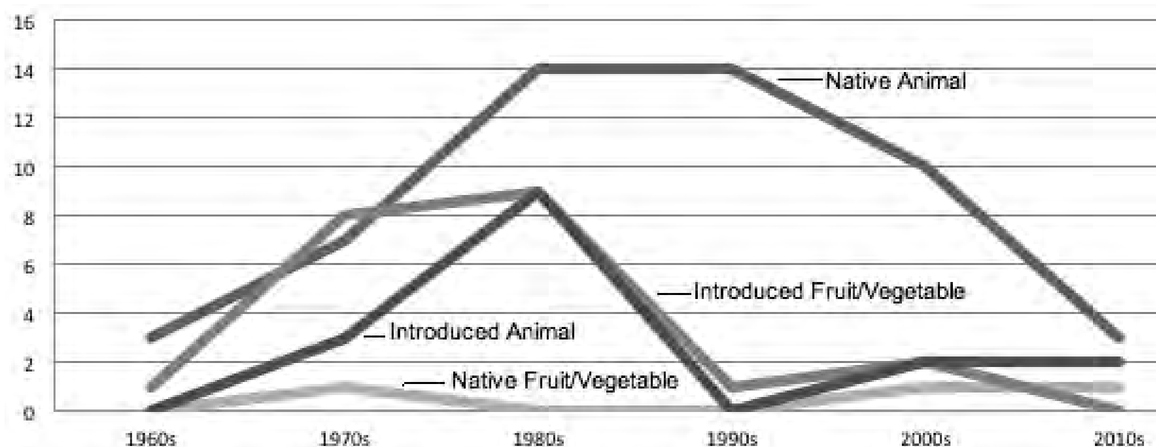

Figure 3. Native and Introduced 'Fruit/Vegetable' and 'Animal' Types of Big Things in Australia, 1960s-2010s (Source: Author, 2017).

The Big Thing trend has declined from its peak in the 1980s when approximately 50 structures were erected, but significant numbers have been built in the past three decades (an estimated 29 in the 1990s, 29 in the 2000s, and 12 from 2010-2017). Recent examples, such as the Big Gumboot in Tully (QLD, 2003; see Figure 4, below) and the Big Bogan in Nyngan (NSW, 2015) are obvious attempts to draw tourists into regional areas, but they are also consciously selected signifiers of local identity. In the case of Tully, known for it's record high rainfall figures, the Gumboot is a physical manifestation of the town's claim to fame; the Bogan at Nyngan, on the other hand, is a defiant gesture to the perceptions of outsiders.

Figure 4. The Big Gumboot in 2006 (Source: Frances76, 2006; Wikimedia Creative Commons 3.0). The Big Prawn in 2007; it was refurbished and relocated to a different spot in the same site in 2012 (Source: Stuart Edwards, 2007; Wikimedia Creative Commons 3.0).

Indeed, Big Things can play an important role in reflecting community pride, and in ways that are far from straightforward. Tully's Gumboot was constructed with local and state government support as well as donations from many businesses, and its design was collectively agreed upon.[19] It serves as an example of an earnestly selected symbol of the community it represents. In other instances, however, such as the Big Prawn in Ballina (NSW, 1990), the initial construction (Figure 4, above) was

met with widespread complaints and derision from the press.[20] Once threatened, however, as the Prawn was in the 2000s, the resulting community debate revealed that the structure had become a beloved icon for the region.[21] One commentator even suggested that the Prawn "says we have character, it says we have a sense of humour. The Big Prawn is very Australian. And anyone who thinks otherwise must be un-Australian".[22]

Stephen Stockwell has argued that reactions like this are evidence of the link between Big Things and the "larrikin sense of humour" celebrated in mainstream Australian culture.[23] To this I would add that when Big Things are threatened—as has recently been the case with Ballina's Prawn, the Big Lobster in Kingston (S.A, 1979), the Big Pineapple in Nambour (QLD, 1971), and the Big Captain Cook in Cairns (QLD, 1973)—it evokes another socio-cultural trope, that of the "Aussie battler". Once this attribution has been made, any decision to close, neglect or demolish the structure risks triggering a broader debate about cultural elitism and perceptions of Australian national and regional identities. This, in turn, may pressure authorities into funding or protecting a structure that is no longer commercially viable and has tenuous heritage significance.

Giant Problems: The Big Pineapple

This is a significant issue that warrants further elaboration here, and the aforementioned example of the Big Pineapple provides some insight. The structure, which opened in August 1971, was the creation of Bill and Lyn Taylor; American expatriates who relocated with the intention of beginning an agritourism business.[24] Several additions were made over the years, including a Tropical Village facility and a Big Macadamia Nut (both in 1978).[25] The Big Pineapple itself remained constant in appearance and content however: the interior is decorated with pineapple-related information, and visitors can climb to a viewing platform at the crown of the fruit (see Figure 5, next page).[26] The property was sold to Lanray Holdings in 1981 for a speculated $6.83 million,[27] before being taken over by Rupert Murdoch's Queensland Newspapers in 1986. The Brisbane World Expo '88 prompted a substantial refurbishment that included shifting the structure a few meters to allow for gift-shop expansion.[28] Optimism about a tourism boom proved short-lived however: an upgrade of the Bruce Highway in 1990 bypassed the Big Pineapple, putting it out-of-sight of an estimated 60,000 cars per day, thus inhibiting its primary purpose as a roadside landmark.[29] Visitor numbers declined significantly, and in 1996 the structure changed hands again (purchased for a speculated half of its $16 million value).[30] Profit continued to fall and by 2003 the owners found themselves in court over substantial tax debts.[31]

Figure 5. Left: The Big Pineapple in 2005 (Source: Moondyne, 2005; Wikimedia Creative Commons 3.0). Right: The Big Lobster in 2006 (Source: Riana Dzasta, 2006; Wikimedia Creative Commons 3.0).

The future of the Big Pineapple remained uncertain in the mid-2000s. A rumour that the property would be sold to developers was covered by the press, and there was mounting pressure from groups such as the National Trust of Queensland to have the structure protected.[32] In 2008 the local council provided a submission regarding the inscription of the Big Pineapple as a State Heritage Site, and—despite protests from the owners who thought designation would inhibit commercial expansion—the listing was formalised by the Queensland Government in March 2009.[33] The owners put it on the market in late 2009 and it was purchased for an undisclosed amount in late 2010, but quickly sold again for an estimated $5.8 million in August 2011.[34] During this period the Big Pineapple was closed to the public, and when it reopened in late 2011 many attractions remained off-limits. Once again, rumours circulated of a planned land sell-off; the new owners instead promised that they would revive the Pineapple with a music festival, farmers market, zoo and donated spaces for local charities.[35]

These plans have gradually come to fruition, but despite earlier grassroots support for the Big Pineapple the efforts of the newest owners appear to have had little impact on the site's appeal to locals and tourists. During its 2010-2011 closure, locals complained that they had lost an important social space, and said they were eager to support new ownership.[36] Three years after it's reopening, however, it was reported that the on-site businesses had limited operating hours due to a lack of local patronage.[37] Reviews on Trip Advisor highlight widespread disappointment amongst tourists, mixed with reminiscences about the Pineapple's former glory.[38] In October 2015 user Heatherwashere2 of Tweed Heads wrote, "In it's hey day, this was worth a drive to. But forget it now. It is run down and has nothing to offer accept (sic) ice creams. A rusty old heap that should be pulled down". Another Australian user, Eric-Ewok, was similarly scathing in their July 2016 review: "I am ashamed to be Australian after visiting the venue. […] If you can't spend a little time and a small budget to renovate, then close, as you are doing the Australian tourist industry more harm than good!" Such reactions reveal the correlation between national pride and some of Australia's high profile Big Things: to neglect the Pineapple was an Australian embarrassment, while even considering the demolition of the Big Prawn was—as previously noted—downright "un-Australian".

The parallel between the Big Pineapple and other threatened Big Things speaks volumes about the physical and psychological changes that have placed these landmarks at risk. Predicting a negative impact on tourism when plans were made for the Pacific Highway Bypass around Ballina in the mid-2000s, its owners duly neglected the aforementioned Big Prawn.[39] Unlike the Big Pineapple, however, local and state authorities avoided suggestions that the Prawn should be given heritage protection.[40] It was later purchased and refurbished as part of a land acquisition by Bunnings Hardware, and now has a promising future.[41] Kingston's Big Lobster (Figure 5, previous page), built in 1979, faces a less certain path: like the Pineapple, it has changed hands several times and its current owners purchased the structure in 2007 for less than $500,000; it had been on the market since 2001.[42] The owners have been criticised for allowing the Lobster to fall into disrepair; they, in turn, have publicly called on local and state authorities to step-in.[43] A crowd-sourced campaign to fund repairs and attempt a buy-out of the structure received national attention in 2015, and the South Australian Government has contributed $10,000 towards refurbishment, but a positive outcome remains elusive.[44] No plans have openly been made to give the Lobster heritage designation, though it seems a logical next step for locals who are eager to ensure "Larry" stays put. It also seems likely that many other Big Things will experience similar challenges in the short- and medium-term.

Conclusion: Legacies or Liabilities?

The large volume of Australian Big Things—many of which are constructed cheaply from fiberglass or ferroconcrete—warrants a cautious approach by local and state governments. The example of the Big Pineapple highlights the challenges faced by these structures, and while the loss of promotion to motorists via the Bruce Highway played a key role in the Pineapple's decline, we also need to consider whether the gimmick itself (a supersized 'real world' object looming over the surrounding landscape) has ceased to be commercially viable. If, as Ben Groundwater has suggested, younger

generations are enamored with “iPods and Xboxes” and fail to see the value in the “often ugly and occasionally decrepit renderings of local obsessions”,[45] it seems unlikely that the income generated by Big Things will remain sufficient to cover structural upkeep. The Big Banana (Figure 6, next page) has incorporated leisure and entertainment facilities into its environs as a means of ensuring its financial survival, but it is an exception to the rule. The Big Captain Cook in Cairns (Figure 6, next page), on the other hand, lost its accompanying hotel in the mid-2000s and now stands abandoned in a vacant lot.[46] The statue has itself come under threat of demolition due to neglect and debate over its political correctness.[47]

Figure 6. Left: The Big Banana in 2015 (Source: Wikiwookie, 2015; Wikimedia Creative Commons 4.0). Right: The Big Captain Cook in 2007 (Source: Fosnez, 2007; WikiMedia Public Domain).

Herein lies the dilemma: while the wider community may look upon Big Things with misty-eyed fondness, many of these structures have or will eventually become financial liabilities. Community-led campaigns to prevent the demolition of Big Things are *not* indicators of their commercial viability, I would argue, but evidence of an attachment to an idea: they are familiar markers in a changing landscape, and their absence would be an emotional rather than practical loss. Heritage designation may offer communities some reassurances but—as seen with the Big Pineapple—it can be more of a symbolic gesture than a guarantee for future success. Moreover, local and State heritage listing criteria would prevent the wholesale inscription of every Big Thing in Australia, and rightfully so. Such registers are only intended to give representative coverage of types of heritage places. Nonetheless, and as this discussion has highlighted, the broad network of Australia’s Big Things is of undeniable architectural and socio-cultural historical significance. The trends within this network, which this paper only briefly touched upon, warrant further exploration. Key examples of the phenomenon should certainly be considered for heritage designation, but local planning committees would be wise to refrain from approving new Big Things without first considering the status of existing structures in their region. After all, there is every possibility that the Big Things of the 2000s and beyond will one day be in similar position of dilapidation and financial ruin to that which is presently being experienced by Big Things of the 1960s-1990s.

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