

Statement of Heritage Value

The Historic Mission Precinct at Wurrumiyanga, Tiwi Islands, consists of the historic church (1941), radio hut (1941) and presbytery (1950), bell towers, and the open grounds in which they are located. A Catholic mission was established at Wurrumiyanga in 1911, and while these buildings do not represent the earliest buildings of the mission, they are the earliest surviving examples, and have come to represent the 'old mission days'.

The church was used as a stage for highly ritualised communal practices such as mass, baptisms and weddings, and as a symbol of religious and social authority. The understorey of the church was also, for a time, a school. The presbytery, primarily the home for the priests, later served as a studio space for important emerging art movements, notably Bima Wear and Tiwi Art. The radio hut is widely remembered for the warning message sent to Darwin by Father McGrath on the 19 February 1942 that Japanese fighter were spotted overhead and headed for Darwin.

The Precinct, particularly the church, has considerable aesthetic qualities, with the church arguably raised to iconic significance. Elevated and statuesque, and surrounded by open space, the church has served as a landmark of the mission and township for many decades. The church encapsulates a very particular, nuanced and celebrated aesthetic combining the grandeur of an elaborately constructed church, a ventilated and louvred tropical design and the intriguing combination of Tiwi spiritual motifs with Catholic iconography. The elaborate roof truss with laminated curved knees is exposed for the visitor to appreciate. Various features such as the hand tool marks on the ironwood piers demonstrate how local wood was worked. More so than other buildings of that era in the Top End, the Precinct reflects the influence of Queensland colonial architecture.

These buildings were constructed of local cyprus pine and ironwood which were cut, transported and milled by the community. No original building plans have been located, making the buildings themselves the only record of their construction. The Precinct, which also includes a small grotto, has a special association with builder and layman Peter de Hayer, and the Tiwi men who worked with him. This included

Alex Babui, Paddy Kelantumama, Kanta Tipiloura, Pius Tipuamantumirri, Cornelius Tipuamantumirri, Peter Jacko Tipuamantumirri, 'Bushman' Tipuamantumirri and Barney Tipuamantumirri.