

Atomic Town: History and Vernacular Heritage at the Mary Kathleen Uranium Mine in Australia

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Abstract : Mary Kathleen was a purpose-built company town located in northwest Queensland in Australia. It was created to work on a rich uranium deposit discovered in the area in July 1954. The town was complete by 1958, possessing curved streets, modern materials, and a progressive urban planning scheme. Formed in the minds of corporate executives and architects and made manifest in arid zone country between Cloncurry and Mount Isa, Mary Kathleen was a modern marvel in the outback, a town that tamed the wild country of northwest Queensland, or so it seemed. The town was also a product of the Cold War. In the context of a nuclear arms race between the Soviet Union and her allies, and the United States of America (USA) and her Allies, a rapid rush to locate, mine, and process uranium after 1944 led to the creation of uranium towns in Czechoslovakia, Canada, the Soviet Union, USA and Australia of which Mary Kathleen was one such example. Mary Kathleen closed in 1981, and most of the town's infrastructure was removed. Since then, the town's ghostly remains have attracted travellers and tourists. Never an officially-sanctioned tourist site, the area has nevertheless become a regular stop for campers and day trippers who have engaged with the site often without formal interpretation. This paper explores the status of this vernacular heritage and asks why it has not gained any official status and what visitors might see in the place despite its uncertain status.

Keywords : uranium mining, planned communities, official heritage, vernacular heritage, Australian history

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