



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

St. Brigid's Convent (fmr) is significant for its contribution to the streetscape of the area and is valued by the community. The building form is easily recognisable and is associated with the *St. Brigid's Precinct* of related religious buildings. (Criterion 1.1)

St. Brigid's Convent (fmr) is an uncommon example of a Federation Gothic building type with Romanesque influences. (Criterion 1.1)

St. Brigid's Convent (fmr) has a landmark quality to vistas of the *St. Brigid's Precinct* from surrounding streets. (Criterion 1.3)

St. Brigid's Convent (fmr) and the associated detailing (cross finials, figure over the door etc.) contribute to its aesthetic qualities and are an integral part of the stylistic motifs of *St. Brigid's Precinct*. (Criterion 1.4)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

St. Brigid's Convent (fmr) and surrounding precinct is significant for its association with the Sisters of Mercy and the Catholic Church. (Criterion 2.1)

St. Brigid's Convent (fmr)'s principal designer, Michael Cavanagh was significant in the development of architecture within the State. (Criterion 2.3)

11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

St. Brigid's Convent (fmr), because of its level of integrity, and close association with the other buildings on the site, can be considered a reference site by which other educational and convent facilities provided by the Catholic Church in Western Australia may be judged. (Criteria 3.1, 3.2)

11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

St. Brigid's Convent (fmr) has significance for its associations with the Catholic Church in general, with the Sisters of Mercy and with the educational facilities located at the place. (Criterion 4.1)

The form and scale of *St. Brigid's Convent (fmr)* together with associated buildings in the precinct, contributes to the sense of place of the community

and former students. The tri-gabled frontage is memorable and easily recalled by visitors to the area. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12.1. RARITY

The Federation Gothic building type with Romanesque influences is uncommon within Perth. The integrity of the former *St. Brigid's Convent (fmr)* allows this to be fully appreciated. (Criterion 5.1)

12.2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

St. Brigid's Convent (fmr) is representative of the large buildings constructed by the Catholic Church in Western Australia to house religious orders at the time of the gold rushes. (Criterion 6.1)

St. Brigid's Convent (fmr) demonstrates attributes common to convent buildings including cell accommodation, the chapel and the refectory eating area and demonstrates a way of life. (Criterion 6.2)

12.3 CONDITION

St. Brigid's Convent (fmr) is generally in a sound, but uncared for, condition. The c.1881 cottage is an exception to this having been subject to a recent refurbishment programme, making it the best kept part of the place. It is, however, not entirely authentic.

The roof of the main volume of the building and the rainwater goods are in a poor condition due to natural weathering of the galvanised iron, re-roofing and replacement of gutters and downpipes is required as a matter of urgency. Some areas of brickwork require re-pointing and rising damp is evident, although generally the walls are in good condition. Reinforced concrete window lintels and other areas of concrete work are exhibiting signs of failure due to corrosion of ferrous reinforcing bars, and are in a poor condition. Exterior paintwork is generally poor.

Internally the ground floor is well cared for and in good condition, being in daily use, but the upper floor is presently unused due to water ingress and is in a poor condition throughout. Evidence of termite attack is visible in a ground floor door frame, although this has been treated. Sagging ground floor boards indicate the potential for further infestation or other structural defect.

There is no regular maintenance or capital works program in operation presently to tackle defects. A conservation plan has been prepared by Palassis Architects on behalf of the BMA.¹

The current and past managers of the place have undertaken alterations to make the place more suited to their needs, but these works are able to be reversed and sufficient evidence is available to enable accurate reconstruction.

St. Brigid's Convent is in generally sound condition.

12.4 INTEGRITY

¹ Palassis Architects; *Conservation Plan, former St Brigid's Convent, John Street, Northbridge* (Building Management Authority, Perth, 1994).

St. Brigid's Convent (fmr) ceased operation as a convent in 1974, and has since been used by the State Government, first as a work release hostel, and later as the *Northbridge Community Corrections Centre*.

Certain elements of religious significance have been relocated to the Sisters of Mercy's new premises at Craigie. These elements include the fittings to the chapel which were, according to archive photographs, of an ornate and elaborate nature. The building form and built in fixtures remain in the chapel, and there is still a high degree of significance, even without the relocated items.

The current occupiers of the building only utilise the ground floor; however, when the building was used as a work release hostel various security screens and toilet facilities were installed at first floor level, and are intrusive.

The ground floor is almost intact, with the only major intrusion being toilet facilities constructed in the position of the former rear verandah. Minor intrusions include a viewing hatch at the reception desk, various wall or window mounted air conditioning units, and modern air extraction duct work in the former kitchen. The interior of the building has some significance, with potential for reconstruction work to enhance this.

The external fabric of the building has been subject to further works, some of which detract from the integrity of the place.

The most intrusive element is the now disused stage five works - a timber frame fibreboard clad first floor extension - which is in a structurally dangerous state and may contain asbestos.

A series of outbuildings, not directly connected to the convent intrude into the courtyard space between the convent and the nearby school buildings. The presence of these structures detracts from the working relationship that the buildings previously had with each other, and lowers the significance of both school and convent.

The John Street frontage to the school was originally face brickwork with concrete details, but has been rendered and is presently painted white. The presence of the render is intrusive, although the form of the building remains unaltered and has considerable significance for the aesthetic qualities of its design.

To the sides and rear of the buildings there has been less effort to preserve the integrity of the place, with air conditioning units, steel window canopies and steel escape stairs from the first floor all intruding on the place.

All of these intrusive elements, with the possible exception of the cement render, are able to be removed and do not detract significantly from the overall cultural significance of the place, which displays a high degree of integrity.

The current usage of the place is not diminishing that integrity, although regular maintenance is required to ensure that structural or weatherproofing defects do not result in irreparable damage to the fabric. Attention to defects must be undertaken as a matter of some urgency, and a regular maintenance program is required immediately.

With due care and attention the general integrity is sustainable, and careful conservation work may result in more appropriate alternatives to the presently intrusive elements.

St. Brigid's Convent (fmr) retains a high degree of integrity.

12.5 AUTHENTICITY

St. Brigid's Convent (fmr) is a brick built structure - archive photographs clearly indicate that all external surfaces were face brick. The stage two works (c.1889-1894) were built with dichromatic patterning in the brickwork; however, this is now obscured by cement rendering that extends over the whole of the John Street frontage, the stage 1 cottage and both east and west elevations of stages two, three and four.

Most of the rear of the place is unrendered, although the introduction of hard, cement rich mortars in repointing repairs is unfortunate, as is the puncturing of the fabric to accept modern services.

The stage one cottage was subject to considerable refurbishment in 1988, including total re-roofing and both internal and external repainting programmes. The cottage is thus of low authenticity; however, the basic form is similar to original, but without the front verandah, which is indicated on archive plans.

The main building (stages two to eight) is, externally, of high authenticity with regards to the roof, rainwater goods, window and verandah details etc. Some of these elements are; however, in a poor state of repair due to weathering and lack of maintenance and will require replacement, with subsequent lowering of authenticity. Concrete replacement and repair is necessary, due to corrosion of ferrous reinforcing resulting in damage to window lintels and the failure of cross finials etc, repair of which will introduce new material. The replacement of badly deteriorated elements need not result in a lowering of the cultural heritage significance of the place, as the materials required for effective, matching replacement are readily available in Perth.

Internally the building fabric is of high authenticity, with the staircase, doors, windows, skirting boards and plasterwork generally in the original form, constructed of the original materials. Colours of internal surfaces are not original and detailed paint scrape analysis is required to reveal further evidence.

The chapel, in particular, has potential to be returned to the original form as good documentary evidence exists, and the shadow of stencil work and decorative lettering can be seen under existing paintwork.

St. Brigid's Convent (fmr) has a high degree of authenticity.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

The former *St. Brigid's Convent* is a brick building comprised of single storey and two storey elements constructed in eight different stages from c.1881 to 1982. Adjacent to the convent are the other buildings making up the *St. Brigid's Precinct* including the *Parish Hall, the School, Church and Presbytery*. A small brick and tile outbuilding, known as the *tuckshop*, sits to the west of the convent, on the John Street boundary.

The *Fitzgerald Hotel* opposite *St. Brigid's School* was built in 1925, however the corner site has been continuously occupied by a hotel since 1885. The *St. Brigid's Precinct* and the *Fitzgerald Hotel* form the nucleus of what was a thriving residential neighbourhood.

The first stage of construction of *St. Brigid's Convent* was the annexe now known as *Conroy's Cottage*, on Lot Y144 which was purchased by John Doyle in 1881. The ratebook mentions the presence of a cottage on the land in 1881. The property changed hands in 1884 when it was purchased by William Conroy. From 1885 the place was rented out to various tenants. Conroy transferred ownership of the property to his aunt, Mrs Mary Herbert in August 1887.²

Subsequently, William Conroy was accused of fatally shooting John Snook, a Fremantle Councillor, on the 24 September 1887 and was hanged for murder. Conroy is reputed to have left his property to the Sisters of Mercy, who befriended him in prison, and in 1888 the property owned by Mary Herbert was transferred to Bishop Gibney for the use of the Sisters of Mercy.³

The Sisters of Mercy first arrived in Perth, in 1846, and established a school on St. George's Terrace and a convent in Victoria Square. By the time of the acquisition of *St. Brigid's Convent*, the order had grown considerably and had established schools in Perth, York, Guildford, Bunbury, and Geraldton.⁴ The establishment of another convent in Perth was in response to the increasing population of Perth.

The Sisters of Mercy used the cottage as a convent, and a school was opened in a cottage on neighbouring Lot Y145. The school building functioned as a chapel at weekends.⁵

Further development occurred c.1889-1894, with the construction of a single storey dichromatic brick chapel and several rooms abutting and to the west of *Conroy's Cottage*. The building was built by Mr D. Gray for £250, a temporary

² *Title Deeds*, Vol VII, fol. 366; cited in Palassis, p. 11.

³ Perdue, B. *Legal Executions in Western Australia* (Victoria Park Foundation Press, 1993), p. 34 cited in Palassis, pp. 11, 86.

⁴ Bourke, A. *History and its Beginnings*. (unpublished manuscript held at Sisters of Mercy Archives, Craigie); Tannock, P. D. *Education in Western Australia*, (edited Neal, W. D., UWA Press, Nedlands, 1979) cited in Palassis, p. 14.

⁵ *The WA Record* (19 July 1888, Perth) ,p. 5; McLay, A. *Women out of their Sphere: A History of the Sisters of Mercy in Western Australia*. (Vanguard Press, Perth, 1992) cited in Palassis, p. 14.

laundry was added for a further £60. At approximately the same time Messrs. Wilkie and Co. constructed a drill shed for £80.⁶

The discovery of gold in Kalgoorlie in 1893 coincided with a serious economic downturn in the Eastern States of Australia. As a direct result, the population of Western Australia increased rapidly and Western Australia's school population increased threefold from 1890 to 1896.⁷ The subsequent development of the *St. Brigid's Convent* site reflected the Catholic Church's response to the growing educational needs of children in Perth.

In May 1896, Bishop Gibney declared St. Brigid's an independent community of the Sisters of Mercy. In July of the same year, further alterations were completed to the designs of Michael Cavanagh, an architect newly arrived from Adelaide. Cavanagh would later design numerous convent and church buildings including alterations to *St. Mary's Cathedral*, and the *Bishop's Palace*. As a result of Cavanagh's influence, *St. Brigid's Convent* has many similarities with other Catholic religious buildings in Western Australia built between 1895 and 1910. As such, the building is readily identifiable as a religious institution built at the turn of the century.⁸

Cavanagh's additions provided seven new cells, and an alteration to the chapel to double its size. Original drawings indicate the removal of internal walls and reconstruction of the bay window. *The WA Record* of 18 July 1896, reported the new building works were "...carried out by Messrs. Ryan and Co., to be decorated by Mr J. Clarke".⁹

On 1 February 1897, the foundation stone was laid for a new much larger convent, also to the design of Michael Cavanagh, which was to incorporate the existing buildings except for *Conroy's Cottage*. The new two storey building was constructed of face brickwork, and apart from being cement rendered at a later date the main facade is still largely intact when viewed from John Street.¹⁰

The new building, was completed in December 1897, at a cost of £4060. The Christmas issue of the *Western Mail* reported the convent had "...every modern convenience stopping short however at being lit up by electricity or gas light".¹¹ *The WA Record* had previously reported that the then incomplete building would be "...an ornament to the part of the city in which it is situated".¹²

On 1 February 1899, the foundation stone was laid for a new school: *St Brigid's School* (primary school only) on Fitzgerald Street.¹³ The building was designed by J. J. Talbot Hobbs and cost £630 to construct. It is now occupied

6 *The WA Record* (18 July 1896, Perth), p. 11 cited in Palassis, p. 11.

7 Palassis, p. 44.

8 *ibid.*

9 Drawings held by the Sisters of Mercy, Craigie; *The WA Record* (18 July, 1896, Perth) p. 11 cited in Palassis, p. 12.

10 Drawings held by the Sisters of Mercy, Craigie; *Joining in the Dance, West Perth Mercy Memories*, (manuscript held by Sisters of Mercy, c.1988).

11 *Western Mail* (Christmas 1897, Perth), p. 66 cited in Palassis, p. 12.

12 *The WA Record* (15 May 1897, Perth), p. 9 cited in Palassis, p. 12.

13 *The WA Record* (17 February 1889, Perth); *The WA Record* (18 July, 1896, Perth), p. 11 cited in Palassis, p. 15.

by the TAFE School of Art and Design. The school has strong visual connections to the convent, and forms one side of the rear courtyard.

Circa 1900, the existing brick and iron fence to John Street was erected, replacing a previous timber picket fence. The new fence was built at the expense of J. R. Campbell, whose parents had been tenants of *Conroy's Cottage* in 1884-1885.¹⁴

In 1901, *St. Brigid's High School* opened. Unlike the primary school it was not a purpose built high school. It operated on the ground floor of the convent, in *Conroy's Cottage* and in three other old cottages on the site.¹⁵

Circa 1915-1920, a two roomed timber framed first floor extension, known by the sisters as *Paradise* was added to the north of the chapel to provide accommodation for Sister M. Borgia who had contracted tuberculosis. The second room in this stage five extension provided additional sleeping accommodation for other sisters.¹⁶ Circa 1920, two laundry rooms were built, which extended the ground floor kitchen and refectory service wing to the north east. Constructed of face brick work, it is difficult to distinguish from the 1897 building.

Circa 1925, additional first floor accommodation comprising sixteen new cells was constructed of face brickwork over the service wing.¹⁷

Circa 1928, two cottages immediately to the west of the convent were demolished to allow space for a new boarding school. The work was not carried out as land was, instead, purchased at Lesmurdie to construct *St. Brigid's Boarding School in the Hills*, which opened in April 1929.¹⁸

In the latter half of this century, the increasing pressure for land and housing and the subsequent development of the northern suburbs, caused families to move out of the area and encouraged industrial and commercial businesses to move in.

In 1972, *St. Brigid's High School* closed and the students moved to new premises at Koondoola and, in February 1974, the Sisters of Mercy vacated *St. Brigid's Convent* and moved to new premises at Craigie.¹⁹ Some of the stained glass windows were incorporated into the new Craigie buildings, and important items of movable religious heritage were relocated from the chapel.

The Department of Corrective services took over the former *St. Brigid's Convent* as the venue for the West Perth Work Release Hostel.²⁰ Accommodation was provided for working prisoners who were obliged to remain in the building at all times they were not working or seeking work.

¹⁴ *The WA Record* (28 July 1938, Perth), pp. 7, 10; cited in Palassis, p. 12.

¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 15.

¹⁶ *Joining in the Dance*; Interview conducted by Lucy Williams, April 1994 with the Sisters of Mercy, formerly of St Brigid's, West Perth cited in Palassis, p. 12.

¹⁷ *ibid*.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p. 13.

¹⁹ *ibid*.

²⁰ Levitt, E. G. Tour notes of the former St Brigid's convent building (unpublished 1991); Interview by Lucy Williams cited in Palassis, p. 13.

Circa 1982, the Public Works Department constructed new toilet facilities which resulted in the loss of the rear verandah constructed in 1897.²¹

Circa 1983, the Prison's Department proposed to demolish the former *St. Brigid's Convent* and to erect a new purpose built hostel. The proposal was eventually rejected because of the adverse response from the local community and on 18 April 1986, Lot Y144 was transferred to the State Government. Subsequently, on 6 November 1987, Reserve 40197 (including former Lot Y144) was gazetted.

On 1 March 1989, the former *St. Brigid's Convent* began use as the *Northbridge Community Corrections Centre*. It is still being used for this purpose although the first floor of the building is no longer in use.²²

On 9 September 1991, the National Trust of Australia (WA) classified *St. Brigid's Convent*.²³

The surrounding area is presently dominated by industrial workshops and commercial businesses, however the current trend towards inner-city housing may change this. The former Public Works Depot directly south of the convent is soon to be redeveloped for mixed residential use.

The City of Perth has advised that the area is zoned for industrial use, but that Residential R160 or General Commercial development is encouraged.²⁴ A proposal to change the zoning to Residential R160 or general commercial is being considered.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

St. Brigid's Convent is part of the much larger *St. Brigid's Precinct*, which is bounded to the north by Aberdeen Street, to the south by John Street, to the east by the buildings Fitzgerald Street and to the west by the Mitchell Freeway.

The convent is situated on Lot N^o 983, class C reserve N^o 40197.

Architectural Style.

The period in which the major phase of the design and construction of the convent took place (Stage 4 - 1897) is referred to as Federation. In Western Australia at this time a variety of architectural styles were applied to building design.

The style of the convent is generally referred to as Gothic, the predominant architectural style of religious buildings built in Perth at the turn of the century. However the building also possesses Romanesque characteristics, a style that the architect particularly favoured because of the similarities

²¹ *Building Management Authority Records* cited in Palassis, p. 13.

²² Levitt, E. G. ; cited in Palassis, p. 14.

²³ Collins, D. *St Brigid's Church, Convent, School and Parish Hall, National Trust Assessment Exposition*, (for the National Trust of Australia, Perth 1991) cited in Palassis, p. 14.

²⁴ City of Perth *City Planning Scheme Plan No.451 - 2*; cited in Peter D Webb and Associates, *Former St Brigid's Convent Conservation Plan Supplementary Planning Report* (Perth, 1994), p. 3 cited in Palassis, p. 115.

between the climates of Perth and the Southern Mediterranean countries where the Romanesque style originated.²⁵

Stage One - c.1881

The oldest extant structure on the site is the four bedroom cottage known as *Conroy's Cottage*. The cottage, dating from c.1881, has been subject to a number of alterations and is now an integral part of the larger building. Although rendered and painted in recent years, and re-roofed as recently as 1988, the cottage is still recognisable as a simple dwelling of the last century. The condition of the brickwork under the render can be observed from within the adjoining school building, where it is apparent that the clay is soft and friable.²⁶

Stage Two - c.1889-1894 and Stage Three - 1896.

The second stage of construction is of unknown date, but the third stage of construction dates from March 1896. These two stages are identifiable on site as being of separate construction. The materials used are similar, only the slight mismatching of brickwork coursing indicates the joint.

The accommodation cells of the stage two and three development are of simple form, each with one door and one window, and plain plastered walls with a timber floor, these rooms remain intact currently being used as offices, with one cell fitted out as a security lock up.

Stage three, designed by Michael Cavanagh, in March 1896, differs little in proportion and layout to the earlier stage two development.

Stage Four - 1897.

The major phase of construction is the stage four works of 1897, also designed by Michael Cavanagh. The public facade of the stage four works directly address John Street which is now truncated to the west by the Mitchell Freeway.

Examination of early photographs clearly shows exposed face brick work, now obscured on the front elevation by render and paintwork.²⁷ The detail to arches, balusters and window bays is concrete, now painted although generally in a fair condition, but with isolated cracking and reinforcement corrosion resulting in spalling of concrete.

The bay window to the east on the John Street elevation has been altered from the original with the removal of the original multi-finial parapet, and has been replaced by a simpler rendered brick design. The render, applied sometime between 1919 and 1955, obscures alterations. Three out of the five cross finials placed on the apex of the gables of stage four are now missing, but the locating metal pins remain.

The roof cladding and flashing has deteriorated over the years. Additions to the exterior of the property have continued since the major stage four works.

²⁵ *ibid* p. 51.

²⁶ *ibid*, p. 49.

²⁷ *ibid*. pp. 38, 49.

Stage Five - c.1915-1919.

A first floor bedroom addition (known as *Paradise*) was constructed c.1915-1919, to the north of the chapel and is identified as stage five. Constructed of fibre sheets (possibly asbestos) on a timber frame, with louvre windows, this element is now in a poor state of repair, and unsound.²⁸

Stage Six - c.1920.

Stage six, comprising of two additional rooms on the ground floor to the north of the kitchen is constructed of face brickwork but is in a generally poor condition with rising damp evident on the east wall.²⁹

Stage Seven - c.1925.

A first floor addition, also of brick exterior walls forms stage seven, located over the northern wing. Some internal walls are constructed of unknown material (possibly asbestos) on timber studs. These rooms are generally of fair condition although may be subject to water ingress through the roof during periods of heavy rain.³⁰

Stage Eight - 1982

Inserted below *Paradise* on the location of the earlier verandah is the current toilet area. Of different scale, proportion and fenestration to the earlier structures it was constructed in 1982, to Public Works Department drawings. This addition is of modern face brick and is generally in good order.³¹

13.3 REFERENCES

Collins D., *St. Brigid's Church, Convent, School and Parish Hall*, National Trust Assessment Exposition, (for The National Trust of Australia, Perth, 1991).

Palassis Architects: *Conservation Plan, former St. Brigid's Convent, John Street, Northbridge* (Building Management Authority, Perth, 1994).

28 *ibid.* pp. 50, 53.

29 *ibid.* p. 50.

30 *ibid.*

31 *ibid.*