

**Restoration Australia: an easy watch about - Guardian, The (London, England) - October 20, 2020**

October 20, 2020 | Guardian, The (London, England) | Walter Marsh

Like a kind of Grand Designs with more trips to the library, Restoration Australia has returned for another season of genteel Victorian houses, crumbling cottages and rambling pastoral homesteads, and the brave (or foolish) homeowners working to rescue them.

Hosted by architect Stuart Harrison, it's easily watchable, occasionally delightful television. We root for the country husband-and-wife teams who roll up their sleeves to give old beauties some TLC. We cringe when hubris or inexperience leads to baffling misses, like last season's "stainless steel mesh cocoon". We revel in millennial renter schadenfreude when unexpected structural issues start to bleed money, and nod knowingly at a well-restored wrought iron veranda (having learnt about the intricacies of "Italianate" motifs moments earlier).

But the limitations of its historical inquiry can sometimes prove frustrating. Series three began earlier this month in fraught territory: Milton Terrace, an 1879 townhouse in the shadow of the Sydney Harbour Bridge bought for \$4.2m in 2015 as part of the Baird government's controversial sell-off of harbourside public housing. We now watch its new property developer owners spend millions more turning several spartan, subdivided government housing flats into one four-storey slice of Mayfair-inspired "global glam".

The protests that greeted the sale and evictions are briefly addressed by the show, but like in The Block's 2018 overhaul of St Kilda's Gatwick hotel, the grim subtexts of gentrification and inequality are largely sidestepped. Offsite, Harrison meets with historians and heritage experts who fill us in on the building's past, from the merchant whose original 1820s residence was subsumed into the Victorian-era terrace, to the 1900 plague outbreak that first prompted the government to take ownership.

But what about the stories we don't hear? We are invited to marvel at the giant sandstone blocks of Milton Terrace's ground-floor kitchen – an iconic feature of colonial Sydney architecture – but are stopped short of reflecting on the transformative effect such quarrying, building and occupation had on the land and life of the Gadigal nation. How Sydney Harbour, ground zero of British colonisation, was once dotted with giant shell middens that were ground up and fired to create the lime mortar holding many of those sandstone building blocks together. It's bitterly poignant to consider the heritage that was torn up and built over to create the two centuries of colonial heritage now protected by reams of planning restrictions and passionate community advocacy.

Last Sunday's episode descends on an 1876 home in Inverell, New South Wales: a "postcard-pretty" country town full of handsome old buildings that mirror the economic windfalls of 19th and 20th century mining and agriculture booms. But would it also be worth noting that it sits half an hour down the road from the site of the Myall Creek Massacre? It's a footnote that adds an important, if painful context: the mineral and pastoral wealth that gave rise to the town's charming architecture were made possible by violent dispossession just a few decades earlier.

The program has showed it is capable of tackling these issues – at least to an extent. In season two, a secluded Tasmanian property dubbed “Hunting Ground” is found to have been named for the mobs of kangaroos that once thrived there. As a curator at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery tells viewers, such abundance – which had been embraced by settlers seeking food – was no accident, but the result of years of fire stick-burning by the valley’s First Nations people. We don’t find out what became of them.

There is also another, broader undercurrent to the celebration of “built heritage”: in this country, it has long been used as a symbol of civilisation and tool of colonisation, with the supposed absence of permanent structures pre-settlement held up as evidence of **terra nullius**. Of course, it’s now accepted that this is a convenient and Eurocentric myth, laying the groundwork for what **Bruce Pascoe** describes as “colonial amnesia”. And there are certainly efforts to explore and revive Aboriginal architecture today – a contemporary recreation of historical winter dwellings from south-east Australia by Wiradjuri architect Samantha Rich and Kurna artist James Tylor is currently showing as part of Canberra’s public art biennial Contour 556 and DESIGN festival.

Throughout the series, Harrison and the show’s subjects reflect on the idea that these restorations aren’t just a private act of improving one’s real estate investment, but a kind of public service and contribution to their community. I would tend to agree – but set against the sidelining of Juukan Gorge and the Djab Wurrung Embassy (to name just two well-known examples), one can’t help but be reminded that even in 2020 there remains a disconnect in this country over the kinds of “heritage” we value and protect.

Such a reckoning is a lot to ask of Sunday night light entertainment, and questions of sovereignty might be straight up incompatible with any show tied up in Australia’s 21st century real estate culture. But by stopping short of this bigger picture, there’s a risk that it’s more than just the walls scoring a fresh coat of whitewash.

Restoration Australia airs 7.40pm Sunday on ABC1 and iView

#### CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

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