

Save our City - Melbourne's Heritage Under Threat



Not since the development spree of the late 1980s have there been so many large-scale projects permitted or proposed that threaten the heritage values of 'the city', the heart of Melbourne.

While unfortunately many have already been approved (with no possibility of appeal), the Trust believes that without a strong and united protest, new proposals will emerge that are even more damaging to the cherished values of our city. We urge you to join us in our campaign to 'save our city'.

Though there are many large proposals in various parts of the city that have little or no heritage impacts, the list of proposals that do is long and growing. In December 2007, the Minister of Planning approved an 88m glass office tower (more than twice the recommended height limit of 40m), in Flinders Lane near St Paul's Cathedral, that will dominate the views of the city and the Cathedral from St Kilda Road. Another permit was granted in late 2007 to demolish low heritage buildings behind Scots Church, including Victoria's oldest multi-storey car park, built in 1938. The car park is on the Heritage Register, and only a façade is to be

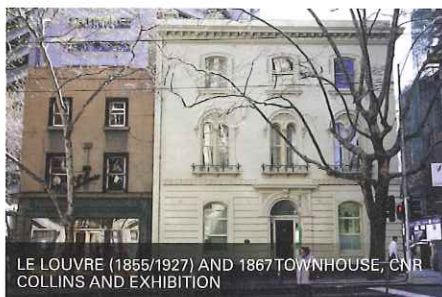
kept, contrary to the Heritage Council's advice not to demolish. The tower that will replace them is 51m where the height limit is 30m. Neither project has yet commenced.

The proposals eat away at controls carefully established in the early 1980s. The most important parts of Melbourne's CBD are protected by heritage listings and height controls, which often co-exist, making doubly sure that new development not only respects heritage places, but the traditional low scale character of the precincts. In these areas, the pedestrian scale has been maintained, along with the multiple smaller heritage buildings and the lanes and arcades that are so characteristic of Melbourne. In the last decade an unexpected benefit has been the conversion of many to apartments and laneway bars, bringing the city to life.

In the last two years however, a number of proposals threaten all that has been achieved. Almost all the projects are subject to approval by the Minister for Planning, as the Minister is the 'Responsible Authority' for developments over 25,000m² in the CBD. With the scale of projects getting ever larger, this figure, also dating from the early 1980s, has led to the Minister being responsible for what are now seen as medium scale projects. The Minister has often granted planning permission by approving a Planning Scheme Amendment, a process that does not include an ability to make submissions or lodge appeals.

In June last year, the Moorish style Eastern Arcade façade of 1894 on Bourke Street (missed in the 1984 heritage study) was demolished for a high rise hotel, now well under way. In early 2009, the rear facades of both Myer Bourke Street and David Jones (a total of six pre WWII facades) were also demolished, currently being replaced with glassy contemporary designs.

In July this year, the Minister also granted approval for a 250 + shopping centre between the gutted facades of the Myer Lonsdale stores,



along with the demolition of the heritage listed Art Deco Lonsdale House (justified on the basis of needing to widen the access lane!). This approval has generated strong opposition, complete with a website devoted to the cause - 'savelonsdalehouse.com'.

Since then two more proposals that threaten heritage and ignore height limits have been proposed, which could be approved at any time.

An office tower is proposed for 80 Collins Street, in front of Nauru House. Partly supported on legs, it would be built to the very edge of the street for the full height of 40+ storeys, against all controls and precedents for the area. It would completely dominate the heritage buildings and the low rise heritage streetscape of the famous 'Paris End' of Collins Street.

The other is the Windsor Hotel proposal, which would see the rear 1888 wing replaced by a 92m (27 storey) 'curtain walled' tower. This would not only dominate the retained front of the hotel, but completely ignores the 23m height limit designed to keep the whole Bourke Hill area low-scale. This establishes a dangerous precedent.

The Trust is taking a leading role in the debate, and we have launched a campaign, calling on you, our members, to have your voice heard. Please visit our website at www.saveourcity.com.au for more information on how you can help us.

By Rohan Storey, Architectural Historian

