

PHA WORKING HISTORY CONFERENCE
HISTORY AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE
WORKINGMAN'S PARLIAMENT

Libby Blamey
lblamey@lovellchen.com.au

August 2016

LOVELL CHEN
ARCHITECTS & HERITAGE CONSULTANTS

LEVEL 5, 176 WELLINGTON PARADE
EAST MELBOURNE 3002
AUSTRALIA
TEL +61 (0)3 **9667 0800**
FAX +61 (0)3 9416 1818
enquiry@lovellchen.com.au
www.lovellchen.com.au

Introduction

The Victorian Trades Hall, Carlton has been the centre of the local union movement since the construction of the first temporary hall at the site in 1859. As the labour movement matured through the nineteenth century, the campaigns, events and decisions which emerged from the 'workingman's parliament' have had broader implications for the social history of Victoria than just for the building and its tenant union members. While the union movement has grown and diversified beyond Trades Hall, the building remains the symbolic heart of the labour movement.

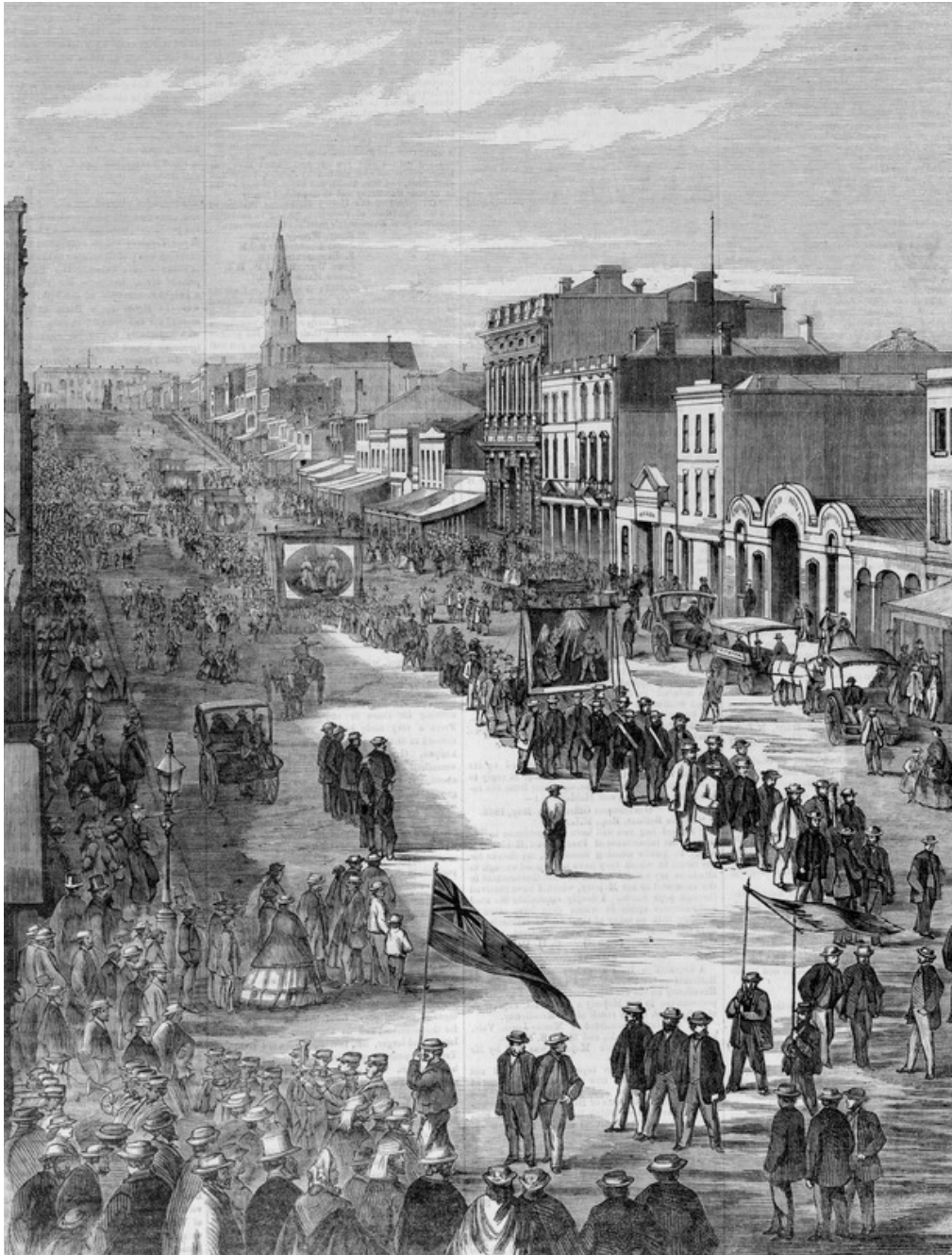


Figure 1 Eight hour procession through the city, 1866

Source: *Australian News for Home Readers*, State Library of Victoria

Earlier this year, heritage consultants Lovell Chen prepared a conservation management plan (CMP) for Trades Hall. Conservation management plans are in-depth investigations into the history, fabric and significance of a heritage place, and this deeper understanding leads to policy and guidelines for the conservation and management of these important buildings. This article examines how a more nuanced understanding of the historical and social significance of Trades Hall was developed and how the work of the historian in heritage complemented the work of other heritage professionals in the preparation of this more detailed assessment of significance. Along with an overview of the growth and importance of the union movement in Victoria, I will use an example of one room of the building, the Banner Room, to examine the input of history and the work of historians in drawing out meaning and significant values of the place.

By way of background, Trades Hall is included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) for its historical, social and architectural significance. Although a comprehensive history has not previously been prepared on the place, the work of historians including Carlotta Kellaway, Keir Reeves and Colin Long, RMIT academic Cathy Brigden and Peter Ludvigsen have provided valuable comment in relation to Trades Hall's place in the broader cultural, political and social context.



Figure 2 Trades Hall from Lygon Street
Source: Lovell Chen, 2016

The building

Trades Hall is a substantial, generally two-storey, rendered brick building sited on a prominent corner at the intersection of Lygon and Victoria streets, Carlton. Its architecture draws on Classical and Italianate influences, typical for public buildings of mid-late nineteenth century Victoria. Although presenting as a nineteenth century building, it was constructed in stages between 1874 and 1925. Internally Trades Hall comprises numerous small offices and

hallways, and larger meeting spaces, and although its exterior appears to be well resolved, internally, the connections between the various stages have resulted in awkward junctures and an almost rabbit warren-like feel. While many rooms seem utilitarian, just as many were designed to facilitate the specific requirements of the various unions in their occupation of the building.

Labour movement and development of Trades Hall

The labour and social reforms achieved by Trades Hall from the mid-nineteenth and into the twentieth century had foundations in the reform tradition of colonial Victoria. Factors including the wealth of the gold-rush era; the democratic principles on which prominent Victorians wished to shape the new society; the skilled, articulate and in-demand workforce; the connections between various cultural and political institutions; and the political successes of the miners created a progressive environment in which the demands of workers would be given fair hearing.¹ Victoria came to be seen as a pioneer of the eight-hour day, with working conditions a major issue for trade unions from the 1850s.² Victorian stonemasons achieved an eight-hour day in April 1856, followed by other building trades including painters and plasterers. While some newspapers such as the *Herald* proclaimed the eight-hours marches to be 'childish and useless perambulations'³, public opinion and sections of the media supported the movement, as did the Haines ministry, pitting the government against its own Parliament House contractors. As noted by labour historians Julie Kimber and Peter Love, the eight-hour movement shrewdly linked its cause to the wider public good, ensuring its success.⁴

Even during the campaign for better conditions, leading unionists were aware of the benefits of purpose-built and centralised facilities for the trades. The leader of the masons, J Galloway, suggested that a Trades Hall and Literary Institute should be established, proposing that:

... each Society shall have its own Committee-room, but only one general lecture room open to all the trades, also separate rooms for classes, open to all, and a reading room and coffee-room, free to all the members of the various trades ...⁵

Carlotta Kellaway notes that it was implicit in Galloway's suggestion that while society committee rooms would be restricted to the seven building unions of the eight hours' trades, the lecture rooms would be open to the other trades, already indicating that unions were not limiting the membership of their hall.⁶ A site was granted in Carlton, and the first Trades Hall was opened in May 1859, at a ceremony attended by 1,000 people.⁷

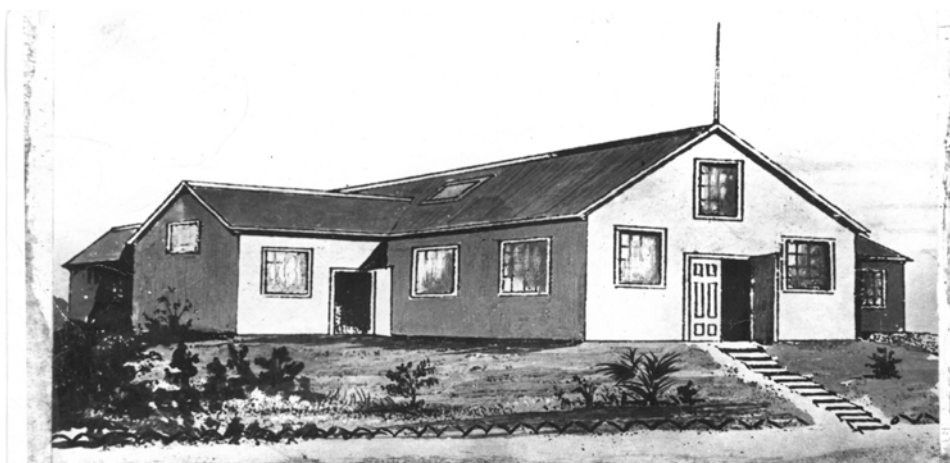


Figure 3 Undated illustration of the 1859 'temporary' Trades Hall building (demolished)
Source: Victorian Trades Hall Council

Operation of the Trades Hall was to be 'vested altogether in the working classes'.⁸ Although Mechanics Institutes were also formed for the benefit of workers, they were supported by public donation, and designed to "agreeably occupy" the 'mental vacancy' of working men'.⁹ Instead, Trades Hall was supported by funds raised by the unions that formed the Trades Hall Council, and the building was occupied and managed by their representatives. The unions were 'in fact their own landlords'.¹⁰

As well offering self-improvement in libraries and reading rooms, the Trades Hall offered meeting and office space, enabling discussion and debate between trades regarding conditions, pay and legislation relating to workers. The halls also allowed for large social gatherings, further increasing the connections between the trades groups and their union delegates. Although initially established by the original eight-hours trades, the growth in number and diversification of its occupants reflects the broadening of Trades Hall's agenda.¹¹



Figure 4 Reed & Barnes design for Trades Hall, 1874 (1968.0013, Drawing no. 4, Job 20)
Trades Hall, Bates Smart Collection, University of Melbourne Archives

In 1873, a new and permanent Trades Hall building was constructed to the design of noted architects, Reed & Barnes. The grand building was to be added to in a number of stages until the mid-1920s. The construction of the Trades Hall building was linked to the growth and prosperity of trade unions: funds collected during boom periods resulted in additional wings. Conversely, economic depression led to a decline in the unions, and a slow-down in works to building. The two-storey building of 1873 comprised library and committee rooms, meeting rooms, and the friendly society's meeting room, later the first council chambers. As Cathy Brigden commented in 2005:

Erecting a permanent structure may have appeared to many to be but a premature and grandiose dream of a group of colonial unions, but it inserted the Victorian union movement and the colonial working class into the landscape and the building environment of the colony, from where they have never been removed.¹²

Reeves and Long observe that the siting of the building is also important: there are former working class suburbs to its north, west and east, and the city is immediately to its south. The increasingly prominent building was a landmark to the residents of Carlton and Fitzroy and to parliamentarians in nearby Spring Street. Furthermore, Trades Hall was central to the Eight Hours Day celebrations: union members would meet at the building in the morning of 25 April each year where the parade would commence, before heading through the main streets of the city. Reeves and Long note that these celebrations represented 'one of the city's first, and greatest, public activities.'¹³ Importantly, they were a means of fundraising for the Trades Hall building program and maintaining the movement's prominence.



Figure 5 Eight hours day procession, c. 1906

Source: State Library of Victoria

From the 1880s, the Trades Hall Council broadened its agenda, including supporting female unionists during the Tailoresses' Strike of 1883. Labour historian Raymond Brooks described this as a significant step, a sign that Trades Hall was attempting to exert influence on both the conduct of the strike, and the growing number of trade societies in Melbourne.¹⁴ In a move which both legitimised the work of female unionists and which brought them under the watch of Trades Hall, the Female Operatives Hall was subsequently constructed in the north-east corner of the site.

Trades Hall was described in the *Picturesque Atlas of Australasia*, published in 1888, as the 'Parliament of Labour'.¹⁵ The author, Andrew Garran, described the operation of the elected Trades Hall Council, which dealt with disputes between employers and employees and had 'other matters affecting the welfare of the operative classes'.¹⁶ Notably, Garran also recognised the importance of the work of Trades Hall; its comprehensive representation of a diversity of trades meant it had 'a voice potential in the social polity of the metropolis and its suburbs'.¹⁷ The prominence of Trades Hall continued into the twentieth century, with an article of 1903 noting 'no one who is familiar with the recent political history of Victoria can doubt that the Trades Hall is an important factor in political affairs'.¹⁸ The fraught anti-conscription campaign of Trades Hall in World War I saw a broadening of its workers' welfare agenda: unionists were concerned that with working class men forced to fight overseas, 'capitalists [would] bring in cheap, non-unionised, coloured labour and break the trade union movement'.¹⁹

By the end of the war, the building comprised 31 offices plus an additional 15 undesignated rooms, 11 committee rooms and three society rooms, along with the council chambers, library, secretary's room, the caretaker's quarters and the Female Operatives Hall.

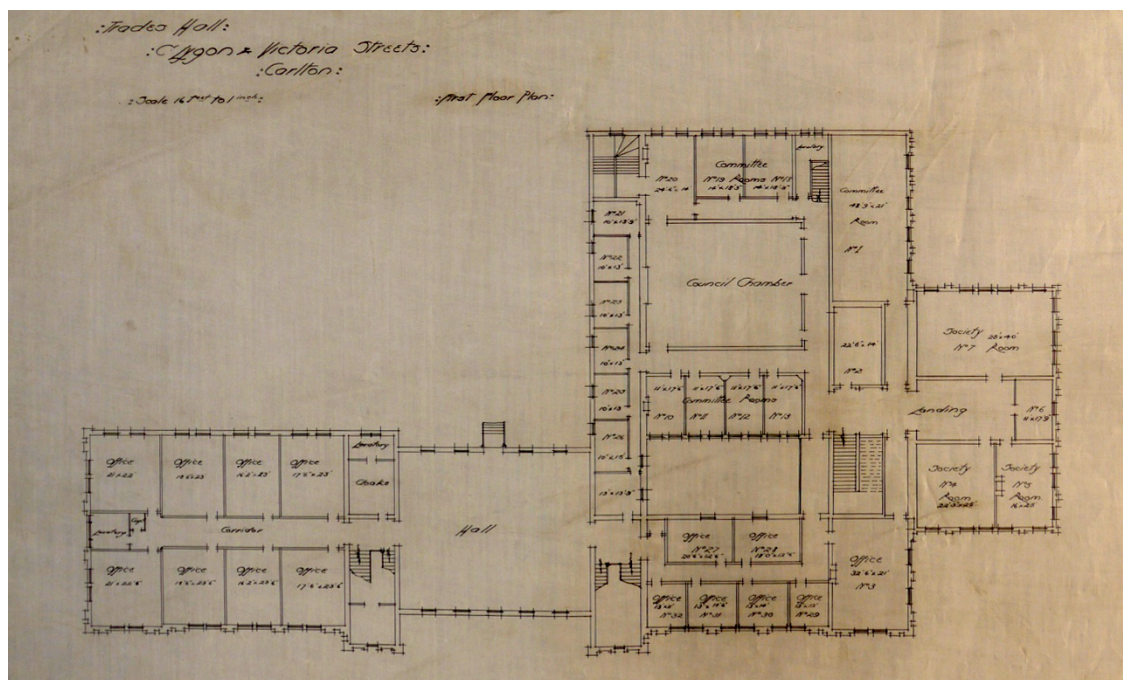


Figure 6 First floor plan of Trades Hall, 1922 (1968.0013, 1922, Job 20)

Source: Trades Hall, Bates Smart Collection, University of Melbourne Archives

From the building, Trades Hall has engaged in a wide range of campaigns relating to workers' rights, including equal pay for men and women and the introduction of a 40 hour week, now accepted as basic standards for many, although not all, workers. From the 1960s, after what became known as the 'split', a number of large unions and the ALP departed the building. The future of Trades Hall was debated, reaching the point of a proposal to demolish the building and redevelop the site. However, the late 1980s saw Trades Hall's revival as a vocal political protest body, with the building often the focus of large protests. In 1989, the site was added

to the then Historic Buildings Register, and subsequently transferred to the VHR in recognition of its historical, social and architectural significance.

Methodology

To generalise, heritage professionals have different ways of ‘reading’ a building. An architect or architectural historian may look for a tell-tale detail signalling the work of a noted architectural firm, or a construction method that was in fashion for a mere few decades. They too may look for symbolism stretching back to Classical periods, alerting them to the ambitions of the building’s owner. The work of the historian, however, is often to look at the inside the building to find meaning: why it was built, and why there, what happened inside those spaces, and why are those events important?

The historical research undertaken on a heritage building serves a number of purposes. In the first instance, it gives a chronology of the development of the site and the reasons for that development. It also underscores an assessment of the significance of the building, with an understanding of where it sits in the context of local or Victorian history. In all of this the history is linked to the fabric, how events, movements, people and stories resulted in the extant building. Both primary and secondary sources are used, often with a focus on visual sources, which give an indication of why the building was constructed and what has changed. It is the historian’s role to interpret these sources, to draw out the information required to give an understanding of the main source: the building itself.

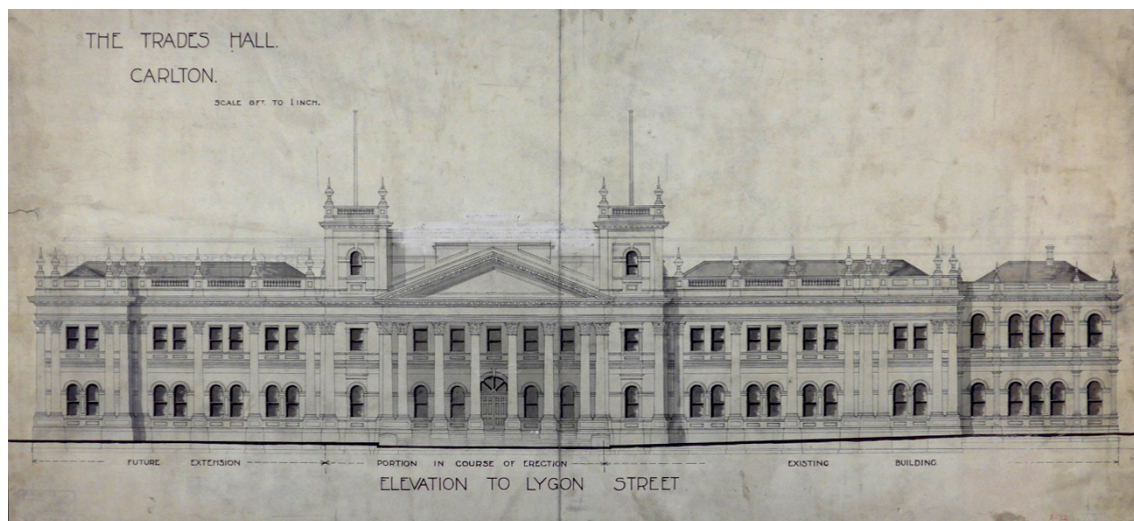


Figure 7 Illustration showing the works to be completed along Lygon Street from 1917 (1968.0013, 1917, Job 20)

Source: Trades Hall, Bates Smart Collection, University of Melbourne Archives

The historical research of the Trades Hall building needed to address both its construction and the development of the union movement. The collection of architectural drawings of Reed & Barnes, held by the University of Melbourne Archives, illustrated the various additions and schemes developed for the building, and provided valuable information on how intact the building remains. Newspaper articles on the movement and the building, photographs of the site, and the archives of the Trades Hall Council were also important sources.

While the Trades Hall building clearly has aesthetic significance as a substantial nineteenth (and early twentieth) century institutional building, designed by prominent architects, it is its distinct historical significance that distinguishes the ‘workingman’s parliament’ from other

large nineteenth century public buildings. An understanding of the social, political and economic context in which it was built, and its connection to the labour movement, is essential in exploring this significance more fully.

Helen Bennett commented in *Circa* in 2014, that for the historian, 'the meaning of a place is largely dependant on the perspectives of the cultural group that created it'.²⁰ The 'cultural group' for Trades Hall is both specific and broad: it is the eight hours' movement and the individual trades unionists, but equally it is the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century labour movement and Victoria's working class communities. As political academic Peter Love comments in the *Encyclopedia of Melbourne*, the labour movement was 'one of the most significant social movements in Melbourne for much of its history' and has 'played a prominent role in the economic, political and civic life of the city.'²¹ Reeves and Long further note that few Victorian institutions have had as much and continuous influence over Victorian and national affairs.²² They state:

It is difficult to exaggerate the significance of the Trades Hall Council to the development of Victorian and Australian society over the last 150 years ... Whether leading, supporting or opposing, Trades Hall has ... been involved in most major political debates in Victoria.²³

The impact of the labour movement on Victorian society is clearly significant, with reforms relating to working hours, wages and conditions the result of political agitation, much of which emanated from Trades Hall. Through individual unions, its council and various committees, the Victorian Trades Hall sought to influence and support these reforms in Victoria and further afield, and was a prominent contributor to debates. The influence of the Trades Hall bodies would not have been so great had it not been for the Trades Hall site and building.

However, in this heritage assessment, the significance of the movement needed to be linked to the fabric of the building, to establish how the importance of the labour movements and of Victoria's working class political campaigns are both demonstrated in the building and linked to its very existence.

As noted previously, numerous small offices and meeting spaces were added to the building over the fifty years of its construction. This co-location of an increasing number of trade unions allowed discussion, debate and sharing of information between union members. The success of this model, proposed by the leader of the masons in 1856, and the importance of Trades Hall Council as a peak body is demonstrated by the fact that more and more offices were added. The unions recognised the benefit to their cause by being part of Trades Hall. The building was also funded by union members for their use, and is therefore indicative of the growth of the movement through the nineteenth century.

The historical research undertaken also gives background to architectural grandeur of the building: it was a statement of intent of the union movement, to be a permanent and important institution for the workers of Victoria. It is, as Reeves emphasises 'a most tangible manifestation of labour movement aspirations and activities' and a 'vital physical symbol of the influence of the Victorian labour movement.'²⁴ The Trades Hall building enabled the Victorian trades unions to exert their influence beyond the building trades and the conditions under which their members were employed, to wider workplace reform. Trades Hall continues to be the focus of the union movement in Victoria, and is the longest continually operating trades hall site in Australia.

One role of the historian in heritage is, as Helen Bennett noted, to decipher meaning from heritage places. I would argue that this goes further: to find meaning and value in *spaces*. The purpose of a conservation management plan is to go beyond an understanding of the significance of the place as a whole; it looks at the elements, fabric and areas which can be considered of primary, contributory or little significance. While spaces considered to be of primary significance often are more intact or more elaborate, the ongoing occupation of Trades Hall by the union movement meant that there are spaces which, although at first glance may appear modest, go a long way in demonstrating this use and the operation of Trades Hall.

Case study: Banner Room

As noted in the introduction, the focus of this article is on what history and the work of the historian brings to an understanding of heritage significance, and is illustrated in the case of one small, unassuming room at the building, the Banner Room. This room is accessed from a covered yard at the rear of the building, and not linked to any other internal spaces. The Banner Room was constructed in the second stage of the building's development of 1882, in a long thin wing behind the 1874 building.



Figure 8 Covered yard at rear of 1882 addition to Trades Hall
Source: Lovell Chen, 2016



Figure 9 Interior of Banner Room

Source: Lovell Chen, 2016

The room is largely utilitarian in its finishes: exposed brick walls, lathe and plaster ceiling, timber skirtings and batten and paired entry doors. A single, timber-framed arched window on the south wall lights this space. The room retains beams at ceiling height, which are fitted with small rollers. It is these beams that indicate the room's function: the careful storage of banners for use in marches and Eight Hours Day celebrations.

As shown earlier, the 'eight hours' anniversary parades and marches were a significant annual event for Trades Hall and the unions. Eight Hours Day had a number of objectives: it was a celebration of the union movement's achievements, a chance to raise funds, and a reminder to the community (and no doubt politicians) that the trades movement was vocal, numerous and enduring. The parades were complemented by the use of the large banners made by union members, which signalled of the movement's ambition and broader political agenda.



Figure 10 Banner of Amalgamated Society of Carpenters & Joiners, Victorian Branch, 1914

Source: Museum Victoria Collections

The banners were works of art: pieces were made with care and were full of symbolism.²⁵ Appropriate storage was needed and banner room filled this function. This storeroom needed to be easily accessed, with space for large groups to gather for the parades, hence its siting at a back corner of the building, opening to a large yard and laneway, rather than accessed within the main building. By examining newspapers, building plans, photographs and incorporating an understanding of the role of the Eight Hours parades, it became clear that this small room was essential to the movement, and intrinsically linked to the operation of Trades Hall.

The Banner Room's back-of-house location and utilitarian character belies its importance to both the Trades Hall building and its links to the Eight Hour movement and the ongoing success of the labour movement in Victoria. It was through an understanding of a broader historical context and operation of Trades Hall, that the 'primary' level significance of this particular space to the building was identified.

Conclusion

Heritage is an industry comprising specialists from a variety of backgrounds. The work of historians in heritage complements the work of other heritage professionals, by providing meaning and context for how and why buildings developed as they did, and underscores any assessment of significance. The research that I undertook as the historian on the Trades Hall CMP, along with earlier work by other historians, enabled a deeper understanding of the historically significant Trades Hall building, both the place as a whole and the individual spaces within it. And ultimately this research and assessment has broader implications, contributing to the protection and preservation of the building and its future management.

-
- 1 See Renate Howe, 'Social Reform', e-Melbourne, Encyclopedia of Melbourne, University of Melbourne, <http://www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM01391b.htm>, accessed 26 February 2016.
 - 2 Geoffrey Blainey, *A History of Victoria*, Second Edition, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, 2013, p. 110.
 - 3 *Herald*, as quoted in Jeff Sparrow, *Radical Melbourne: A Secret History*, Vulgar Press, Carlton North, 2001, p. 183. Original article not sighted.
 - 4 Julie Kimber and Peter Love (eds.), *The time of their lives: the Eight Hour Day and Working Life*, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Melbourne, 2007, p. 12
 - 5 *Argus*, 23 April 1856, as quoted in Carlotta Kellaway, 'The Melbourne Trades Hall Council: its origins and political significance, 1855-1889', PhD thesis, Department of Politics, La Trobe University, 1973, p. 24.
 - 6 Carlotta Kellaway, 'The Melbourne Trades Hall Council: its origins and political significance, 1855-1889', PhD thesis, Department of Politics, La Trobe University, 1973, pp. 24-25.
 - 7 *Age*, 25 May 1859, p. 5.
 - 8 *Age*, 15 September 1858, p. 5.
 - 9 Leigh Boucher, 'Mechanics Insitutes', e-Melbourne, Encyclopedia of Melbourne, University of Melbourne, 2008, accessed via <http://www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM00913b.htm>, 29 September 2016.
 - 10 *Age*, 12 December 1885 as quoted in Carlotta Kellaway, 'The Melbourne Trades Hall Council: its origins and political significance, 1855-1889', PhD thesis, Department of Politics, La Trobe University, 1973, Appendix A, p. 455.
 - 11 Original eight hours trade unions were the masons, carpenters, bricklayers, plasterers, plumbers and quarrymen. See Chapter 2, p. 3.
 - 12 Brigden, Cathy, 'Creating Labour's Space: the Case of the Melbourne Trades Hall', in *Labour History*, No. 89, November 2005, p. 138.
 - 13 Keir Reeves and Colin Long, 'Trades Hall Heritage Study', undated, held by Trades Hall Council, pp. 8-9.
 - 14 Raymond Brooks, 'The Melbourne tailoresses' strike 1882-1883: An assessment', in *Labour History*, No. 44, May 1983, p. 29.
 - 15 Andrew Garran, *Australia - The First Hundred Years: Being a facsimile of volumes I & II of the Picturesque Atlas of Australasia - 1888*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1974, p. 238.
 - 16 Andrew Garran, *Australia - The First Hundred Years: Being a facsimile of volumes I & II of the Picturesque Atlas of Australasia - 1888*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1974, p. 239.

-
- 17 Andrew Garran, *Australia - The First Hundred Years: Being a facsimile of volumes I & II of the Picturesque Atlas of Australasia – 1888*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1974, p. 239.
- 18 *Age*, 8 May 1903, p. 4.
- 19 Gordon McCaskie, 'Trades Hall and the union movement' in Peter Yule (ed.), *Carlton: A history*, Melbourne University Publishing, Carlton, 2005, p. 423.
- 20 Helen Bennett, 'History, Heritage and the Professional Historian', *Circa: The Journal of Professional Historians*, Issue Four, 2014, p. 51.
- 21 Peter Love, 'Labour', e-Melbourne, Encyclopedia of Melbourne, University of Melbourne, <http://www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM00819b.htm>, accessed 1 March 2016.
- 22 Helen Doyle 'Trade unions', in Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2001, p. 654 and Keir Reeves and Colin Long, Trades Hall Heritage Study, 2015, unpublished report for Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific, held by Trades Hall Council, p. 1.
- 23 Keir Reeves and Colin Long, Trades Hall Heritage Study, 2015, unpublished report for Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific, held by Trades Hall Council, p. 10.
- 24 Keir Reeves and Colin Long, Trades Hall Heritage Study, 2015, unpublished report for Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific, held by Trades Hall Council, pp. 1, 10.
- 25 A collection of these banners is housed at Museum Victoria and included on the Victorian Heritage Register.