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## Looking after the shop

*Ways to document, care for and interpret our shopping heritage*

**Above: Wong Sat  
General Store  
Collection**

*Photograph by  
Scott Donkin, reproduced  
courtesy of Powerhouse  
Museum.*

The changing nature and needs of small businesses mean that many of our older shops and their contents face an uncertain future.

There are different ways of caring for our shopping heritage, depending on the circumstances of the particular business and owner, and the local opportunities available to those wanting to look after it.

Perhaps it is your own shop. Perhaps it is a much loved or historically significant local shop that is to be sold, and the precious shelves and counters, equipment and furniture are likely to be removed and sold off too.

The shop owner might be intending to 'clean up', modernise or refurbish, or perhaps the owner is elderly and the future of the shop is uncertain.

How can we bring this rich and colourful history with us into the twenty-first century?

The following sections explain how to go about determining what is significant about a shop, and what actions will help to look after it.

- **Staying open for business**
- **Recording the contents**
- **Understanding significance**
- **Keeping collections in place**
- **Making a plan**
- **Making changes**
- **Caring for collections**
- **Putting shops on show**



**Left: The Paragon Café, Katoomba**

The entry to the Paragon is set back and raised from the street and features an original sign, brass window frames, a large door-mat and double timber doors, all of which suggest a clean and comfortable retreat from the outside world. *Photograph courtesy of Natalie Broughton 1999.*

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**Below: The Niagara Café** has a striking art moderne style interior, with timber dining booths, black and chromium counters and a gleaming sign along the wall. The atmosphere and history have long made this café a favourite for travellers along the Hume Highway.

*Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

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**Above: Bickmores Store, Kurri Kurri**

The corner shop has long served as a meeting place for people to shop and catch up on news, although changing shopping habits are forcing many to close their doors.  
*Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

**Below: Original chinaware and biscuit tin, Niagara Café, Gundagai**

The china's quality and pattern and the Arnotts tin with the famous parrot logo evoke memories of another era and tell us about the experience of eating at the Niagara.  
*Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*





**Left: Detail of tiles, Short's Butchers, Narromine**

The unusual tiled façade and interior of this shop regularly attracts visitors. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

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**Below: Timber drawers, Finn's Store, Canowindra**

Kitchen ingredients such as flour and spices were dispensed from wooden drawers and hopper bins below the counter which were dry and secure from vermin. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

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**Left: G.A. Zink & Sons Tailors, Darlinghurst**

This 1920s terrazzo entry porch was in the latest style and was designed to catch the eye of passers by. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

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**The Centre Arcade, Cowra**

Shopping arcades began to appear in country towns during the 1930s. They offered a convenient sheltered space featuring a cluster of specialty shops, and sometimes even boasted a picture theatre. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

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**Left: The Golden Gate Café**

The Golden Gate Café in Hillston was built in 1929. Operated by the Morgan Family for 67 years, it remains the local café and traditional corner shop for the small country town of Hillston in the Riverina. *Photograph by Maringo Kojdanovski, reproduced courtesy of the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.*

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## Staying open for business

Keeping a shop open for business is perhaps the best way to look after the shop's heritage. A shop with an authentic historical character can add to the vitality and interest of a local town or shopping street. Many people like to shop in places with a 'bit of history', and certainly keeping original fittings and objects will add to their experience.

There are many shops that try to recreate the old world look and feel, but there is nothing like the real thing! Having a genuine heritage shop in your street or town can give you a marketing advantage, as they are becoming increasingly rare. Many towns that have main street programs have already discovered that heritage is an asset for the whole community.

Shop owners, members of the local community or the local council have many options for making the most of their shopping heritage. Here are some suggestions and examples, and you may think of other ideas along the way.

- Form a shopping heritage committee and work together to plan for activities that centre on recording and celebrating the history of significant shops, their contents, and the people associated with them. The committee should include people with a range of relevant skills and knowledge. It may be helpful to include the local heritage advisor and representatives of the local museum, historical society and National Trust.
- Undertake some history research about the shop and individual objects. Use the State Library of NSW or the local library, as well as old photographs, plans, local knowledge, mail order catalogues, stocktaking records, museums, collectors, etc. Tape interviews with people associated with the shop – owners, lessees, and customers – to record the history from different perspectives. Record the interviews in the shop and with the collection, to prompt memories and better document the objects.
- Collect old photographs of the shops and display them with a caption or brief history. Several of the case studies featured in this guide have early photographs on display to show customers something about the shop's history.
- Arrange for a local newspaper to feature a story about the shop and its history. For example, the Niagara Café in Gundagai has featured in articles in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which helped travellers and potential customers to find out about this historic café.
- Ensure that information about local shopping heritage is included in tourist information.
- Put together a display for Heritage Week and hold a fair or party at the shop to celebrate its history and role in the local community. Leo Duff held a 50th anniversary celebration for his barber shop in Wellington, and hundreds of residents and customers turned out for the occasion.
- Promote the historic character and traditions of the shop, and show how it is part of the community's history.
- Record the memories of current and former owners, staff and customers.

## Hamilton's Bakery, Abermain

It is rare to find wood-fired bakehouses these days, but at Hamilton's Bakery in Abermain, located in the Hunter Valley region, the specialised skills and equipment of an early twentieth century bakery live on. Built in 1908, the bakehouse's centenary was recently celebrated by the Hamilton family and they proudly display a brief history in the front retail shop.

During the 1950s the front shop was used as a general store, with merchandise stored in the bakehouse. A new owner restored the bakery. Through good fortune, the commitment of the current owners, and special consideration by the local council, the bakery has continued to operate with its wood-fired oven, traditional baking equipment and methods. As a heritage bakery, the owners have special council approval to keep linoleum-covered preparation benches and a bare concrete floor.

## Some principles to remember:

### **Approach the owner of a shop with goodwill and sensitivity to their individual circumstances**

The owner may be elderly, concerned about their privacy or anxious about the future of their business. They may also be too busy to talk. Because time is money, owners may be more receptive if you buy something!

### **Involve everyone**

Everyone who might be interested in the shop and its history, or who may be able to offer information or assistance.



The shop in the Hunter Valley is advertised as a 'heritage bakery', and regulars are treated to pies cooked daily in the brick-lined, wood-fired oven. Here, baker Chris Hamilton uses a wooden paddle to manoeuvre baking trays deep inside the oven. Unlike the three-phase baking process possible with modern ovens, this bakery still operates on a traditional single-phase. The oven is first fired up at 2 a.m. and baking starts at 5 a.m. when the correct temperature is reached. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

## Recording the contents

Recording or documenting the movable heritage of a shop is a crucial part of looking after our cultural heritage. By creating a list or inventory of the key or significant items, you will have begun the process of conserving the shop's history.

When objects are moved from the shop – either permanently or temporarily – the recording will help to recover their history and return them to the shop at a later date, if circumstances permit.

These are some of the things that you can do:

- Photograph the shop in detail, inside and out, before moving any of the contents.
- Draw a sketch plan of the whole site, including the shop itself, outbuildings and other features such as delivery areas and walkways.
- Make a list of all objects and any fixed items that seem to be part of the shop's history e.g. signs painted on the building walls or windows.
- Photograph the key items and label the photographs with the object number, name and date of photograph.
- Record information in a standard way (see the Sample Recording Sheet as an example). Write down as much information as possible about each item in your list, such as what it is or what it was used for, where it is located, where it was made, and who owned it (photographs and the sketch plan of the shop site will help here). It is possible to reinstate removed items if they are properly recorded before removal.
- Talk to people who used the object or who might remember its history. If the shop owner, and even present and past customers, record their memories about the shop on tape or video, or in writing, the information can play a valuable part in understanding the history of an item. Ask about the way it was used, whether it was unusual or common, who used it and what role they played. Such oral or written history can enhance the meaning and significance of a shop and its contents.
- Research the history of the locality and the shop, to help you locate the objects in their social context and understand why the shop is significant.
- Carefully examine each object to see how it was used, and note any evidence of wear and tear, repairs or alterations.
- Decide whether the object is likely to be significant (see Understanding Significance).
- Consider researching and recording information about all the historic shops and their movable heritage in your locality, and placing your research material (including photographs, sketches and interviews) in your local library.

## Sample Recording Sheet for Movable Objects

Object number: \_\_\_\_\_ *Allocate a new number for each object* \_\_\_\_\_

Object name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address of shop: \_\_\_\_\_

Location within shop: \_\_\_\_\_

*Attach site or floor plan to show location*

Description of object: \_\_\_\_\_

*Brief physical description of features, materials, size and signs of wear and tear, repair or alteration (attaching a photograph will help show these details)*

How was object used? \_\_\_\_\_

History of object: \_\_\_\_\_

History of shop: \_\_\_\_\_

Why is object significant? \_\_\_\_\_

What opportunities are there for conserving and interpreting the shop? \_\_\_\_\_

Name of recorder: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of recording: \_\_\_\_\_

# Understanding significance

Understanding exactly what is significant, and therefore worth keeping and looking after, is the first logical step in making decisions about what to do with a shop. While the focus here is on the movable objects or collections in a shop, we need to look at them as part of the shop as a whole.

Understanding significance is widely adopted by heritage professionals as a starting point in any work involving looking after places that are part of our cultural heritage.

The Australia ICOMOS *Burra Charter*<sup>4</sup> uses the terms *aesthetic, historic, social or scientific value* to describe what makes a place significant in terms of our cultural heritage. The *Illustrated Guide to the Burra Charter* explains how these terms are used and gives examples of different types of places that have these heritage values.

As we have already seen, there are many different ways that shops and their contents can be regarded as significant. Here are some things to look for.

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<sup>4</sup> ICOMOS stands for the International Council on Monuments and Sites. *The Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance* was developed by Australia ICOMOS and formally adopted in Burra, South Australia, in 1979. It is generally referred to as the Burra Charter, and was revised in 1999.

## Aspects of a Shop's Significance

### The setting

- The location and setting of a shop can still say something about its role in the history of the community. For example, it may have been at the heart of the old main shopping street, or established along a now redundant public transport route, or conveniently located near a cinema.

### The building/s

- Few, if any, shops are frozen in time. Changes to the shop and its contents over time may be part of the heritage significance. Evidence of these changes tells us about such things as fashion, technology, ownership, laws and economic ups or downs.
- Through its layout and the types of fixtures and fittings, a shop can also reveal how the shop owner stored, moved and displayed goods.
- A shop might show changes in the way people have shopped in different eras. For example, how people were encouraged to buy goods and complete their transactions through clever positioning of signs and display stands. It might also show changes in use or layout of particular rooms, or the introduction of new spaces and equipment to accommodate retailing trends such as cash-and-carry style shopping.
- A shop can illustrate how changing technology, such as the introduction of electricity, has influenced such things as layout, lighting and the type of equipment used.
- The significance of a shop may be even greater if it has a long history of being associated with a particular family, group or community and this association continues to the present day.

### The objects

- Authentic interiors and objects are significant. New shops, fitted out to imitate old-style shops, are not.
- The movable contents of a shop are an integral part of its history and significance. Equipment, tools of trade, signs and furniture from an earlier era, or different eras, often help to explain how that particular type of business was conducted and how changes were made over time.

- Evidence of wear and tear is important – the condition of an object is part of its interest, and reveals important information about how it was handled and used.
- Paper records, such as stocktaking and order books, account records, dockets, advertising material and mail order catalogues provide a fascinating and often intimate picture of daily life in a town. They often contain information not found anywhere else: what, when and how purchases were made, who shopped there and slumps or peaks in the local economy.
- Personal letters, photographs, and recollections of owners, staff and customers are sometimes the only sources of information about events, stories, and traditions associated with the shop. They too are part of the heritage of shopping.
- Consider all aspects of the shop, including lighting, atmosphere, smell, even whether the shop has a cluttered or open feel – these can also be significant aspects.

These are just some of the many ways that a shop can reflect aspects of our cultural heritage. Observing and writing down precisely what is significant is a crucial step in determining what is worth looking after.



Tools of trade are a crucial part of our shopping heritage, and are often the very things that tell us most about the history of the retailing trades. Because of their portability and attraction for collectors, they are also the things most likely to be removed from the shop. These barber's chairs and shop signs in Confoy's Barber Shop at Coolamon are part of the shop's significant collection of tools of trade and ephemera. Much of the collection's significance lies in the fact that it remains in situ and is associated with the original place of use and family of barbers. Relocated to a museum, the collection may technically be more accessible to the public but the historical importance of both the shop and the collection will inevitably be diminished. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

## Some principles to remember:

### Consider all aspects of the shop

Whilst this publication pays particular attention to the movable objects in a shop, don't forget that they are part of the whole shop and its setting – consider all aspects of the shop including the building, shop front, offices, storerooms, kitchens, associated buildings, yards, trees, gardens, walkways, landscape setting, contents, oral history, as well as the wear and tear, smells, sounds and textures.

### No one era is necessarily any more significant than any other era

Most shops have accumulated different features and movable items that date from different periods. Evidence of these changes can be significant too.

### Don't be deceived by appearances

A significant shop isn't necessarily big, beautiful or in mint condition. It can be important regardless of how modest and unassuming it may appear. In fact, some of the more significant shops remaining in NSW are likely to be humble corner shops or general stores, precisely because they are associated with the history of their community and reveal important information through the wear and tear of the years.

### Shops with intact interiors, contents and traditions are rare, and therefore significant

Few shops established before about 1960 survive with their original layout and contents. They are even rarer if they are also still being run in a traditional way and are associated with the original owner or an owner of long-standing.

## Keeping collections in place

Keeping original features and contents in situ (in their original location) is part of looking after our shopping heritage.

Here are some ideas:

- Although it is tempting to sell a shop's contents to collectors, the historic significance of the shop will be greatly diminished by doing so. Make every effort to keep the contents of a shop in situ.
- Don't automatically assume that you have to modernise and therefore dispense with particular equipment or features of a significant shop because it contravenes health and safety or other legislation. There may be special provision for places and objects of heritage significance. Ask your local council first.
- If items of furniture and equipment have been in use in a shop for many years, and are still in use, then they will have a strong link with the history of the shop and they can actively show how they were used.
- If the items are in storage and can be reinstated or displayed to explain their history and use, you are looking after their heritage significance, particularly if they form part of a collection of items related to the shop.
- If the items have been sold or donated, but are able to be easily identified and perhaps borrowed or returned at a later date, these items will still be a significant part of the history of the shop because their provenance (or origin) is known and their context can be accurately restored or interpreted.
- If items have been acquired, particularly by a collector, and no record is made of their history and use, we consider them to have no known provenance. Lack of provenance will make it almost impossible to trace the history and association of an object with the shop, and this will lessen the significance of the item.
- Where the original owner or family still run a shop, and still maintain traditional ways of doing things, they can be said to be a living link with the past. This aspect of a shop is as important as the physical features and contents, because it takes us beyond physical history and into the realm of people's feelings and experiences.

### Some principles to remember:

#### Keep significant shops 'alive'

The best way of looking after a significant shop and its contents is to keep it open and maintain a living link with the past. Removing the movable heritage reduces the significance of both the shop and the objects themselves.

#### Record key objects

This should be done regardless of the future of the shop. Recording can only be done properly while the contents are in situ. Don't wait until the shop has closed. See Recording the Contents on page 45. When the provenance, or links between an object and its origins, are no longer known and recorded, we have lost an important aspect of our cultural heritage.

#### Record people's memories

Do this as soon as you can. It is too late once the people associated with the shop have died or moved away.

#### Remember that a lot of our shopping history is ephemeral, and can easily be destroyed or lost

The key rules are: take your time, understand what is significant, and carefully plan what needs to be done before you begin cleaning up or handling any objects. Don't make hasty decisions.



Older shops often attract collectors and dealers who are on the trail of collectables. For example, the owner of a pharmacy in country NSW is frequently approached by customers wanting to buy this statue. Once bought, such an object may gain in monetary value, but its heritage significance is greatly diminished. At the very least, an object acquired from a shop should be accompanied by a statement about its provenance (origin) and history, and a copy kept with the object and the shop from which it was acquired. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

## Making a plan

Having a conservation management plan is the best way to work out what to look after and how to care for it. A conservation plan means that you have a formula for guiding future decisions about looking after the heritage of both the shop itself and the significant contents.

A conservation management plan should include:

- a brief history of the shop;
- a physical description of the shop and its contents;

- a simple statement about why the shop and its contents are significant;
- a conservation policy based on an understanding of what is significant, and describing general rules and principles about such things as how objects will be handled, used, stored or displayed;
- a plan of things to do, and in what order of priority (a strategy).

If the contents of the shop have already been recorded (see Sample Recording Sheet on page 46), this information should be used in compiling the conservation plan.



### Wing Hing Long Store, Tingha

The Tingha community has embarked on a process of conserving the Wing Hing Long Store and has prepared a conservation and museum management plan to guide their decisions and conservation work. It is based on the significance of the whole shop site, together with the contents. This store, built in 1881 to supply general provisions to the tin mining communities of the Tingha district, was acquired by the Guyra Shire Council in 1998 in order to keep it as a living museum. The acquisition was made with assistance from members of the local community, the NSW Heritage Office and NSW Ministry for the Arts, the *Golden Threads: Chinese in Regional NSW* project and the Pratt family who are descended from Jack Joe Lowe, the fifth Chinese owner of the property. The contents are integral to its significance and include original counters, display units, cabinets, shelving, a cashier's aerial pulley system in working order, merchandise, advertising signs and store records. The shop and contents also demonstrate the changes and adaptations made over the years. The collection will remain intact, with no new objects or collections added. This means that the store will be conserved in the condition it was acquired in 1998. The remaining stock from all phases of the store's history including the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s will be retained, including the aging contents of tins and bottles!  
*Photograph courtesy of Karl Zhao.*

## **Extract from Wing Hing Long Conservation and Museum Management Plan**

**Use the Wing Hing Long store in a way that is compatible with its cultural significance. Use as a place museum is compatible.**

Use as a place museum is compatible with the cultural significance of the complex. A place museum is a museum where the structures and their contents are themselves the artefact displayed and other material is not introduced, except as required for interpretation.

Place museum use requires some adaptation for visitor facilities. It should be possible to provide basic facilities without damaging the significance of the complex.

The Wing Hing Long Store is not suitable for use as a general museum.

**The purpose of the Wing Hing Long Museum should be to conserve, manage and interpret the site for present and future generations and make its significance and unique stories accessible to visitors and the local community.**

Wing Hing Long Store collection is significant as a rare and intact assemblage of retail products, furnishing, records and ephemera surviving in situ in a general store complex in Tingha in Northern New South Wales. The integrity of the collections and their relationship with the various spaces of the building is central to the significance of the store. The store and its contents interpret the history, economic fortunes, social life and people of this small tin mining town. It is essential that the collection be managed and conserved to retain its integrity and significance, and interpret its significance and unique stories to the local community and to visitors.

**The acquisition and disposal of objects should be guided by the collection policy.**

New artefacts should not be introduced to the collection except in accordance with the collection policy. There should be no introduction of new material or display systems, storage arrangements and possibly environmental controls that would damage the historical significance of the place.

Objects not associated with the store should be deaccessioned. Where possible these objects should be passed on to other museums in the region.

**The aim should be to display nothing in the store that is not associated with Wing Hing Long except in the form of structured temporary exhibitions or interpretive material like albums and display panels.**

## Making changes

Planning for change is an important part of looking after our shopping heritage. Change might mean anything from rearranging furniture to accommodating a new business, equipment or legislation.

Whether the shop is to be sold, leased or simply left vacant, the best practice is to plan for the future recording and care of significant items or collections of objects well before the shop closes, or any changes occur.

When a shop is recognised as being significant, any changes affecting the significance of the shop and its contents should be undertaken with great care, some forward planning and possibly some expert heritage advice. It is now that you will need to be clear about what aspects are important to keep as part of any plans for the future of the business.

Here are some steps based on the suggestions contained in previous sections:

### **Step 1: Try to keep the contents with the shop**

When you know what the fate of the shop building is likely to be, decide whether the contents can be kept together with the shop, or perhaps temporarily stored for later reinstatement (see *Keeping Collections in Place* on page 49). Many shop buildings can be adapted to different types of retailing while significant aspects are left intact.

### **Step 2: Record the contents**

Whether or not the objects are to remain in the shop, write down a description and draw the precise location in case they are moved for any reason. Remember to keep your records in a safe place, preferably one copy with the objects, and one stored with the local council library. If necessary, index them for easy access.

### **Step 3: Decide what is significant**

Whilst every item should be recorded in a systematic way, you may choose to retain or select key items for keeping or for displays on the history of the shop. There are no hard and fast rules about how to decide which objects to keep, but you will need to gather all the information you can about an object's history, use, ownership, materials and construction. This will help you to decide whether it is a significant part of the shop and how to care for it.

### **Step 4: Seek advice**

The Museums and Galleries Foundation of NSW, or a museum professional, will be able to provide expert advice on dealing with significant objects and writing a conservation management plan, as well as advice on applying for a grant if needed. If the shop building (or buildings) is significant, a heritage adviser (usually attached to the local council) or conservation architect can provide advice on ways to look after it too.

### **Step 5: Write a conservation management plan**

Before you start making changes or cleaning up the shop, put together a plan to make sure everyone involved understands the significant aspects of the shop, and agrees on what is to happen. See *Making a Plan* on page 50. The brochure, *Objects in Their Place; An Introduction to Movable Heritage* will also give you some guidance. It is available from the NSW Heritage Office or downloadable from [www.heritage.nsw.gov.au](http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au)

### **Step 6: Raise funds**

If you need to raise funds for doing this work, part of your plan could be to apply to the Museums and Galleries Foundation, the NSW Heritage Office or your local council for a grant, or launch an appeal. Remember that a condition of the grant will usually be that a conservation plan has been prepared.

## Step 7: Talk to others

Contact others with experience in managing historic shops (e.g. the National Trust) and ask how they went about looking after their shop.

## Step 8: Store and care for the objects

Objects require storage and care that minimises their rate of physical deterioration. Whilst major museums might have sophisticated systems and professional staff to do this, it is possible to achieve a basic level of care with some simple measures. Remember that deterioration of objects cannot be stopped, only delayed, so caring for objects is a continuous process.

These steps may seem like a lot of work when all you want to do is get in and sort the shop out, but they are the **best** way to make sure that nothing significant is lost in the process of changing hands or closing the shop, and that everyone involved has an agreed process to follow.

A local heritage adviser can provide owners of significant shops with help in planning for changes.

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### • Suggestions for shop owners

Private shop owners can ensure that vital information about the shop and its contents are recorded before any information is lost or the movable contents dispersed. As a minimum, this could include photographing the shop and any individual items associated with its history, and recording their memories about the shop (or those of family and any staff). Where family members divide or sell items, it is a good idea to keep a record of who holds what item, and also ensure that a copy of any information about its provenance and history stays with the item.

New owners should be encouraged to keep significant objects and store or display them as an important part of the shop's heritage and character.

### • Suggestions for local councils

The local council can play an important role in identifying and protecting shops in the locality. For example, an original shop front can be retained, even when a shop is being modernised. The council can also provide information about funding or specialist conservation advice, and may be able to assist owners or organisations to develop options for future use of closed or vacant shops. It may also be able to help them find suitable local storage for significant objects, or record and celebrate the local shopping heritage. If the council employs a heritage adviser, they can be a useful starting point to discuss the shop and its heritage significance.

### • Suggestions for community museums, historical societies and community organisations

Museums and historical societies are often in the position of being asked to acquire items from shops as they close down. Sometimes they are approached because they seem to be the most suitable repository, and sometimes they actively acquire items that fit with the themes of their local history collection. Community organisations therefore have an important role to play as guardians and interpreters of their local community's heritage, and they need to follow good conservation practice.

### • Suggestions for collectors and dealers

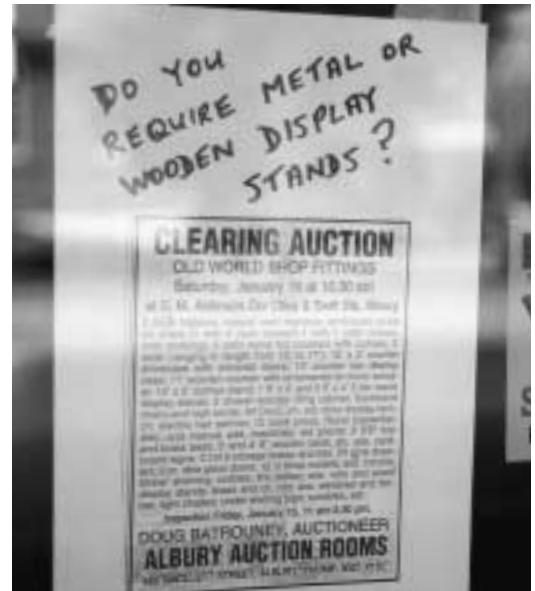
People who collect movable objects for personal interest or commercial trade are also key players in determining the fate of our shopping heritage. They are often in the unique position of seeing objects and collections come up for sale. If they make sure that the provenance and history of their acquisitions are documented, they are not only enhancing the objects' value to prospective buyers, but also keeping track of our shopping heritage for future generations to appreciate, long after the shop is gone.

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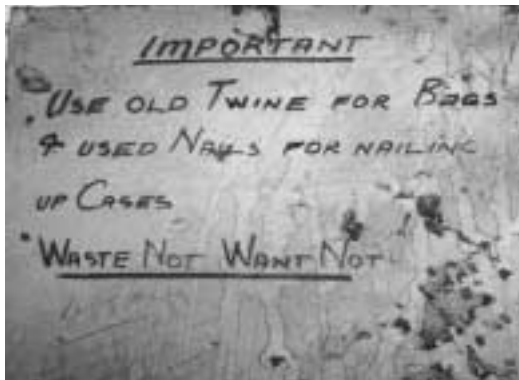
## Abikhair's Haberdashery Store, Albury

When local newspaper stories about Abikhair's store began to appear in the 1980s, there was a sudden surge of interest in NSW heritage circles. The shop appeared to have changed little since it was established in 1907. Abikhair's became widely known as a significant part of not only our shopping heritage, but also the history of Lebanese migrants in Australia. When Wal Abikhair, son of the original Lebanese owner, closed the store at 93 years of age, the closing down sale created a flurry of activity by those who sought to save it,

including the Albury Regional Museum. In the end, the shop building was afforded local government protection but the intact interior, with its 'extraordinary clutter of goods', was not so lucky. Eventually, despite the best efforts of many people, most of the significant items of fixtures, furniture, equipment and stock were either sold off or acquired by the Albury Regional Museum. The new owners were able to acquire a few original features to keep, and the shop itself will continue to sell haberdashery and clothing.



The former Abikhair's Haberdashery Store in Albury. Museums are not just collectors of objects, they also have a role to play in helping to keep our shopping heritage in situ, documenting it, holding events to celebrate it, and encouraging greater awareness of how to look after shopping heritage under threat. Museums should have sound policies about caring for objects in their possession, including provision for reinstating them (perhaps on loan or by sale) in their original location if the opportunity ever arises. *Photographs by Joy McCann, 1999.*



## The Model Store, Boorowa

This former country emporium has been successfully adapted as a newsagency. The current owner has taken care to keep significant features and objects that were once used in the former emporium. This sign was reputedly written by the original owner, and still hangs in the produce store. It is a reminder that these types of movable items tell us about the way things were done in the past, an aspect of the shop's history that is not likely to be found anywhere in the formal records! *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

## Caring for collections

Caring for movable heritage shop collections does not need to be onerous. Most significant objects will survive in the shop for long periods, providing there is some security from theft or vandalism and protection from pests and weather. It may be possible, or even necessary, to keep using significant objects such as counters, furniture and equipment.

Here are some basic measures that are based on good conservation practice for movable shopping heritage:

- Be guided by a conservation plan (see Making a Plan on page 50).
- If changes have to be made (e.g. for health and safety reasons, or to modernise the premises), try to make the changes affecting significant movable objects reversible. Examples include:
  - placing a panel over a painted wall sign, rather than painting over it;
  - laying new linoleum over the old one, rather than ripping it up;
  - storing light fittings no longer required, for later display or reinstatement;
  - placing interesting but redundant equipment, stock or furniture on display.
- Don't clean, repaint or restore objects if you can avoid it – keep all the signs of age and use because this is part of the heritage significance, although you may need to relocate or protect items that are particularly vulnerable to damage.
- Minimise the possibility of damage or theft.
- Store paper records or other delicate objects safely away from pests, dust and light – perhaps use a safe or strong room on site, or keep books in manila folders wrapped in acid free paper and stored in a filing cabinet.
- Support delicate objects to prevent them from sagging or collapsing over time.
- If building work is planned, record and secure or store movable items for later return (see Recording the Contents on page 45).
- Seek the help of a professional museum conservator for objects that are deteriorating rapidly or where an item is to be restored to working or usable condition.
- Keep a record of any changes or repairs to significant objects – notes and before-and-after photographs are best.
- Keep a record of all maintenance work, including the date and conditions, and keep a copy of this record with the object.
- Regularly monitor and maintain objects, especially if they are being used or are required to be in working condition.

## **Brennan and Geraghty's Store Museum, Maryborough, Queensland**

The Brennan and Geraghty's Store Museum, owned and managed by the National Trust of Queensland, is a 'museum about itself'. Put simply, the store traces its history within the Maryborough community from 1871 to 1972.

It is a rich and inspiring shop museum. The building and contents have been carefully researched, restored and presented, very much as the store was when George Geraghty and his sister Agnes ran it in its later years. Much of the hard work has been done with the curator and members of the community working together.

As the museum has taken shape, those involved have learnt together about good methods of recording, storing and displaying the contents. They have sought advice from experts. They have held a workshop, inviting people from different backgrounds to share their knowledge about ways to care for a small regional museum collection.

One of the major problems that this museum shares with all small, privately-owned museums is that of limited resources. The museum is fortunate to have a full-time curator who has managed the process of conservation and exhibition. In the end, however, it relies on good planning, opportunities for assistance through the various government grant schemes and private sponsorship, support from many local people and promotional activities to raise funds.

The museum has a collections policy translated into a brochure explaining that items offered by donors are only accepted if they are the types of things once available when the museum was operating as a grocery store.

It also has a conservation policy that gives guidance on the best ways to look after the shop's contents. Old photographs have helped to determine that crêpe paper was used in the front window displays. (In the early years of the twentieth century, crêpe paper was a popular and inexpensive way to decorate the windows and provide a background for the merchandise on display.) Every item, together with its original location when the shop was acquired, has been systematically recorded.

The conservation policy determined that fragile paper items such as store records needed careful removal, minimal treatment and storage. In some cases, copies have been made for display and research purposes, while the originals are kept safely archived. Shelves are lined with brown acid-free paper, a simple and cheap way to protect objects, as well as keeping the feel of the shop shelves.

A conservation specialist has advised that no special environmental controls are required to protect the shop contents - just regular monitoring and some calico over two of the windows to prevent sun damage.

The shop building was restored using a conservation plan and some fundraising efforts. It has been painted on the outside, but the inside paintwork has been left as it was in the 1930s to keep the feel of the original shop. Naturally, if anything starts to deteriorate, decisions have to be made about what to do next. In the meantime, the idea is to do the minimum necessary, based on a lot of thought and planning.

All in all, Brennan and Geraghty's Store is left remarkably as it was when George and Agnes closed the doors for the last time in 1972. The work was done slowly. Those involved have gained new insights into the history and significance of different objects, as they have carefully recorded and monitored them. This is an authentic shop, not a reproduction, and its history and significance shines because of it.



The Brennan and Geraghty Store now operates as a grocery store museum of itself, with original stock. The fittings and stock accumulated over 100 years of trading were kept intact after the shop closed for business. Very little was thrown away over the years and there are more than 100,000 objects in the collection. Even items lost between the floorboards were recovered during an archaeological investigation before the building conservation began. There is a collection policy not to collect shopping objects removed or sold through the store over the years because the store is already a record of Maryborough's history and the staff and volunteers don't need even more objects to care for. Sometimes highly significant objects relating to the store's history are collected and kept as part of a **separate** collection and stored away from the store. The heritage significance of the archival records, including stock books, is appreciated by the store and has assisted research into the store's history and its relationship to people and places in the region. *Photograph courtesy of National Trust of Queensland.*



## **Brennan & Geraghty's Store Museum Collection Policy**

The Brennan & Geraghty collection comprises over 100,000 items, which are all original to the property from when the store was an operating commercial business. The collection makes the museum unique. Brennan & Geraghty's store is one of only two grocery store museums in Australia that are intact with their own collections.

### **Do we collect items for Brennan & Geraghty's Store Museum?**

Yes, we do collect items for the Brennan & Geraghty collection. We must be able to identify potentially acceptable items as being the types of things that were once available from when the museum was an operating grocery store.

Because Brennan & Geraghty's Store is so important for its unusually intact collection, care is taken to ensure that we don't collect items that are not relevant to the museum.

### **In selecting material we:**

- look for items that date from between 1871 and 1972 (the years that the store operated)
- look for items relating to commerce and commercial history
- look for items in good condition
- do not accept paper based material that has not been laminated
- do not accept metal or paper-based material that has not been coated with lacquers
- do not guarantee to display material.

### **What sort of material do we collect?**

The manager of Brennan & Geraghty's Store Museum can advise you on the acceptability of an item.

We generally accept:

- items relating to the Brennan & Geraghty families
- items that came from Brennan & Geraghty's Store
- items that came from the Brennan & Geraghty family houses
- items that are identified as being the types of stock sold from Brennan & Geraghty's Store (identification takes place by matching material to the original store records)
- items of advertising material – provided that the products being advertised were sold through Brennan & Geraghty's Store

- in certain circumstances items not suitable for the Brennan & Geraghty collection may be accepted for research purposes.

### **Do we display all donated items?**

Items that are collected are not necessarily put on display.

Items donated, if displayed, may only be displayed for short periods.

In order to distinguish between donated items and the original store items, full documentation of the item has to take place. Cataloguing of donated items is a time consuming task; cataloguing of the donated items must be undertaken prior to them being displayed.

### **Will your item last forever?**

The National Trust of Queensland endeavours to maximize the life span of items donated by storing or displaying the item in the best possible manner dependent on funding and storage space.

Conservation and preventative conservation of an item is a very time consuming and at times expensive process. The National Trust cannot guarantee that any donated item will last forever. Items of low-grade quality material will deteriorate in time.

### **Do we purchase or borrow items?**

**Purchase** The National Trust does not purchase material for the Brennan & Geraghty collection.

**Loan** We do not borrow items for display purposes.

### **How can you lodge material?**

**Assessment** Items can be lodged for assessment and can be received by the staff and volunteers at Brennan & Geraghty's Store Museum.

**Donation** Items will be assessed for acceptability prior to being received as a donation, this assessment will be undertaken by the Curator/Manager at Brennan & Geraghty's Store Museum.

The National Trust of Queensland is approved to receive gifts under the Federal Government's Taxation Incentives for the Arts Scheme, whereby donors may receive substantial benefits for gifts to public collections.

## Putting Shops on Show

Museums and exhibitions, both big and small, play a crucial role in looking after and popularising the history of shops and shopping.

As we have seen, keeping a shop and its contents together and functioning as part of a viable business, is undoubtedly the very best way to look after our shopping heritage. It also ensures that we can maintain some continuity with, and understanding of, our past.

However, when a shop is historically significant, and it simply has to be closed and its contents removed, one option is to consider creating a museum. A good museum is a caretaker of our history, and it is one way of making the shop's history accessible to everyone.

### Shop museums

A shop turned into a museum can be a powerful medium for educating and entertaining visitors. Shop museums are generally those that are significant because they have kept much of their historical character and an intact collection of movable objects.

A shop museum, although perhaps no longer a vibrant living shop, can still speak volumes about the history of a place and its people. Objects and pictures on display, even the setting, all have their own fascination.

A shop museum doesn't need a lot of additional signs or showcases to work. Add simply written labels and historical fact sheets or stories next to key items, and perhaps have a knowledgeable guide to show people around, and the museum will not only inform and entertain, but also put people in touch with the cultural history of the local community.

Shop museums do require careful management, and a conservation management plan is crucial (see Making a Plan on page 52). Because they already have a significant collection, shop museums are generally closed collections – that is, nothing new is added to the collection at a later date unless it can definitely be attributed to the shop's history.

Anything else introduced to the museum later (such as items donated from other shops) is not part of this shop's collection, although they could still be displayed separately and labelled appropriately.

## **Shop displays and exhibitions**

Of course, not every significant shop that closes can be turned into a museum. When the contents of a shop are earmarked for safeguarding and display, they most often end up as individual items or a collection within a general historical museum.

With a reliable method of recording, storing and handling the objects safely, it might be possible to mount an exciting exhibition about the shop, or about the locality and its local characters as a whole. Exhibitions about shopping can also be a clever way of introducing people to the history of shops and shopping, as well as telling the world something about the place where the exhibition originated.

Sometimes, a new owner, a change of fashion, or a change of use, can mean a shop is ripe for the return of its original contents that may have been in the care of a museum or private collector.

Establishing a shop museum or an exhibition using the objects, photographs and stories about shopping, involves a commitment of time and resources. But there are many rewards for communities who succeed in opening a window to their past.

## **Some principles to remember:**

### **Do as little as necessary**

This includes keeping the way a shop is laid out. The meaning and interest lies in the mixture of impressions for the visitor – the smells, sounds and perhaps even the clutter.

### **Copy old documents and photographs**

Place in a folder for visitors to enjoy without damaging the originals.

### **Label copies or examples in exhibitions**

Make it clear to visitors that they are not original to the shop.

### **Monitor objects**

Keep track of objects carefully once they are on display or in storage.

### **Don't invent information or recreate objects**

Keep the shop and its contents authentic. If you don't know what an object is or how it was used, ask the owner, older shopkeepers or visitors.

## **Make your display a 'closed' collection**

People appreciate authentic history, so make it a policy not to introduce any new objects to a collection or display that have nothing to do with the shop's history. Think carefully before accepting old stock or other shop objects – you could fill your store several times over and make it difficult to remember which are the original objects and which ones were added recently. Think about putting old furniture and tools of trade back in practical use if it is safe to do so and will not cause too much wear and tear.

## **Get permission to display any sensitive material**

Any objects or material that might be regarded as sensitive or private by the families of shop owners, customers or others should be displayed with care. For example, old pharmacy prescriptions might contain personal information about someone's health or stock books might contain information on the credit worthiness of families that live in the area.

## **Use simple display methods**

Ask shop museums for simple, cheap methods of looking after and displaying objects that they have used successfully. There is no need to use your precious funds on elaborate museum-standard equipment unless you have sought advice from different experts and there is no alternative.

## **Aim for a high standard of maintenance and labelling**

This will enhance the importance of the shop and its contents.

## Wong Sat General Store Collection Powerhouse Museum

Museums can play a crucial role in looking after the movable heritage of shopping. The Powerhouse Museum acquired a collection of rural Chinese shopping heritage from the descendants of Wong Sat, who established his store on the goldfields route in Bolong in the 1870s. The museum is preparing the collection as a permanent exhibit, and these items now provide rare insights into a nineteenth century Chinese general store. The museum has also collected associated historical information that helps to interpret the items.

### Wong Sat General Store Collection

*Photograph by Scott Donkin, reproduced courtesy of Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.*

### Objects from Wong Sat General Store Collection

*Photograph by Penelope Clay, reproduced courtesy of Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.*

