

Living heritage: between narratives and architectures around St Mary's

Abstract

This research addresses the complexities surrounding the architectural heritage of former Stolen Generations institutions, focusing on the St Mary's site in Alice Springs. Following its acquisition by the Northern Territory Government, preservation efforts remain at an early stage. When I first visited St Mary's, I sensed the site revealed tensions and diverse ways in which different groups engage with and understand the place, reflecting its difficult past and uncertain future. As the research evolves, I am beginning to map the various groups, institutions, narratives, and ongoing practices connected to the site. These include past residents, heritage professionals, government bodies, and others who hold cultural, emotional, or practical stakes in how the place is remembered and maintained. This broad approach allows me to foreground the complexity and multiplicity embedded in St Mary's as a site of contested heritage. Employing ethnographic methods and cultural mapping, the study seeks to understand how these differing perspectives shape and complicate heritage practices. Rather than seeking a singular interpretation or preservation pathway, the research aims to trouble simplified narratives and promote more inclusive, reflective approaches to heritage. Ultimately, this work hopes to contribute to broader conversations around reconciliation, collective memory, and the responsibilities of engaging with difficult histories in contemporary heritage practice.