

Stars point to brighter future for Forgotten Australians

COMMUNITY

John Honner

I was mowing the lawn last Saturday morning. A strange car pulled up: 'There's a building in Berry that's up for an international prize in architecture. Where is it?'

I had no idea. My neighbour, who knows everything there is to know about Berry, had no idea.

After lunch I googled that a new hall at the Berry Sports and Recreation Centre, designed by [Allen Jack + Cottier](#) of Chippendale in Sydney, had been nominated for a prize in the sport category at the world architecture festival in Barcelona in November. It was one of five finalists, up against the best sports stadiums in the world, including the \$200 million redevelopment of Wimbledon and the \$130 million New York Jets NFL training complex.

Days later, I found that it had won first prize. It cost a little over a million dollars to build. This is a great, a splendid, a wonderful achievement.

I had seen something of the hall being built. It's on the other side of the river, more in the country than in the town, tucked away in a corner of the Moeyan Hill. Long trucks loaded with prefabricated concrete walls, riddled with irregular holes like Swiss cheese, trundled past our house. I thought they were erecting climbing walls for would-be mountaineers with moderate expectations.

Because the driveway into the Sport-Rec Centre prohibits access to the general public, I had no idea what the building was like inside.

But there is one aspect of the new structure that takes my fancy. The nights in Berry are crystal clear and full of stars. The new building, from a distance and when its lights are on at night, looks like a piece of sky has fallen to the earth: in the blackness of the corner of the hillside a wall of stars has suddenly appeared.

There is a not-so-starry back-story that puts these stars in context. Once upon a time, from 1934 to 1977, the Sport-Rec Centre had been the Berry Boys Home, a place for young men who had been made wards of the state.

And this year, indeed this very month, national and state governments in Australia are making formal apologies to those 500,000 Australians who, because their own families were unable to care for them — usually through no fault of their own — were made wards of the state and placed in orphanages, children's homes, and foster care.

Many of these Forgotten Australians suffered emotional and physical and sexual abuse.



Many struggled to find their identity and to develop trusting relationships.

Starry nights. Lonely nights. I remember hearing of a young boy's first nights in an orphanage. He was nine or ten years old. The orphanage was near the South Melbourne Town Hall and the bells in the clock tower would ring out every hour all through the night. Many years later, now an older man, he remembered how he lay awake all night, every night, listening for the bells to ring, counting the hours until dawn.

At the Berry Boys Home, I can imagine the young men looking out the windows at night, watching the stars turn around the sky, defeated by the mystery of their fate, waiting for the sounds of the birds stirring and the cattle waking, 'Like the watchman waits for the dawn'.

Starry, starry night. A healing service for the Forgotten Australians was held in Sydney in September. There wasn't a lot on offer for a memorial, but eventually an agreement was reached with the Botanic Gardens. The people gathered there, however, brought tears and courage and hope.

It's hard to renew a life. It's easier to give new life to old buildings. The secret to both is to leave room for the stars to shine in. And shine out.