

TRADITIONAL



Ian Willis

TRAINING in traditional trades for the built environment in Australia has fallen between the cracks. Courses in the old ways have been disappearing for years. Few tradesmen are passing the crafts on to the current generation. Training opportunities, even for the enthusiasts, are few and far between.

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Traditional trades training has been beset by failures. This was acknowledged in 2007 by the New South Wales Heritage Office (now part of the Office of Environment and Heritage within the Department of Premier and Cabinet) and most recently by Heritage Victoria and the Heritage Chairs and Officials of Australia and New Zealand's *Heritage Trades and Professional Training Project* (2010). This report has predicted skills shortages in carpentry, joinery, stonemasonry, roofing and tuck pointing, and found that "qualified specialised heritage skills are rare".

Traditional trades had their origins in the European guilds of the Middle Ages when master craftsmen taught the apprentice, who then became a journeyman. Their labour-intensive pre-industrial methods have added to cost pressures in recent decades in an ever increasing niche market. For naysayers these trades are dying, vanishing, lost or disappearing, while for supporters they are heritage, traditional or preservation trades.

Since the 1990s marketisation of education by neo-liberal governments intent on economic efficiencies and commercial imperatives have commodified trades training. Course provision has become precarious when combined with ad-hoc delivery, compliance issues, under-resourcing, institutional inflexibility and accreditation problems.

A case in point was the demise of the much-hyped and short-lived Specialist Centre for Heritage Trades at the Holmesglen Institute of TAFE east of Melbourne in 2006. The Victorian government launched the Centre promising that "traditional building, conservation and renovation skills are being given a new lease of life at a Victorian TAFE Institute". The Minister for Education maintained that some traditional techniques were at "risk of becoming a dying art".

The Heritage Centre was to offer a number of short courses, including specialist skills in brickwork, timberwork, plasterwork, wall and floor tiling, painting and decorating, plumbing, roof slating and glass conservation. They were designed to underpin the Certificate IV in Building and Construction (Specialist Trades). Courses were offered for both tradesmen and apprentices, and planned to be delivered through "a network of TAFE institutes linked with the centre" including Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE, The Gordon Institute of

TRADES TRAINING, a story of failure and success

‘The mantra of economic efficiency has contributed to the problematic nature of traditional trades training.’

TAFE (Geelong) and the University of Ballarat, TAFE Division. In the end what started with great promise fell in a heap in less than a year when there was a low demand for courses and student numbers fell below expectation.

In New South Wales natural disasters partially solved the market failures for traditional trades training. Sydney’s Eastern Suburbs hailstorm (1999), like the Newcastle earthquake (1989), increased the demand for skilled craftsmen to repair Sydney’s stock of inter-war, Federation and Victorian buildings. TAFE NSW ran six heritage courses for existing tradesmen between 2000 and 2005. As the repair crisis eased so did the demand for trained craftsmen. Training courses ceased in 2006, even though the courses were listed on the TAFE NSW website. Program manager Richard White stated that the courses failed to attract the requisite fifteen students per class.

Course failures also occurred in the late 1990s. The Heritage Office, the Department of Education and Training, and the Department of Public Works and Services ran a successful workshop for building contractors called *Heritage Trades Training Strategy*. It incorporated a number of the training modules from *Young People in Heritage Restoration and Construction* project. TAFE NSW successfully delivered a two day workshop for over thirty contractors. Day one on timber construction was held at Lismore, while Day two on brick construction was held at Tenterfield. On other occasions courses were held on painting and decorating. All ran successfully over a number of years. A small ongoing demand was insufficient to make up the required minimum class sizes.

The mantra of economic efficiency has contributed to the problematic nature of traditional trades training. Heritage Office director Susan Macdonald stated, at the seminal 2006 New South Wales National Trust Conference *No Skills, No Future* on traditional trades training, that once demand for training courses drops below a critical mass they are difficult to resurrect. This situation has been complicated by a range of other entrenched problems that include an ageing workforce, the loss of corporate memory and skills, high cost of liability insurance and modern OH&S requirements, low pay, a lack of continuity of work that reduces the viability of the small specialist firms, and poor advocacy by traditional trade practitioners.

A solution to one market failure of traditional trades training was provided by a public outcry over the potential loss of Sydney’s sandstone built heritage. Master stonemason Michael Landers stated that after the Second World War stonemasonry training in New South Wales was largely abandoned and eventually led to a skills shortage. By the 1980s many government-owned sandstone buildings

throughout the state eventually needed essential maintenance. This poor state of affairs led to the foundation of the Centenary Stonework Program in 1991.

Macdonald stated at the 2006 Conference that the Stonework Program met many of the shortcomings in traditional trades training. She claimed all aspects of the ‘skills deficits’ in training needed to be tackled together, that is, “material supply, skill supply and re-establishing knowledge by regulatory action, educational input and economic incentives”. The holistic approach used by the traditional trades has been largely lost under the influence of the Industrial Revolution and the encroachment of mechanisation, mass production

continued on page 12 ➡

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“Once demand for training courses drops below a critical mass they are difficult to resurrect.”

continued from page 11 ➡

and work practices that have seen the fragmentation of trades over time.

Strategic Heritage Maintenance Manager Joy Singh stated in 2010 that the Centenary Stonework Program had five stonemasonry apprentices and passed on “valuable knowledge from more experienced staff that can never be learned in a classroom” through the Heritage Trades Training Steering Committee and the George Proudman Stonemasonry Fellowship. Apprentices in the Program have undertaken the Stonemasonry (Monumental/Installation) Certificate Course on a block release at South West Sydney Institute of TAFE.

Two major stonework conservation projects were recently undertaken through the Stonework Program. One on Fort Denison in Sydney Harbour, an exceptionally fine and intact example of a 19th century defense fortification of national and international significance, and Fort Phillip Precinct Conservation between 2008 and 2011, an exceptionally significant collection of built remains from the earliest days of colonial Sydney. The NSW Government

Architect’s Office maintains that the Centenary Stonework Program provides value for money for the development of industry skills and proper maintenance of cultural assets. The manager of the Stonework Program Ron Powell said that the team was devoted to conserving the “state’s heritage sandstone icons”.

The Stonework Program makes a significant contribution to the ongoing sustainability of Sydney’s heritage places and sandstone buildings that give the city its unique identity and character. Sydney’s heritage assets are an important part of Australia’s growing cultural and heritage tourism market. In 2008, according to a survey by Tourism Research Australia, it was estimated that around 23 million people visited Australia’s cultural and heritage locations, and 61 per cent of international visitors visit an historical or heritage building. Kate Farrelly wrote in 2003 that “the warm golden glow” of Sydney sandstone is the “signature material of the [city’s] finest buildings”.

Another solution to a market failure in traditional trades training has been provided by the

museums and galleries sector. Cobb & Co museum director in Toowoomba Queensland, Deborah Tranter, has claimed that traditional trades are caught in a time warp of tradition and convention. In some cases traditional trades have become anachronisms and curiosities relegated to the status of handicrafts.

Tranter thinks that solutions to the inadequacy of training requires a fresh look at the ‘intangible’ benefits of traditional trades concentrating on skills, knowledge, creativity and innovation, an approach supported by the the 2010 Heritage Victoria and Heritage Chairs’ *Project* report. Under this approach some think that traditional trades training based around the progression from apprentice, to journeyman and finally master tradesman is past its use by date.

Under Tranter’s leadership a partnership between Queensland Museum’s Cobb & Co Museum at Toowoomba and the Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE have tried to find a creative solution to traditional trades training using a holistic approach. They have established The National Carriage Factory as a purpose built open plan training centre. Here heritage trades workshops and accredited training programs are conducted

including stonemasonry, blacksmithing, silversmithing, leatherwork, felting, leatherwork, bookmaking, millinery and glass art. In 2011 the museum offered, in conjunction with Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE, a specialist apprenticeship pilot program that incorporates aspects of blacksmithing, wheelwrighting and woodturning.

Traditional trades training is facing many challenges and a number of recommendations have been put forward by the 2010 Heritage Victoria and Heritage Chairs’ *Project* report. They centred around the need for leadership from government in training and education, recognition of ‘on the job’ training and consistent statutory and compliance practice, all supported by appropriate funding. ❖

This article is drawn from Ian Willis’s ‘Cultural heritage and conservation: issues of education and training’ in *Island of History, Proceedings of the 25th Anniversary Conference Professional Historians Association (NSW) Norfolk Island, July 2010* Sydney: Anchor Books 2011.

Dr Ian Willis is an honorary research fellow at the University of Wollongong.



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