

Benevolent Asylum

Miegunyah Student Project Award 2021
Lachlan Welsh



This document is a compilation of research conducted as part of the Miegunyah Student Project Award 2021.

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Introduction

Sir Russell Grimwade was a man with a vision. Despite his questionable attitudes towards First Nations cultures, he strongly believed in the potential of Melbourne to become a humane and progressive civilisation. Taking great pride in his nationality, this wealthy industrialist sought to collect and preserve evidence of colonial ‘achievements’ in early Australia (Bunbury, 2020). The Miegunyah Collection, bequeathed by Grimwade and his wife Mab to the University of Melbourne, reflects this paradigm of empire-building through collecting (Ormond-Parker, 2020). Art, literature, and as we will see, architecture were all important components in constructing an ideology of Western exceptionalism.

In 1934, Grimwade made his grandest gesture of colonial pride. Purchasing the supposed home of Captain James Cook from a village in Yorkshire, the building was dismantled and transported brick-by-brick to be reconstructed in Melbourne’s Fitzroy Gardens. Grimwade knew that Cook’s association with this building was tenuous, however, he was also cognisant of the power buildings can wield in guiding the narrative of a place (Healy, 2020). In this act, he sought to fabricate a sense of national tradition in this imperial outpost, subtly concealing all pre-existing culture. Through such a theatrical contrivance of history, architecture can be seen as instrumental in establishing ideology.

1. Goodman Teale (draughtsman) Nathaniel Whitlock (engraver), *The City of Melbourne, Australia, 1855*, hand-coloured etching and engraving, The University of Melbourne Art Collection, Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.
2. George Bell, *Sir Russell Grimwade, 1951*, oil on canvas, The University of Melbourne Art Collection, Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.
3. *Cook’s Cottage, Fitzroy Gardens, c.1940s*, State Library of Victoria.



Research





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Prominent in the Miegunyah Collection is the photography of Charles Nettleton. Taken in the later-nineteenth century, this collection of images depicts some of the first large public buildings in Melbourne. These images were widely circulated to demonstrate the ‘civilising’ effect of the Empire as well as providing a source of civic pride (Gellatly, 2020). Whilst most of the buildings are still standing, one stood out to me in its lack of familiarity. Demolished in 1911, the Benevolent Asylum once stood proudly at the head of the city, watching over the Hoddle Grid. This building formed the basis of the following research project, providing a source for further investigation of the relationship between architecture and the colonial imaginary.



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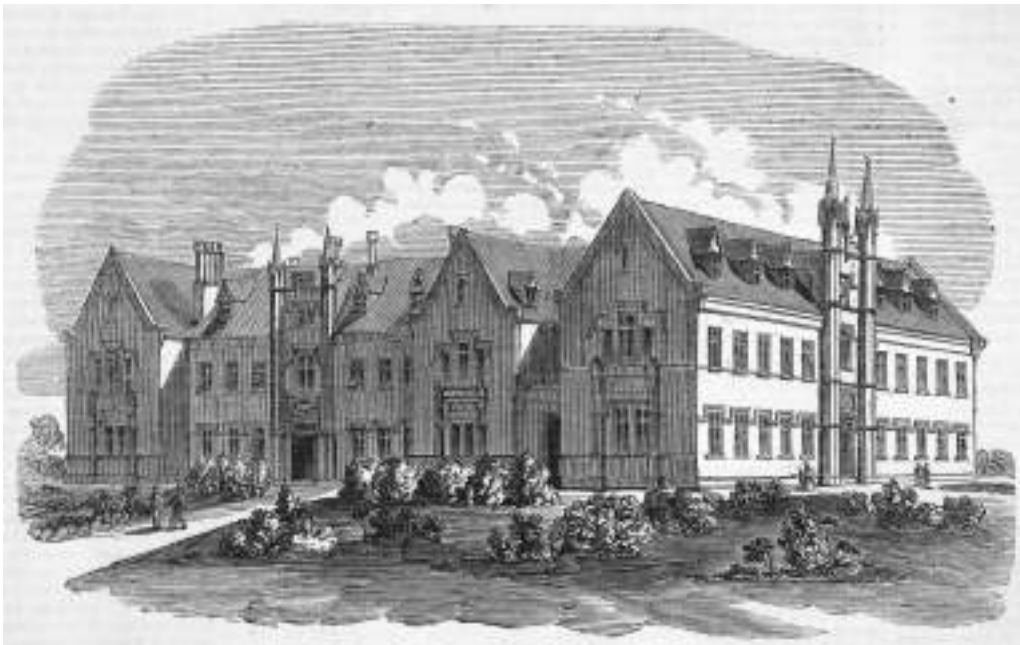
4. Charles Nettleton, Benevolent Asylum, c.1860s, albumen silver photograph, The University of Melbourne Art Collection, Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.
5. Nettleton, 93 Collins Street (next to Independent Church – Russell Street), c.1860s.
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8. Nettleton, Royal Mint, c.1860s.
9. Nettleton, Alfred Hospital, c.1860s.
10. Nettleton, Scot's Church, c.1860s.
11. Nettleton, Princes Bridge, c.1860s.
12. Nettleton, Custom House, c.1860s.



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The city of Melbourne was founded in 1835. In the years that followed, cases of poverty and destitution were increasing. Systems of welfare were virtually non-existent, leaving many elderly citizens and those injured at the goldfields with no support. To combat this growing issue, a proposal was made for a place of refuge for the “aged, infirm, disabled or destitute of all creeds and nations” to be constructed in the open bushlands north of the city (Kehoe, 1998). A design competition was held, won by architect Charles Laing, and in 1851 the Melbourne Benevolent Asylum was complete. This grand Tudor Gothic building was the first permanent structure in today’s North Melbourne and is considered one of the foremost public welfare institutions in Victoria. Looming at the top of Victoria Street, the Asylum held a commanding presence as a symbol of civility, aligning with the upper-class ‘progressive’ ambitions for Melbourne. On the day of its inauguration, over half of the local population marched proudly through the city to the new site in a spectacle of self-congratulation and charitable virtue. As historian John Poynter identifies however, the aspirations of the founders were more ambitious than the outcome in reality (Poynter, 1998).

13. The Benevolent Asylum, engraving of Stage 1, 1851, *The Illustrated Australian Magazine*, vol. III, no. 13, July 1851.
14. Benevolent Asylum, Melbourne, 1862, wood engraving, *The Illustrated Melbourne Post*, State Library of Victoria.
15. Arthur Willmore, The Benevolent Asylum, engraving showing east wing, 1862, *Victoria Illustrated* (2nd series), State Library of Victoria.
16. Charles Nettleton, Benevolent Asylum, eastern frontage, c.1868, albumen silver photograph, State Library of Victoria.
17. Nettleton, Benevolent Asylum, east and north wings, c.1868, albumen silver photograph, State Library of Victoria.
18. Nettleton, Benevolent Asylum, north and south wings completed, c.1870, albumen silver photograph, State Library of Victoria.



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During its lifetime, the Benevolent Asylum provided relief and refuge to over 14,000 residents. As demand for accommodation grew, the complex was frequently expanded with new wings attached to the original building spreading out across the site. Although the colonial government contributed significantly toward the cost of construction, the Asylum was in large part a charitable endeavour, the operation of which was presided over by members of the upper class (Gleeson, 1999). Guided by the ideology of Victorian benevolence, the running of the institution was to be privately funded — a manoeuvre that cunningly sidestepped the creation of a proper taxation system. Purported to be a more humane solution than the workhouse model back in England, it was based on the belief that the poor should not expect assistance as a right but as a privilege, allowing the colony's elite to demonstrate their peerless charity (Kehoe, 1998). This undercurrent manifested in the architecture of the building; a noble edifice symbolising the humanity of Melbournians. Whilst it was often remarked that Melbourne's poor lived in luxury, behind the enchanting façade, a darker reality was concealed. Upon closer examination of this history, the inner reality of the Benevolent Asylum reveals a great deal about the true motives of Melbourne's early elite.



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19. Victoria Street, North Melbourne, c.1880, albumen silver photograph, State Library of Victoria.
20. D. McDonald, Benevolent Asylum Melbourne, c. 1870, albumen silver photograph, State Library of Victoria.
21. John William Lindt, Benevolent Asylum, North Melbourne, Vic., 1878/1894, albumen silver photograph, State Library of Victoria.
22. Lindt, Benevolent Asylum, North Melbourne, Vic., 1878/1894, albumen silver photograph, State Library of Victoria.



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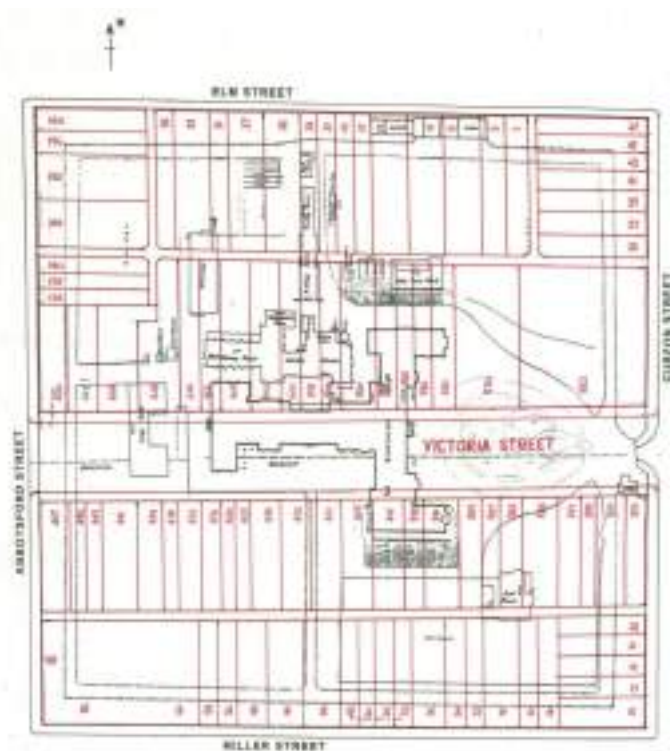
- 23. Dinner at the Benevolent Asylum, 1898, *The Weekly Times*, 31 December 1898, State Library of Victoria.
- 24. The grounds of the Benevolent Asylum, 1868, wood engraving, *The Illustrated Australian*, State Library of Victoria.
- 25. Jubilee Celebration at the Melbourne Benevolent Asylum, 1900, *The Leader*, 7 July 1900, State Library of Victoria.
- 26. Randall Mann, Christmas Day at the Benevolent Asylum, 1895, *The Illustrated Australian*, State Library of Victoria.

Reconstruction





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In June of 1911, sixty years after its inception, the Asylum was demolished, and residents transferred to a new site in Cheltenham. The old grounds were subdivided into residential blocks with Victoria Street cut through the site erasing the presence of the building and allowing it to fade into obscurity. While architecture can communicate and preserve ideologies which we would at times rather forget, it can also act as a bridge back in time allowing for critical historical analysis. With the demolition of the Asylum came a deterrence to closely examine this questionable period in Melbourne's social history. It became clear then that reconstructing this forgotten building was an integral first step in any further investigation.

27. Sydney Arnold, The Melbourne Benevolent Asylum Buildings in course of removal, 1911, albumen silver photograph, State Library of Victoria.
28. The Melbourne Benevolent Asylum Estate, adapted from MMBW Plan 1895 with plan of subdivision imposed.

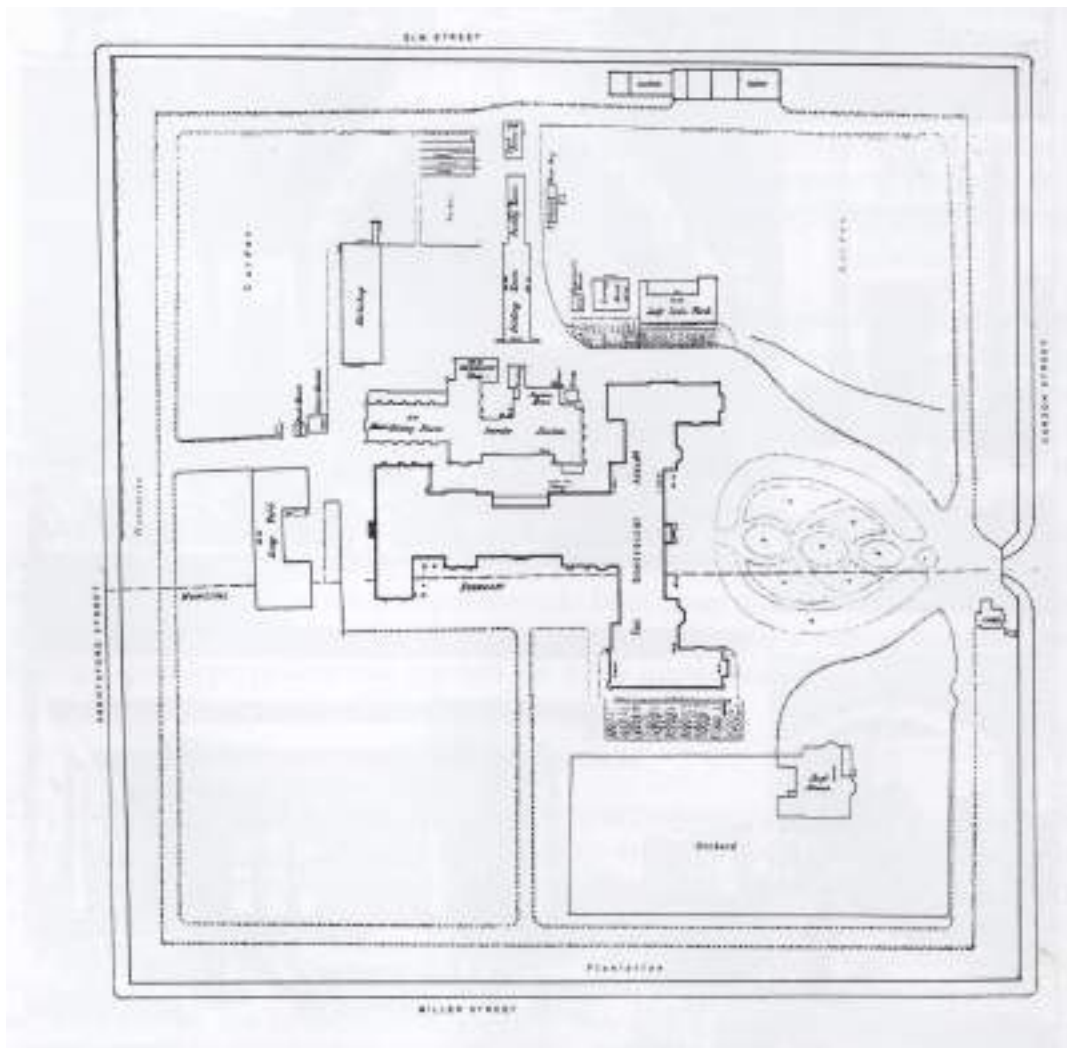


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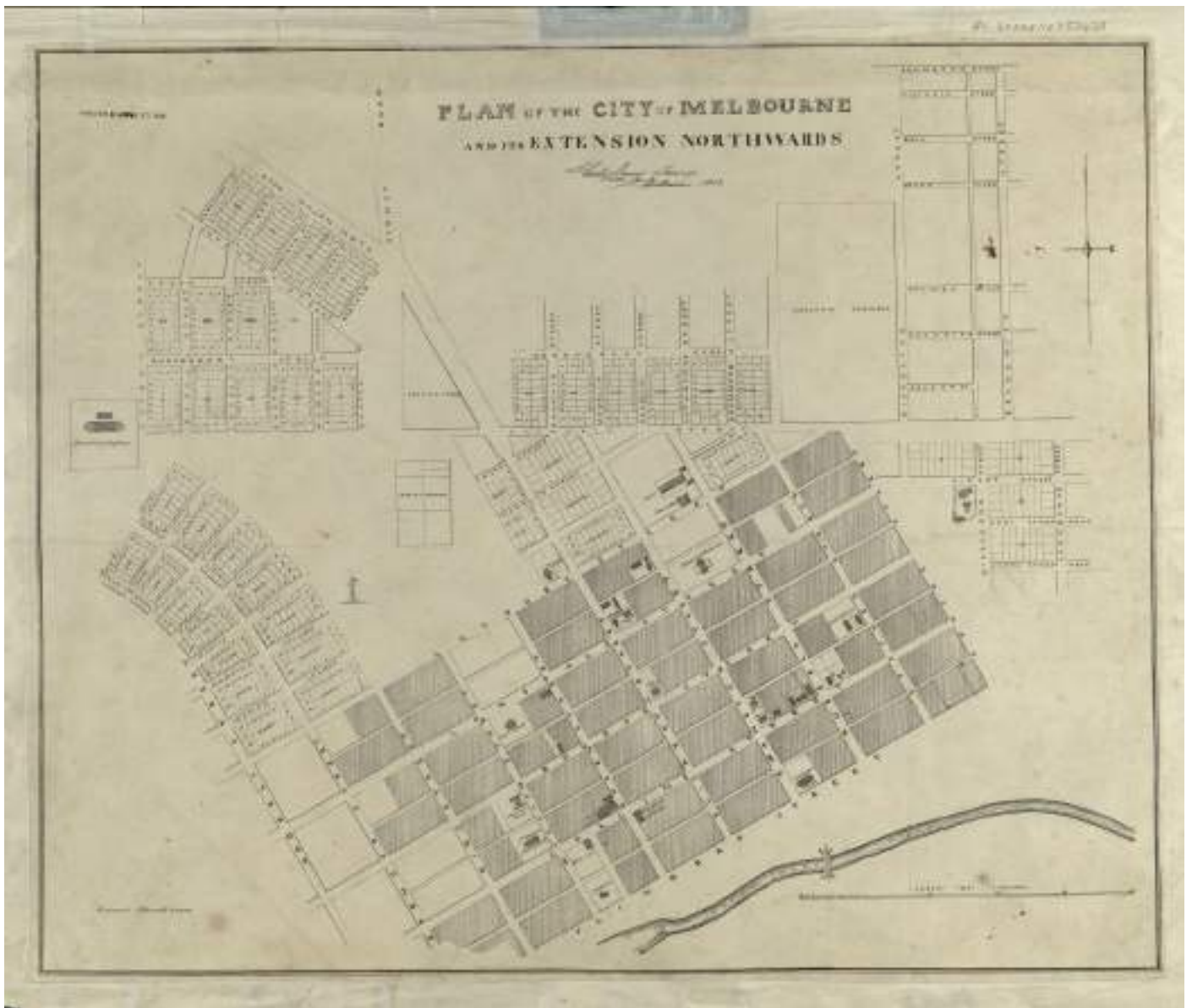
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Beyond the photograph by Nettleton in the Miegunyah Collection, visual documentation of the Asylum is scarce. A handful of engravings and photographs were found in the State Library Victoria archive; however, these did not include any architectural drawings. Some municipal urban plans were uncovered through the Melbourne Water (formerly Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works) archives, as well as some basic site plans in a book published by The Hotham History Project – a historical society based in North Melbourne. By far the most fortuitous discovery in this research phase was an undergraduate architectural thesis completed by an unnamed student at the University of Melbourne sometime in the 1960s. Not only did this document provide rough building footprints of each wing (based on a series of now inaccessible sewerage maps), but it also included thorough written descriptions of the building extracted from newspaper articles, meeting records and journal entries. Together, this fragmentary collection of source material provided a foundation for my remodelling of the Asylum using contemporary techniques.

29. Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, Melbourne and North Melbourne, no. 31, 1895, State Library of Victoria.
30. Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, City of Melbourne, no.24, 1895, State Library of Victoria.
31. Plan of the Benevolent Asylum complex showing wards, workshops and gardens, plan adapted from M.M.B.W., 1895-1896, State Library of Victoria.

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- 32. Plan of Melbourne and its suburbs, accurately compile from the Government maps, 1850-1870, State Library of Victoria.
- 33. Charles Laing, Plan of the City of Melbourne and its extension northwards, 1852, State Library of Victoria.



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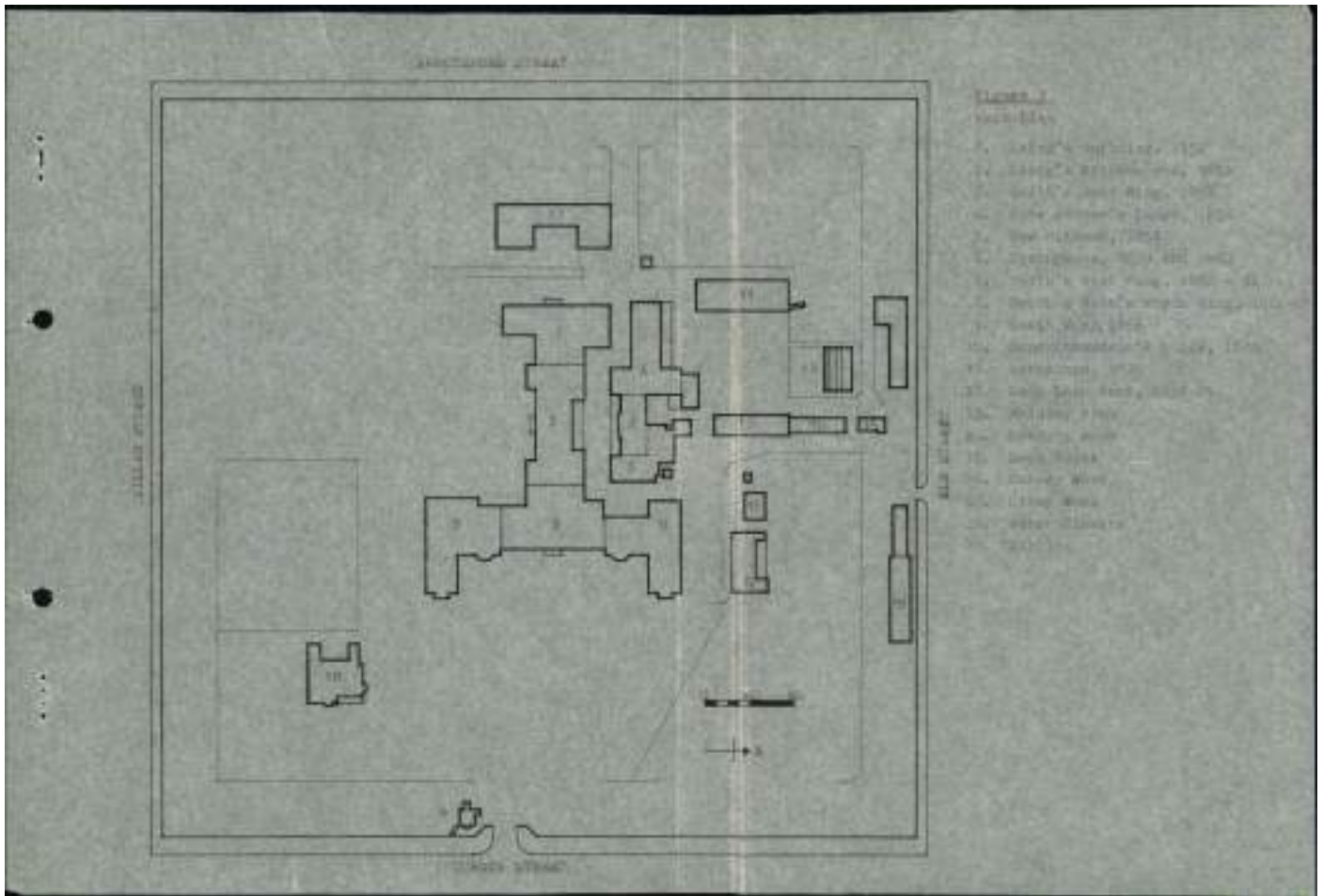
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- 34. Town allotments in Hotham/North Melbourne, 1858, Public Lands Office, State Library of Victoria.
- 35. Hotham, North Melbourne, 1878, State Library of Victoria.
- 36. Town allotments: North Melbourne and Parkside, 1858, State Library of Victoria.
- 37. Building allotments in Melbourne, 1864, State Library of Victoria.
- 38. Plan of allotments at Parkside, North Melbourne, parish of Jika Jika, 1956, State Library of Victoria.



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The Benevolent
 Asylum, North
 Melbourne 1851-1911

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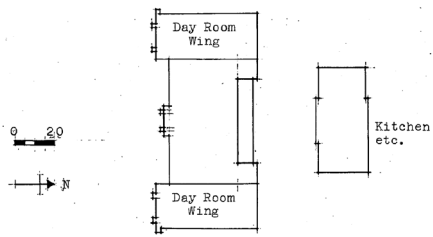


FIGURE 1.
Laing's Buildings

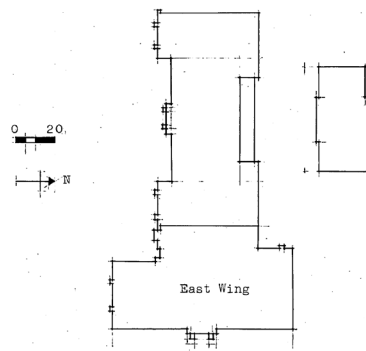


FIGURE 2.
Smith's East Wing

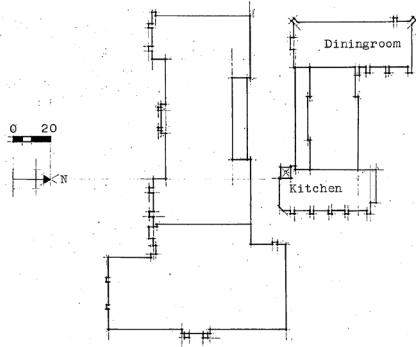


FIGURE 3.
New Kitchen and Diningroom

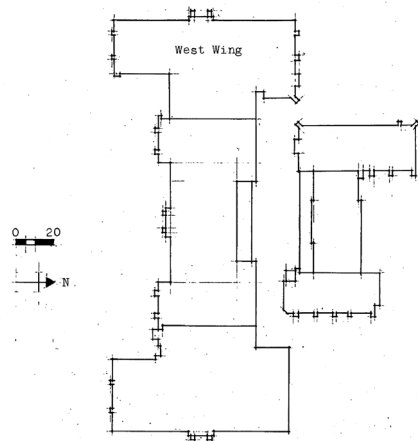


FIGURE 4.
Smith's West Wing

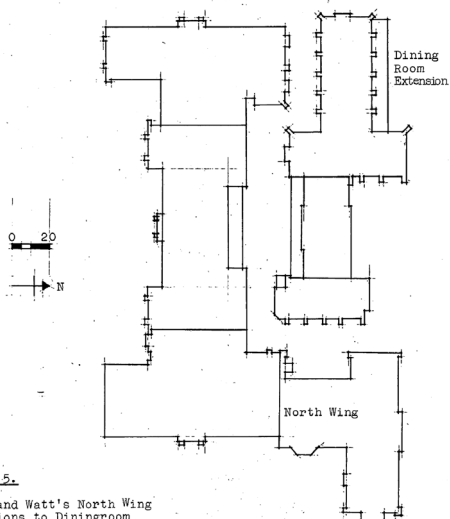


FIGURE 5.
Smith and Watt's North Wing
Extensions to Diningroom

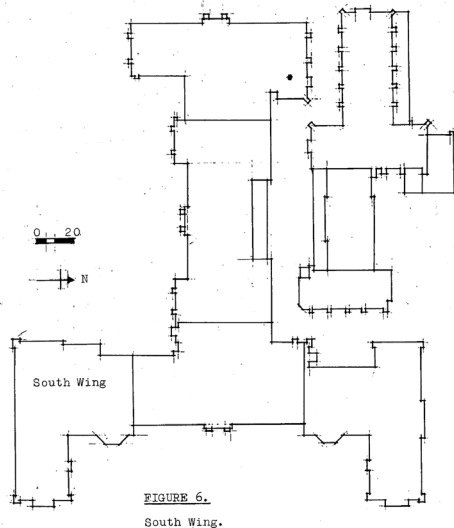
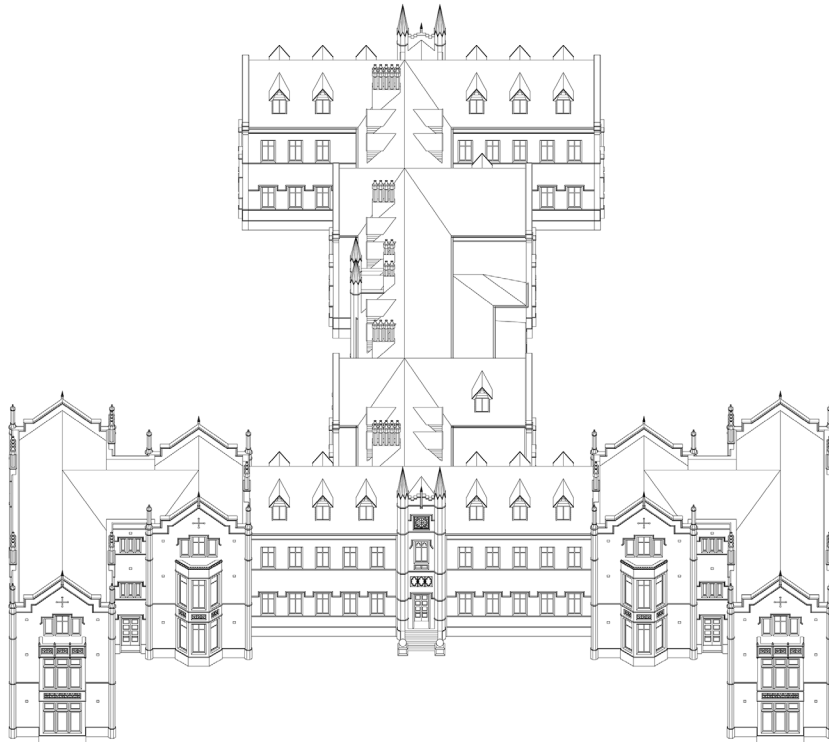


FIGURE 6.
South Wing.



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For this project, I digitally reconstructed the building based on the series of rough plans. Elevational details were measured proportionally from the few available photographs and written descriptions of the building aided in confirming key dimensions. Starting with these verifiable parts I then filled in any gaps by calling upon my own broader research of the Tudor Gothic style. Given the imprecision of this process, the result is only an approximation of what the building might have been. Wing by wing, façade by façade, detail by detail, the building was rematerialized, its presence established once again for critique in the present day. The content created in this process comprises elevational drawings of the two key facades as well as digital 3D models of each wing and the overall site. These new digital resources will now contribute to the University of Melbourne Archives so that future researchers may use them as a springboard for further investigation.

42. The Benevolent Asylum, final phase, south isometric drawing, 2021.
43. The Benevolent Asylum, final phase, east isometric drawing, 2021.
44. The Benevolent Asylum, main building, east and west wings, south elevation, 2021.
45. The Benevolent Asylum, east, north and south wings, east elevation, 2021.
46. The Benevolent Asylum site model, south isometric, 2021.
47. The Benevolent Asylum site model, east isometric, 2021.
48. The Benevolent Asylum, final phase model, east elevation isometric, 2021.
49. The Benevolent Asylum, early phase model, south elevation isometric, 2021.



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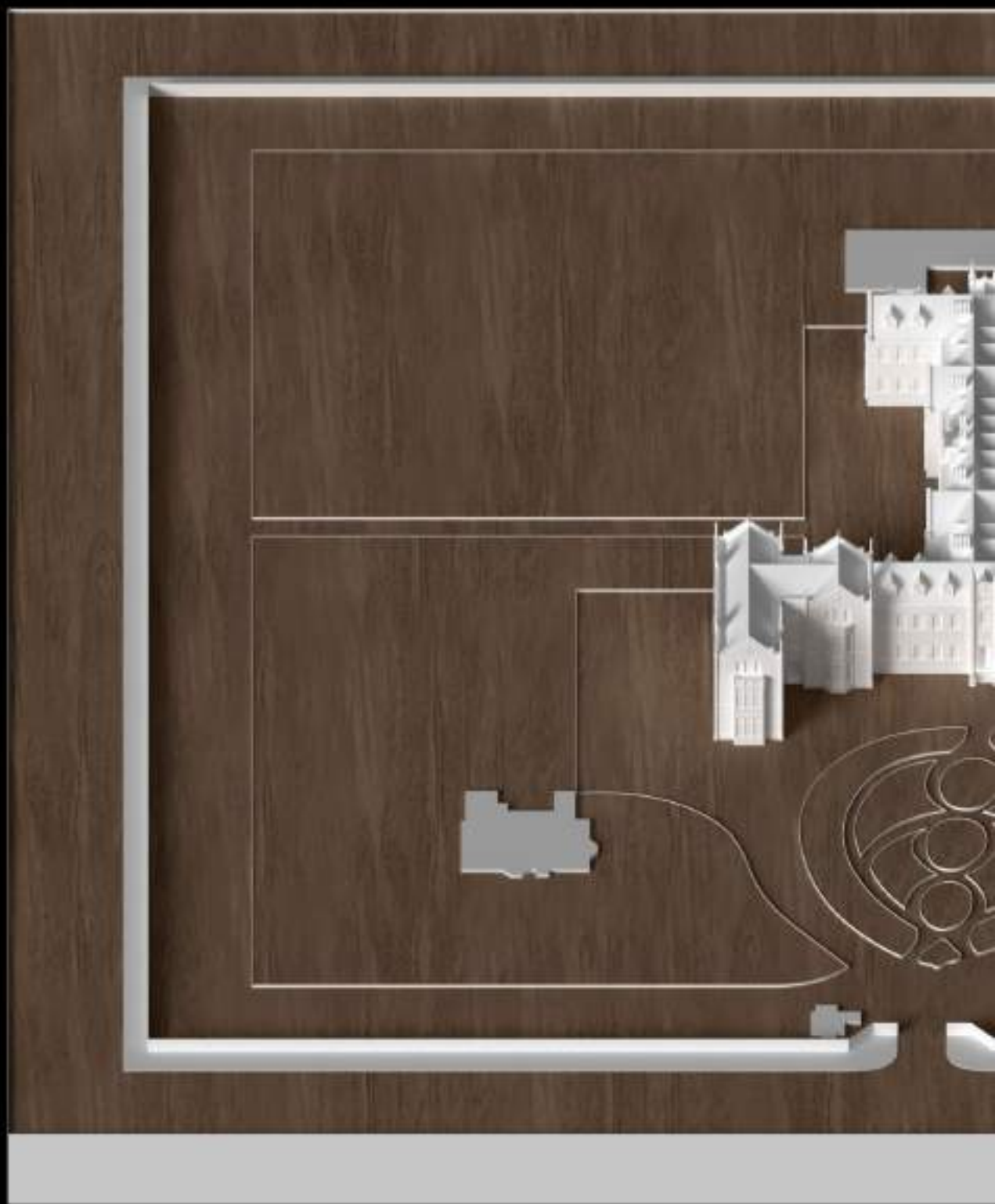


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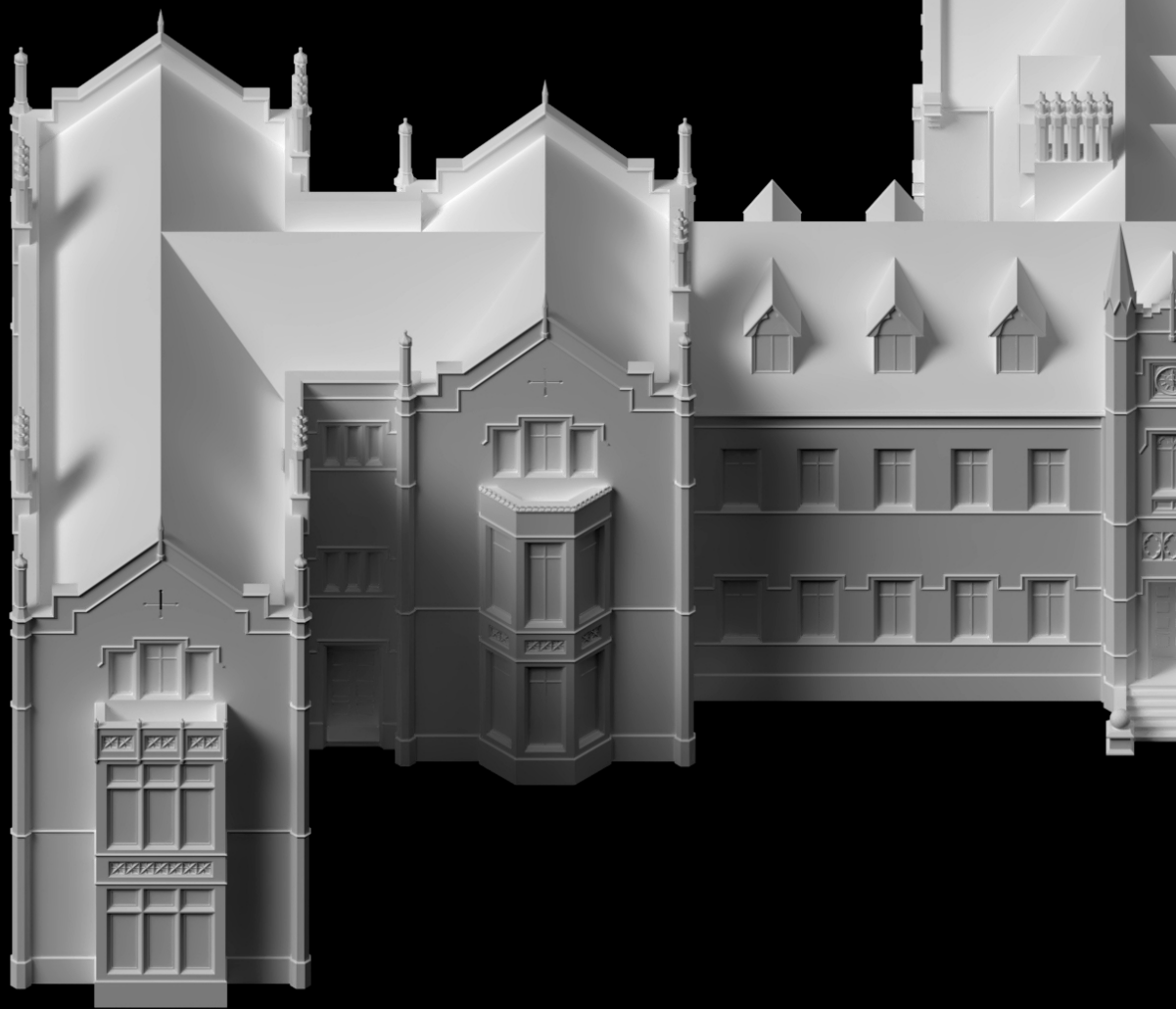










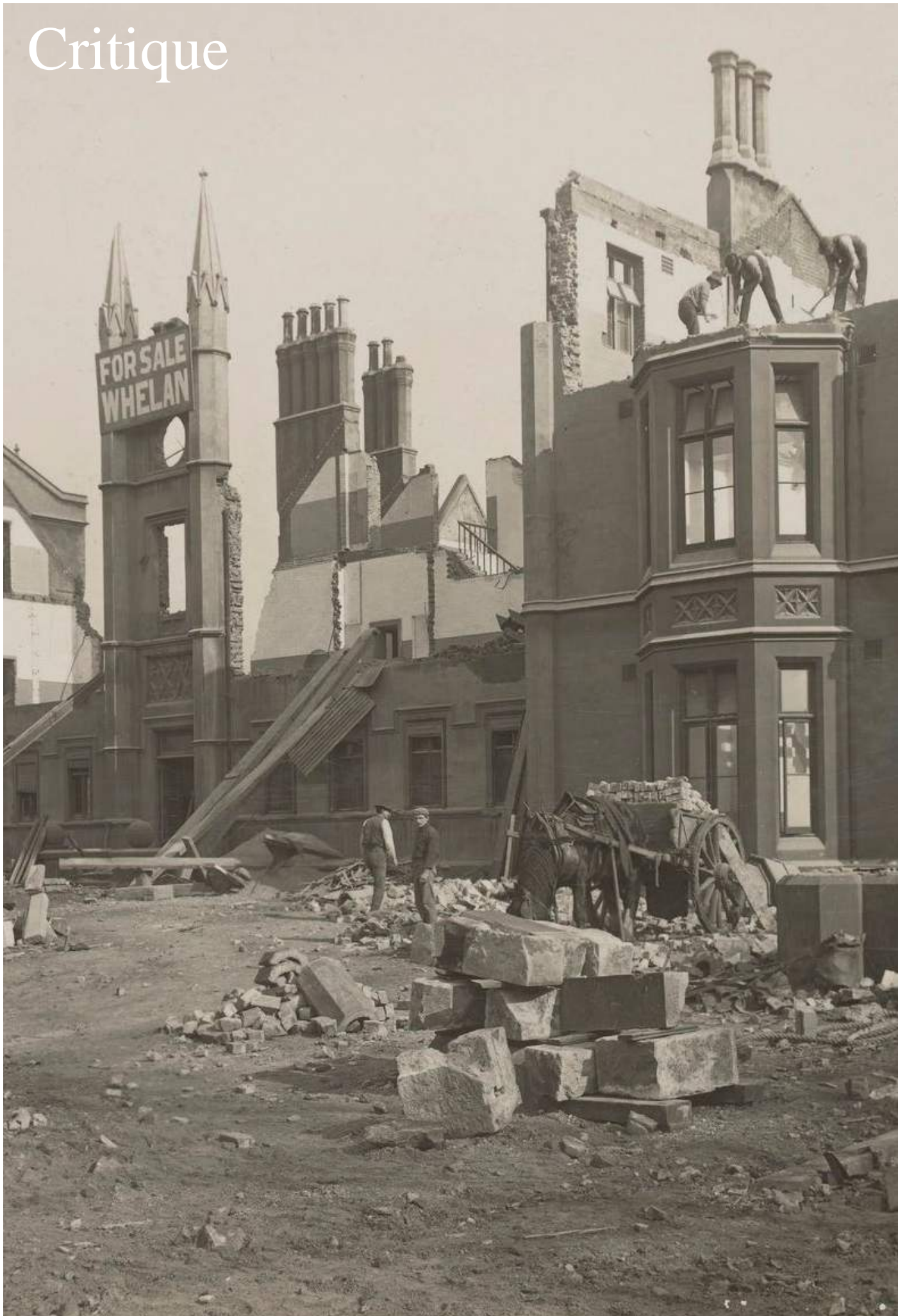








Critique



The Benevolent Asylum



The Superintendent



Laying down the law



15 years bedridden



A nurse



Mark



A general favorite



Right

102 years



Old & New Girls



A reader

Mark

SCENES AT THE BENEVOLENT ASYLUM

My reconstruction of the Benevolent Asylum gave way to a more critical interrogation of its history. Life inside this institution is rigorously documented by local historian Mary Kehoe, the inner reality behind the grand façade not so heartening after all. The promise of private philanthropy was a hollow one with marginal funding given by only a handful of wealthy Melburnians. Ironically, for a large part of its existence the Asylum was supported primarily by government funding. This shaky financial position resulted in the perpetual lack of resources to provide adequate care for its residents. The building was in squalid and unhygienic condition, led by the slovenly management of self-appointed members of the upper class. The situation was particularly dire in the early days with food inedible, milk sour, unclean drinking water, rusty plates, and washing water shared between three to four women (Kehoe, 1998). Dilapidation was a persistent reality of the building with leaking roofs, bad ventilation, and difficulty of circulation contributing to the general discomfort of life inside. Staff were accused of acts of deliberate cruelty, such as giving blisters as a form of punishment and denying medical comforts to sick and dying inmates (Kehoe, 1998). In short, the conditions inside the Asylum were nothing less than barbarous. Life for those impoverished people who were 'lucky' enough to gain admittance was generally wretched and short (Gleeson, 1999).

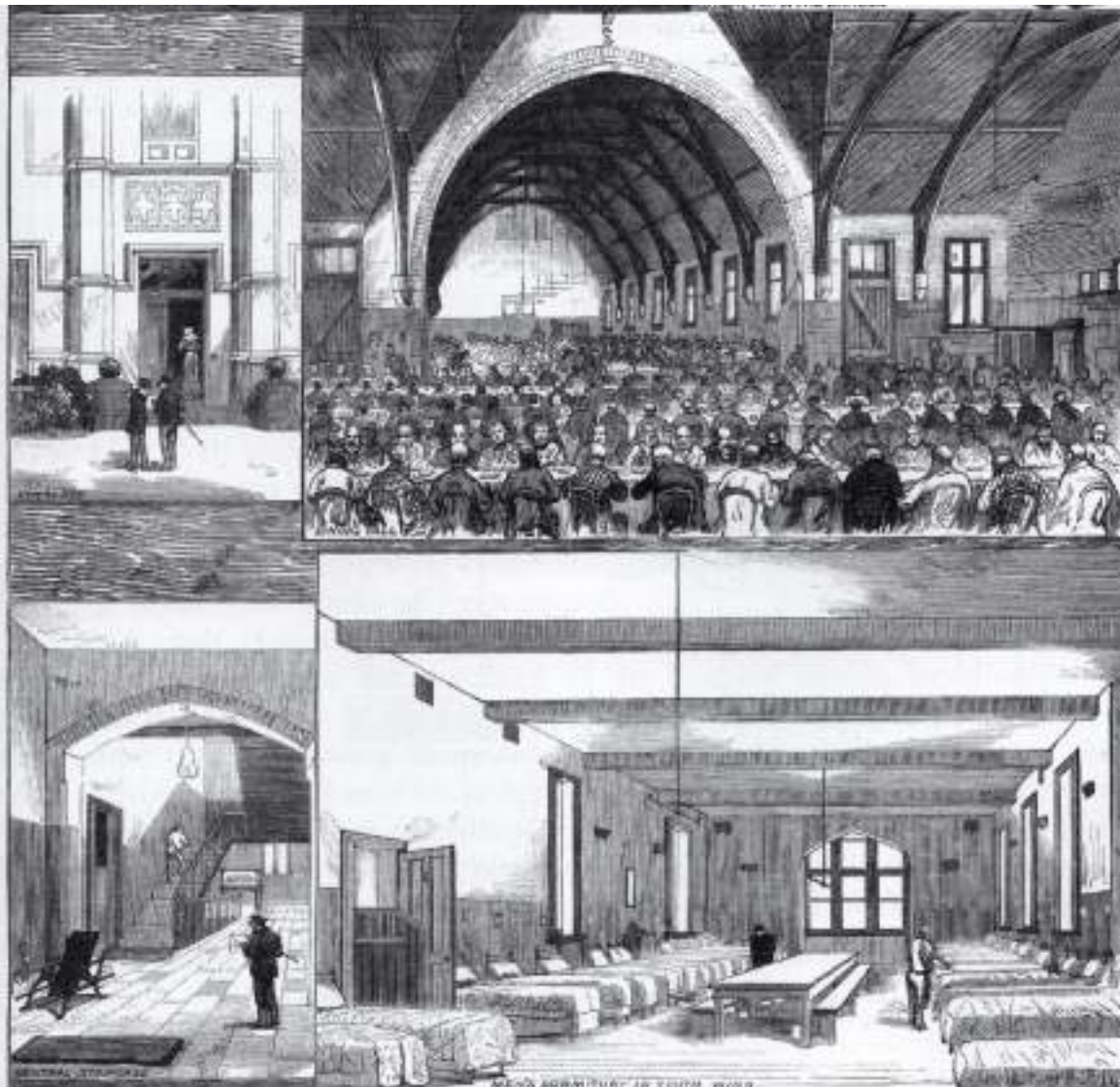
Whilst the Asylum presented an idea of Melbourne as an affluent and civilised fantasyland where even paupers got to live in palatial homes, it also embodied an elaborate attempt to push such people out of sight and out of mind, behind a performative curtain of architecture (Gleeson, 1999). Reminiscent of Australia's carceral roots, those most needy in society were physically removed to a place of confinement under the auspices of charity. The reality of early Melbourne's competitive and ruthless labour economy was transmuted into the grand façade of the Asylum. Historian Richard Kennedy, whose work on the history of social welfare in Australia formed the basis of my critique, asks whether the alleged 'smiling facades' of the Melbourne Benevolent Asylum, compared with the malevolent aspect of the English workhouse, proclaimed a clean break with the British past, or concealed a subtler strategy to deter applicants? (Kennedy, 1982) It could be argued that rather than functioning differently to such typologies in Britain, the Asylum was simply a repackaging of Poor Law sentiments. The harsh inner reality of the institution worked as a deterrent in tandem with the outer appearance denying the presence of a deserving poor.

51. Harvie & Sutcliffe, Melbourne Benevolent Asylum Jubilee Celebration, group portrait of benefactors and supporters, 1900, gelatin silver photograph, State Library of Victoria.

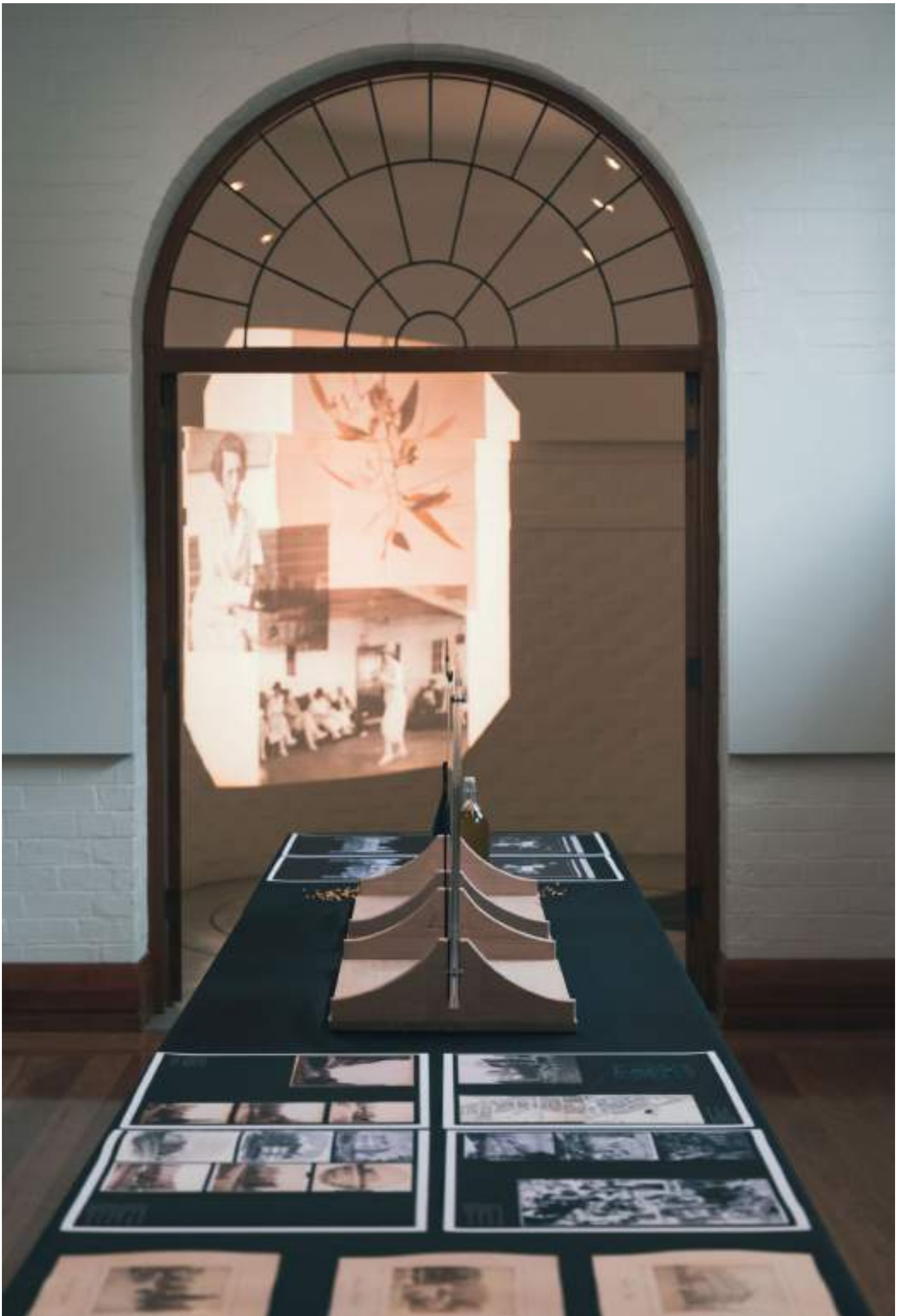
52. Sketches in the Asylum, 1881, The Australasian Sketcher, 31 December 1881.



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In the exhibition of this project at the Grainger Museum, my critique of the Benevolent Asylum was explored in a visual format. A vertical display comprising two timber stands holding layers of clear acrylic presents the building reduced to the two key facades that formed its outer identity during its existence. These faces gave precedence to what the building represented to those on the outside over any acknowledgement of what happened inside. Given documentation was almost solely focused on these south and east elevations of the building, the installation also seeks to identify blind spots in the archival material. By presenting each façade as a paper-thin artifact contained between the acrylic layers the edifice of benevolence is hollowed out enabling a dual perception for the viewer. From the privileged side, the presence of the Asylum remains intact, whilst moving around to the rear the facades are revealed to be as flimsy as the good faith that they were founded upon. This critical mode of display reveals the Asylum to be the largely hollow gesture of colonial exceptionalism and back-patting that it always was.



53. Benevolent Asylum, exhibition, Grainger Museum, March 8 2022.

54. Miegunyah Student Project Awards, public presentation, Benevolent Asylum, Lachlan Welsh.





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55. Benevolent Asylum, exhibition, Grainger Museum, March 8 2022.

56. Benevolent Asylum, exhibition.



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57. Benevolent Asylum, exhibition, Grainger Museum, March 8 2022.

58. Benevolent Asylum, exhibition.





Conclusion

In the book *Pride of Place: Exploring the Grimwade Collection*, Alisa Bunbury, curator of the Grimwade Collection, outlines the complexities embedded in the notion of 'pride'. At once a virtue or recognition for valued abilities or accomplishments; conversely it may be a vice, the unmerited satisfaction in one's own actions (Bunbury, 2020). In Grimwade's installation of Cooks' Cottage, as well as the Benevolent Asylum, one can discern that architecture is not neutral but a system of subtly operating ideological billboards that make up the appearance, both visual and psychological, of our cities. One comes to understand the ability of a façade to act as proxy for real social change. By distancing themselves from the presence of the poor, Melbourne's elite washed their hands of any true financial responsibility, congratulating themselves whilst doing nothing to engage with the true dynamics of wealth inequality. The Benevolent Asylum provides a rich case study illustrating at once how architecture can enforce and establish ideology within the society that it is located, whilst also providing a link back in time for further investigation. The reanimation of this building affords a clearer view of our local history and a stronger criticality of our public architecture, prompting us to question who such buildings might truly have served behind their façades.

References

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Image List

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 52. Sketches in the Asylum, 1881, *The Australasian Sketcher*, 31 December 1881.
 53. Benevolent Asylum, exhibition, Grainger Museum, March 8 2022.
 54. Miegunyah Student Project Awards, public presentation, Benevolent Asylum, Lachlan Welsh.
 55. Benevolent Asylum, exhibition, Grainger Museum, March 8 2022.
 56. Benevolent Asylum, exhibition.
 57. Benevolent Asylum, exhibition, Grainger Museum, March 8 2022.
 58. Benevolent Asylum, exhibition.
 59. Benevolent Asylum, east frontage, digital reconstruction.

