

INQUIRY INTO THE JOINT USE AND CO-LOCATION OF PUBLIC BUILDINGS

SUBMISSION BY THE NSW HERITAGE OFFICE

Introduction

The Heritage Office welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. It presents an opportunity to examine the current uses of the public built asset and, we believe, should encourage the maximum use of these resources in the future.

Through s170 of the Heritage Act NSW State agencies are required to:

- prepare a register of their heritage assets;
- properly manage these assets; and
- regularly report on their condition.

The majority of agencies have not yet complied with this legislative requirement. It is also our understanding, from discussions with agencies, that there is a widespread view within agencies that heritage assets are a drain on their financial and human resources. This is based on the erroneous belief, now relatively uncommon in the private sector, that heritage items 'cannot be touched'.

The Heritage Office and the Heritage Council encourage the continuing use of heritage assets for their original purpose (for example, railway stations) where this is appropriate. Where the operational requirements of the agency have changed, however, the adaptation of the asset to another use is the preferred option.

In our view the worst possible option is to leave heritage assets, or in fact any building stock, lying vacant and unused. This only encourages a view in the agency that normal maintenance can be abandoned and leads in the end to vandalism and 'demolition by neglect', a waste of the embodied energy in the building materials of the assets and a wasted opportunity to put them to a new use.

Sustainability

This waste of assets is a flagrant breach of the sustainability principle, which requires that the maximum use should be made of the energy embodied in the State's building stock.

The adaptive reuse of heritage buildings when compared to new developments has major benefits:

- responsible continuing use of natural resources;
- recycling of existing building materials;
- energy savings by reusing the embodied energy in the existing asset; and
- minimizing environmental impacts through lower greenhouse gas generation.

In global environmental terms, the balance of advantage strongly favours the retention of existing building stock, particularly when performance in terms of energy consumption in use can be improved. (Guide to the Principles of the Conservation of Historic Buildings, London: British Standards Institution)

The embodied energy in the brickwork of a typical Victorian terraced house in Britain is the equivalent of over 30,000 litres of petrol – enough to power a modern fuel-efficient car for more than 250,000 miles, or ten times around the world. (State of the Historic Environment Report 2002, London, English Heritage)

In recycling the 1834 King's School building in Parramatta as its current premises the Heritage Office has achieved a 4 1/2 star 'green' rating. In addition, recent articles in the Sydney press have identified a number of heritage buildings that have achieved the greatest possible 'green' rating through the recycling of their building materials and long-term continuing use.

Research has also shown that, while older buildings generally reach their first repair cycle after almost 60 years, and are likely to require major repairs after 120 years, in building stock constructed since WWII those cycles have been reduced to 30 and 60 years respectively.

Economic Benefits

There are also economic benefits in retaining heritage assets:

- Heritage places present opportunities to create a unique environment when sympathetically incorporated into a new development;
- Agencies' commercial operations can be significantly enhanced by their location in heritage buildings, particularly those with which the community is already familiar.

Community Benefits

The community in general benefits from the continuing use or adaptive reuse of public sector building stock. It provides a stimulus to urban regeneration, developing social capital through the retention of familiar public assets.

A century ago government was the largest business in the State. The reuse of older buildings strengthens the community's identification with government as a stable, long-term enterprise. It also encourages the community's continuing respect for government enterprises as those services that operate in the interests of the whole community.

Adaptive reuse also gives the public renewed opportunities for the aesthetic enjoyment of the high quality workmanship and richly decorated interiors characteristic of many government buildings. For example, the adaptation of the Chief Secretary's Building to a new role as courts will give the public greater access to a finely crafted landmark city building newly conserved and adapted to 21st century performance standards.

The modern practice is not to create public buildings of the scale, grandeur and public presence of the past. Yet it is these very landmark qualities of our public heritage buildings that have helped to define the strong character of NSW cities and towns and given the community a strong sense of identity with our built environment. The retention and reuse of government heritage assets is therefore a logical expression of the community's own values and expectations, its sense of place and social structure.

Co-Location of Government and Private Buildings

The Heritage Office encourages any mix of government and private sector operations that will permit greater continuing use of the existing heritage asset. For example, the Prince Henry Hospital re-development will retain some heritage buildings on the site for public health services while allowing new private housing development on less significant sectors.

In design terms co-location needs to be negotiated on a site-by-site basis. The retention of a heritage building on a co-location site will involve a process of analysis similar to that of environmental impact statements. The conservation management plan is a familiar and well-used means of determining the nature of the heritage significance of buildings and sites and of deciding where and how intervention should occur. It is a process that can be applied to any site with existing buildings, regardless of whether or not they are of heritage significance.

The essential point is that where possible existing buildings on any co-location site should be retained and used as part of any development. This makes sound economic sense and is fundamental to the principles of sustainable development. The degree of intervention appropriate in each case will be determined by each individual building's heritage significance. In our view this is sound policy from an environmental, economic and community point of view.

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