



REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES - ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in September 1991 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

11. 1. AESTHETIC VALUE

Together with *Archbishop's Palace, St. Mary's Cathedral, Convent of the Sisters of Mercy* and *Mercedes College, St. John's Pro Cathedral* forms part of a precinct of nineteenth century Roman Catholic buildings around Victoria Square. (Criterion 1.4)

11. 2. HISTORIC VALUE

St. John's Pro Cathedral was the first Roman Catholic Church constructed in Western Australia. (Criterion 2.1)

St. John's Pro Cathedral has a close association with Bishop Brady (the first Roman Catholic Bishop in W. A.) and Bishop Serra (the second Bishop) and the Benedictine Brothers. It also has a close association with the development of the Sisters of Mercy convent. The Sisters held their first school in the building and used the building as their Chapel after the completion of the new Cathedral. (Criteria 2.2, 2.3)

11. 3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

St. John's Pro Cathedral has the potential to demonstrate vernacular construction techniques used in the mid-nineteenth century. (Criterion 3.1)

11. 4. SOCIAL VALUE

St. John's Pro Cathedral is highly valued by the Roman Catholic community as a place which is historically and spiritually important in the development of the Catholic Church in Western Australia. (Criterion 4.1)

St. John's Pro Cathedral contributes to the community's sense of place by providing a physical and spiritual link with the early colonial development of Perth. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12.1 . RARITY

St. John's Pro Cathedral is one of the few remaining colonial buildings in Perth from the first half of the nineteenth century. It is the earliest Roman Catholic church building in Western Australia. (Criterion 5.1)

12.2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

St. John's Pro Cathedral demonstrates the style of building that was constructed by the early colonists as a place of worship. (Criterion 6.2)

12.3 CONDITION

In 1979/80, work was done to restore the building and to remove additions and alterations which were unsympathetic to the original design intent. The current condition of the building is good.

12.4 INTEGRITY

The building is currently used as a church and religious museum by the Catholic Church and ceremonies are still held in it. The use of *St. John's Pro Cathedral* as a religious museum is compatible with the original intention of the place as a place of public worship. In this dual usage, the building has a moderately high degree of integrity.

12.5 AUTHENTICITY

There have been additions, alterations and some reconstruction of *St. John's Pro Cathedral*; however, the external fabric of the building is intact and the place retains a high degree of authenticity.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

At the time of the foundation of the Swan River Colony, in 1829, Roman Catholics living in New Holland were under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Mauritius. In 1834, John Polding was appointed Bishop of New Holland and Van Dieman's Land and, in 1843, Archbishop. Polding's base was in Sydney. In 1843, Polding sent Father John Brady to minister to the Catholic settlers in the Swan River Colony. The Roman Catholic population in Perth at the time of Brady's arrival was very small and funds to construct a place of worship were in short supply. However, the colonists were generous in their support of the building of a place of worship and, on 27 December 1843, the construction of Perth's first Roman Catholic church began. The foundation stone was laid on 16 January 1844.

Brady left for Rome, in 1844, to ask for assistance and advocate the establishment of a new diocese for the Swan River Colony. In May 1845, the Diocese of Perth was declared and Brady was appointed Bishop. He returned to Perth, on 8 January 1846, with lay persons, six Sisters of Mercy and several priests, two of whom were the Spanish Benedictine priests Joseph Serra and Rosendo Salvado who would later establish the community of Benedictine Brothers at New Norcia. On their arrival, they found that *St. John's Pro Cathedral* was incomplete. Mother Ursula Frayne described the building as being

'about thirty feet long by fifteen feet wide and twelve feet high, a shingle roof, through which the sun, moon and stars could be distinctly seen; a few planks laid loosely on the ground did duty as flooring: door spaces, but no doors; window spaces, but no windows...'¹

Work on the building was undertaken immediately and, three days later, the walls had been plastered, doors hung and the windows glazed. In February, a small lean-to was added to the north side of the building. The Sisters used this room as their school and Bishop Brady apparently lived here until better quarters were constructed.²

In 1850, Bishop Serra replaced Brady as Bishop of Perth and, in 1855, he extended the building in brick to twice its original size. The church was rededicated as the *Immaculate Conception*. In 1856, a brick portico was added to the western side of the building.³

The building was the principal place of worship for the Roman Catholic Community in Perth from 1844 until 1865. By 1865, the increasing size of the Roman Catholic population in the colony, necessitated the building of a larger Cathedral. The new Cathedral - *St. Mary's* - was built at the top of the hill to the north. The new cathedral was named the *Cathedral of the*

¹ Newbold, M. 'The Beginnings of the Catholic Church in Western Australia', (unpublished thesis, n.d.) p. 70, cited in Bourke, D. F. *The History of the Catholic Church in Western Australia*, (Archdiocese of Perth, 1979) p. 12.

² Rossen, I. 'St. John Evangelist Pro Cathedral Victoria Avenue, Perth Western Australia, A Sequential Building Study for the Purpose of Restoration', (no date) p. 16.

³ Bourke, D. F. *The History of the Catholic Church in Western Australia*, (Archdiocese of Perth, 1979) p. 59.

Immaculate Conception. After the construction of *St. Mary's Cathedral* the original church became known as *St. John's Pro Cathedral* and was used by the Christian Brothers as a school. In 1881, *St. John's Pro Cathedral* was renovated and used by the Sisters of Mercy, under the name of *St. John's Chapel*, as the school chapel in the Mercedes College complex.

In 1965, the building was 'modernised' and used as a classroom for convent students and for external students studying English.

In 1979/80, conservation of *St. John's Pro Cathedral* began in celebration of Western Australia's Sesquicentenary. Unsympathetic modifications to the building were restored under the supervision of architect, Iris Rossen and *St. John's Pro Cathedral* was adapted for use as a museum by the Catholic Church.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

St. John's Pro Cathedral is sited on a block which slopes to the south and is closely associated with nearby buildings belonging to *Mercedes College*. It is across Victoria Avenue from *Archbishop's Palace*.

It is constructed of brick which has been covered with cement render and painted white. The gable roof is covered with shingles. The north and south facades are punctuated by arched windows. Buttresses have been placed at regular intervals down the length of these facades. The portico, which was removed in 1881, has been reconstructed at the western end of the building. The western gable end is punctuated by four arched windows, a pair above the portico and a single window either side of the portico. A lean-to extension is located at the eastern end of the southern facade. Entry to this section is through an arched door on the north facade. The church windows are of coloured glass set in wooden mullions. Those in the lean-to section are square, four paned windows.

The interior walls have been plastered. The floor is timber boards. The open ceiling reveals the rafters and the timber boarding nailed on the exterior side of the rafters. The internal layout has the altar at the eastern end with rows of pews extending to the west.

In 1881, alterations to the building included the removal of the portico, the construction of an organ platform at the western end, the enhancement of the side door and the construction of a brick wall which cut the church off from the street.⁴ In 1965, the nave was shortened by several feet at the eastern end and was separated from the convent, the timber windows were removed and replaced with aluminium windows, a plaster board ceiling was suspended from the roof, internal partitioning was installed and a dividing wall in the lean-to was demolished. In approximately 1967, the walls were rendered.⁵

In 1979/80, restoration work was undertaken under the aegis of Architect, Iris Rossen. The work returned *St John's Pro Cathedral* to its 1856 appearance, externally and internally. The rendered brick wall, which previously screened the building from the street, was removed. This wall

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Rossen, p.18; National Trust Assessment Exposition.

is still insitu on the northern side of the church. Physical evidence was found to suggest there was originally a bell tower to the church, but as there was no remaining documentation from which a reconstruction could have been made, the bell tower was not reinstated. The forecourt on the southern side of the building is covered with cement paving blocks. The interior of the building was reinstated as closely as possible to the original appearance using historical material as references. Windows were replaced by replicating an original window still insitu. A collection of historical photographs and other memorabilia line the north and south walls.

13.3 REFERENCES

Rossen, I. 'St. John Evangelist Pro Cathedral Victoria Avenue, Perth Western Australia, A Sequential Building Study for the Purpose of Restoration' (no date.)

Australian Heritage Commission Data Sheet 1980

National Trust Assessment Exposition 1978