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THE BEST

Old Customs Houses are becoming some of the best addresses in Australia.

Long after their working life was thought to be over, many Customs Houses are being renewed as premier community assets in our bigger cities.

In Melbourne, an Immigration Museum and Hellenic Archaeological Museum will open later this year in the old Customs House in Flinders Street.

In Sydney, the Customs House at Circular Quay will reopen this year as a commercial complex featuring restaurants and a high-tech exhibition centre that will maintain the building's 150-year history as a significant part of the city's life.

In Brisbane, the Customs House built more than a century ago has become one of the city's premier function venues after being reopened in 1994.

It is no coincidence that these Customs Houses, along with others around Australia, are playing a major role in Australia's urban renewal.

Graeme Austin, who is the Customs history officer, says many of these buildings possess an architectural grandeur that is historic yet contemporary.

"The grandeur of Customs Houses was for good reason," Graeme said.

"Customs were the first tax collectors in Australia, so the buildings were designed to dominate the surrounding environment, to emphasise the importance of Customs, and probably to intimidate the people it dealt with.

"The grand design has been essential in so many being retained for renewal as community assets. It is likely that lesser buildings may have fallen into disrepair or been bulldozed long ago."

Graeme said that the former Brisbane Customs House remains a city landmark because of a pressure campaign in the 1980s by former and serving Customs officers,

supported by local residents, who wanted to secure funding to retain the building in good working order.

The campaign worked, and today Brisbane has an outstanding community asset used by thousands of people each year.

"Across Australia, there are many other old Customs Houses still used by the community," Graeme said.

"It seems likely that the great design of these buildings will also see them retained and reborn, just as Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane have once again become some of the best addresses in town."

Graeme says that while the original buildings may have looked wonderful, some were often impractical places to work.

"Along with many of the post offices and court houses built in the 1800s, a number of Customs Houses were cold in winter, hot in summer, and became cramped and uncomfortable as officer numbers increased," Graeme said.

"The benefit of refitting in the 1990s is that modern architects are making the interiors a better place. Now they're both grand and people-friendly."

BRISBANE

Brisbane Customs House was built during 1886-89 on the northern bank of the Brisbane River, its prime location reflecting the importance of maritime trade through the city during the late nineteenth century. Trade at this time through the Port of Brisbane was based on pastoral, mineral and sugar production.

Older than both the Brisbane City Hall and the Treasury Building, its working life as a Customs office lasted 99 years until 1988.

future

ADDRESS IN TOWN



Brisbane Customs House, Queen Street.



Melbourne Customs House, Flinders Street.

Although no conclusive evidence exists as to the actual designer, historical records indicate the involvement of Charles McLay who was to become Chief Draftsman for the Queensland Government Works and Building Department, and George St Paul Connolly who was Colonial Architect from 1886-91.

Its renewal began when the University of Queensland instituted innovative plans that came to fruition in 1994 with the Customs House being relaunched after a \$7m building program.

Today the Customs House is a function centre for business or private use, a meeting place for academics, professionals, representatives of commerce and the arts. It also features a brasserie, bookshop and art gallery.

MELBOURNE

This former Customs House is one of the finest public buildings in Melbourne and remains a link with the city's rich maritime past.

Built in the 1850s, the Melbourne Customs House provided a post and telegraph office for public use, and facilities for merchants who dealt with Customs. Its style reflected the maturing of Victoria into a prosperous metropolis with a strong financial and trading base.

From this Customs House began the Customs Department's implementation of a protectionist trade policy for the colony.

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Sydney Customs House, Circular Quay.

The building's revival for the 1990s follows a major refurbishment by the Victorian Government to establish an Immigration Museum and Hellenic Archaeological Museum.

It will include a resource centre for research into immigration issues, an education area for schools, and a theatre for performances, festivals, film nights and meetings.

Given the role of Customs Houses in fostering trade and welcoming new arrivals, it is appropriate that the new immigration museum will recognise the thousands of migrants who settled in Victoria, and invested their energies in the city and the State.

SYDNEY

Although Sydney has had a Customs presence since 1800, it was not until 1845 that the first substantial Customs House was built.

Designed by Mortimer Lewis in a Greek revival style, the original structure was built by people registered to an unemployment scheme that had been established at the time. Unfortunately some of the work proved to be substandard, and significant structural repairs were required in the years immediately following its opening.

In later years as Sydney became the primary gateway to Australia, the Customs House became a focal point for merchants with more than 55 ships arriving each week for clearance. In addition, the Collector of Customs controlled 22 inland border Customs posts for maintenance of tariffs over interstate trade.

With its latest redevelopment, Customs House will again be the centre of attention in Sydney. As well as being a shopping centre, it will feature an exhibition centre for plans and models of landmark city developments as well as displays related to key city infrastructure.

The development, being undertaken by the Sydney City Council, will also feature a rooftop restaurant, centres for contemporary craft, chamber music, Aboriginal and Pacific Islander craft, and retail stores.

One of the redeveloped building's chief goals, according to Sydney Lord Mayor, Frank Sartor, as quoted in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, will be to highlight the planning processes for Sydney.

"If you want to know what's happening in Sydney, that's where you'll go," Lord Mayor Sartor said.

"It will be very accessible and make the entire development and planning process more transparent."