

Submission
No 242

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE HERITAGE ACT 1977

Name: Name suppressed

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Submission to Legislative Council of NSW, Standing Committee on Social Issues, Review of the Heritage Act 1977

The Heritage Act of 1977 ushered in a golden age of heritage protection. This was particularly welcome after the depredations of the 1950s and 1960s saw many heritage buildings destroyed by developers. Much of the Victorian sandstone splendour of the Sydney CBD was lost.

The passage of the Heritage Act ushered in a golden age where significant heritage buildings were restored and preserved. For example, the Macquarie Street precinct.

In more recent times, there has been a disturbing trend away from conservation under the cloak of weasel words such as 'different narratives and values that underpin our communities of today and tomorrow'. Instead of being appropriately and historically restored, heritage buildings now must have 'modern' accretions added. One of the most egregious examples is the Customs House at Circular Quay which has lost much of its history and had an inappropriate structure resembling a 1950s garage added to the top.

There was much pressure recently to preserve rather than 'adaptively reuse' the brutalist Sirius building. This debate seems value-laden: 18th and 19th century buildings need to be adaptively reused, modern ones completely preserved.

The objects of the Heritage Act are:

- (a)
to promote an understanding of the State's heritage,
- (b)
to encourage the conservation of the State's heritage,
- (c)
to provide for the identification and registration of items of State heritage significance,
- (d)
to provide for the interim protection of items of State heritage significance,
- (e)
to encourage the adaptive reuse of items of State heritage significance,
- (f)
to constitute the Heritage Council of New South Wales and confer on it functions relating to the State's heritage,
- (g)
to assist owners with the conservation of items of State heritage significance.

In my opinion, they remain as relevant today as they were then. Some of the vague, platitudinous jargon in the Discussion Paper I find concerning, for example, 'An effective heritage system will facilitate the community in harnessing the cultural and economic values of heritage sites. It will also provide a framework for managing competing values and adapting to the pressures and challenges of an ever-changing world' and 'We also have a more complex understanding of heritage. Heritage is increasingly being recognised for more than just its historical relevance, with the many social, economic, environmental, health and wellbeing aspects of heritage increasingly coming into focus'.

I hope such woolly generalisations are not camouflage for a watering-down of current protections and an opportunity for developers to do more damage to the social and built fabric of Sydney and regional NSW. It is asserted that 'the Act is now widely considered to be out-of-step with trends in heritage conservation and land use planning and development'. Where is the evidence for this sweeping generalisation? Isn't it pre-judging the issue before the Social issues Committee has had a chance to investigate and report? If over-development was a reason for the passing of the original Act it is an even more pressing issue now.

Finally, the increasingly vital role of local government in protecting heritage is given only a scanty mention. In my opinion, this issue is at the forefront of the struggle to preserve our built heritage. I live in a conservation zone and am constantly dismayed at the inappropriate mutilation of historic homes that is increasingly taking place. Protections against inappropriate local redevelopment should be greatly strengthened.

3 July 2021