

The writer is the Heritage Officer and Librarian at Unions NSW, a role I have held for 24 years. I have continued the valuable work that Lorna Morrison, former secretary of the Sydney Trades Hall Association, began in the late 1960s to ensure the retention and development of trade union history in the building built specifically by and for trade union education.

Unions NSW, via the Sydney Trades Hall, a heritage listed building, actively collects, conserves, displays and generally makes available to the public the largest collection of trade union memorabilia in Australia. This collection includes a trade union banner collection dating largely from 1890 to 1920, trade union badges dating from 1879, photographs, archives and newspapers and other memorabilia that are a core part of the history of working people and democracy in NSW and Australia. These are part of the reason the building is of national significance and the collection is recognised as key moveable heritage under NSW Heritage legislation. The importance is in its having been retained on site and that it is available to the public, be they researchers or visiting tourists.

Since 1872 the Sydney Trades Hall Association and Unions NSW (through its preceding body the Sydney Labour Council) has seen the educational role as central to the role of Unions NSW and Sydney Trades Hall. A library and Literary Institute being a core function of the organisations since their beginnings. All unions that have been affiliated to Unions NSW and whom have had offices in the Trades Hall have availed themselves of the Library and education opportunities that unions have had as part of their role.

Moving further back, the arguments that Sydney Stonemasons made in 1855-56 on the need for a reduction in working hours from ten hours a day to eight hours were squarely based on the time needed for workers to better their education and knowledge. The masons pointed out that even at ten hours their members were engaged in learning:

*“masons are men of a different stamp, and if they had time, many, I doubt not, would have their names enrolled as members of that valuable institution the Mechanics’ School of Arts; and their desire for mental improvement is another and a strong reason which urges them on to obtain a reduction in their present hours of labour.”* (letter to the Sydney Morning Herald on 26<sup>th</sup> Feb 1856)

Rail workers and their unions were organised from the beginnings of rail in NSW and have been amongst the many who have provided training and education for their members across all aspects of civil society, not simply in trade union functions.

The libraries at Trades Hall and at such other adult education centres such as Railway Institutes, Mechanics Institutes and Workers Education Associations (the Australian body having its origins in a room in Sydney Trades Hall in 1913) have been enormously important in deepening community understanding of the opportunities for further education, skills development and personal growth. This is why the proposal for an archive/research centre which embraces the intangible cultural history of the Eveleigh Workshops Precinct is so important, an opportunity not to be foregone. We must not remove from the people of NSW and future generations access to the knowledge and understanding of such a crucial component of Australia’s social and labour history.

Community has been central to industrial development and the Redfern/and Eveleigh precincts have been great historical bastions of such opportunity and development. The location was a heartland of Australia’ manufacturing industry, perhaps being the major location of heavy industrial manufacturing and further processing of Australian made steel products.

This manufacturing community and railway worker community saw the development of such society leaders as Sir William McKell, Eddie Ward, Ben Chifley as a train driver based in Bathurst and Eveleigh, and James McGowan who was a long time representative in NSW Parliament for Redfern as Eveleigh developed. The advance in health and safety and workers' compensation legislation and regulations stemmed in large part from the actions and knowledge of rail workers such as Lloyd Ross and the support of ALP leader such as Jack Lang and William McKell.

The Eveleigh Railway Workshops have been described as a "City within a City" because they have their own power systems and were self-reliant in manufacturing, repairing and assembling locomotives. The Workshops represented the pinnacle of industrial capitalism in Australia. The factory/production line processes that were being developed by large scale corporations and factories around the world found their Australian hub at Eveleigh with thousands of employees in what was effectively one large plant being engaged in thousands of occupations, classifications and tasks and it was the cutting edge of new technologies and processes (the Taylor system was a divisive factor in the Great Strike of 1917). Its workers the most skilled operatives in the country. This story must be told, the relationships between workers and machines, the classification structures, the conditions of work were often dirty and dangerous with minimal safety standards the underpinning of the deep development of the award wage system in Australia, the "new province for law and order" as Justice Higgins put it, that was the envy of western democracies for decades as a way of regulating work, disputes and safety.

The wage structures and teamwork were a standard setter across industries, many of which have fallen away. This structure, and the teamwork upon which this production of locomotives was based was a measure of the leading role Eveleigh played in Australian industry. Techniques not limited to heavy manufacturing but that could be applied many occupations and tasks. This is a bygone era best exemplified by the recent demise of the vehicle production industry in Australia.

### **Moveable Heritage**

Trade unions and workers have a social history, a built legacy and have accumulated and value many physical historical items, as well as an oral and written history of actions, work and celebration.

Sydney Trades Hall has a collection of trade union banners that are recognised as of national significance, and which are known around the world as a great living example of work history housed in a building (also historically recognises as of significance) that was built by and for union activity.

The parallels with the ATP site are striking. Not simply because part of our collection honours the work of railway workers and their unions, but also because the industrial and manufacturing history of Australia remains in situ at ATP.

The Davey press is one of the great industrial icons and has been recognised as such since its installation at ATP the banner of the Ironworkers features an idea of that machine as central to the work of nations.



*(Ironworkers banner from early 1900s depicting the scale of the work that Eveleigh workers performed (image Sydney Trades Hall Collection))*

The national significance of the moveable heritage at Sydney Trades hall is well recognised, as pointed out above. This connects directly with the significance of the heritage machinery, buildings and tools that remain at Eveleigh. The era of Australian history that the age of banner making and the age of rapid industrial development in the new nation of Australia are captured well by both these collections. Just as the significance of the Trades Hall's collection is intimately tied to the size and number of items that remain together at the Hall, so to the significance of the Eveleigh workshops is vastly enhanced by the fact that they do remain.

NSW Government Environment and Heritage reports have previously identified this significance as very largely tied to the fact that individual pieces of machinery are given context and great significance by being seen and studied as part of the processes that made them important for manufacturing and advancement. Completeness of the items, and their ability to be conserved and retained in working order if possible and on site is a wonderful gift to our future. This is even more urgent now as so much of the development of Australian industry and of the city and urban environment that enabled work and workers to make a community in this part of Australia's oldest white-colonial settlement is under threat or has disappeared. Technological development is central to our future as a nation, and of our future as humans in a world threatened by climate change, and reminders of technological developments that helped create a modern nation can help spur us to researching and creating an ecological future that can include making things.

To allow this site to become a shell that barely acknowledges that deep historical role as an industrial site and a site of community development and concern shows a lack of understanding of the importance of our past. To allow that historical memory to disintegrate would be a great loss.

The buildings that remain can be maintained and can properly acknowledge, highlight and extend that historical roll without intruding on newer functions.

Heritage assessment, as Chris Johnston put it in 1992 (*What is Social Value?*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra) is the process of defining the cultural significance of a place and seeks to understand:

- the *nature* of the significance of a place, with the four terms 'social', 'historical', 'aesthetic', 'scientific' being used to reflect all aspects of the nature of significance;

The Eveleigh precinct would appear to sit well under this criterion.

Further, Geraldine O'Brien's comments on what is heritage:

"Heritage is the combination of all those things that make us, as individuals, the people we are and, on a larger scale, make us the nation we are,"  
(<http://www.teachingheritage.nsw.edu.au/section01/>)

This could have been almost written about Eveleigh as place that made us an industrial nation, as the thousands of individual workers, via their work, collective action and community and family development in this locality can be honoured and used as a way of deepening understandings of all those issues as we continue to develop.



*Image shows the number of local people who were employed at the railway workshops in 1905 (Sydney Mail)*

That it became the Australian Technology Park was a recognition of the industrial past and the technological future. That needs to be emphasised and enhanced.

To this end reshaping the spaces to ensure real large-scale space to explain and highlight the manufacturing history, and to explain the lived history of the area are very important. Space for permanent and well set out exhibits, research facilities in situ on rail and industrial history, urban planning and development and new technologies would be a perfect fit for a re-developed and vibrant site that allows the public to understand what has been before and enable them to understand the past and think about new technologies and spaces that can make a better future. It can be a place for advancement of community, not simply a place for advancement of profit.