

## **Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places**

### **Submission from Balmain Precinct Committee**

#### **Key points**

1. The built heritage of Balmain should have greater prominence in Australia's history (after European settlement) and should be more effectively recognized at national, state and local government levels.
2. The need for continual activity and protest by resident groups suggests that the overall framework for heritage conservation and protection is not working effectively for our community.
3. There is a need for more coherent and effective heritage values and related planning policies.
4. Broad interpretation of planning controls and commercial pressures continue to place our heritage at risk. There is a need to develop a more coherent and workable framework for built heritage which will provide all interested parties with clarity and guidance, and which will leave our history intact.
5. Loss of heritage buildings in Balmain has been high over our recent history. Some suggest that this demonstrated a lack of commitment to heritage in the past, resulting in irretrievable losses.
6. The current stock of heritage buildings is limited.
7. Many residents do not understand the nature of heritage management and protection in the Leichhardt Municipality.
  - There is a need for publicly accessible information about heritage values.
  - There is a need for information and guidelines about heritage for owners or potential buyers of heritage properties.
8. A national focus on built heritage would be a significant achievement of this study.
9. here is an opportunity to create special 'heritage areas' within Sydney which cover a specific timeframe of development.
10. Councils which have areas of heritage significance should set out a statement of values which allows their community to appreciate their commitment to heritage.
11. Some Councils value their heritage with great care while others may not have the same focus. NSW has 176 Councils with potentially 176 different planning policies, interpretations and outcomes relating to heritage. This needs to be reviewed.

12. Owning a heritage property should not solely be about restrictions and control. Incentives and assistance for owners should be provided.
13. Heritage is the major attribute that Balmain offers at a State and National level - this is what Balmain is about to many of us - yet heritage remains underfunded and resourced.
14. The establishment of Heritage Committees at Local Government level or across broader identifiable 'heritage regions' should be investigated.

## **Introduction**

Balmain is one of the best known suburbs in Australia and has a special place in Australia's social and political history. Throughout our history, many Balmain residents have reached national and international prominence in very diverse fields including politics, literature, art, sport, medicine, industry and the trade union movement.

The built heritage of Balmain should have greater prominence in Australia's history (after European settlement) and should be more effectively recognized at national, state and local government levels.

## **Balmain ... the oldest planned residential area in Australia?**

Balmain provides a rich display of Australia's early development. This includes workers' cottages dating back to the early 1840's, marine villas, townhouses, shops, hotels and other business establishments.

The layout of our streets reflects the early tracks and delivery routes. All of this still has direct impact on our daily lives today. In some respects, our access and movement across the peninsula has not changed greatly in over 120 years.

Very few areas in Australia reflect 205 years of European settlement as does Balmain. There is evidence to suggest that Balmain might be the oldest planned residential area in Australia. This is something that the Productivity Commission might clarify.

## **Local heritage activity in Balmain**

Our residents are active with regard to recognition and protection of our heritage. In fact, it would be fair to say that residents are providing the leadership on this very important issue. The Balmain Association is key amongst this. The Association manages the Balmain Watchhouse which is a well-known 1840's public building on the Peninsula. With 40 years of constructive activity for our community, the Balmain Association aims are to:

- improve the living, working and recreational amenity of our area;
- maintain all features having natural, architectural and/or historical value of the area
- keep a permanent collection of historical interest
- seek the cooperation of everyone concerned in the realization of the above.

The Balmain Town Hall Management Committee plays a significant part in the care of this unique building. They are responsible for the maintenance of the building as a heritage building. The Town Hall is heritage listed and was the Council Chambers when Balmain was an independent council.

Our community has a local historian who has spent many years documenting our built heritage in the Leichhardt Historical Journals, with 23 published to date..

Focusing on the last few years, our residents have come together to fight many potential threats to heritage. The Pashley Cottage Heritage Committee, Darling Street Committee, and the Jane Street and Wharf Road resident action groups have been instrumental in saving significant parts of our heritage. Residents have recently combined again regarding another area on the East Balmain Foreshore.

The need for continual activity and protest by resident groups suggests that the overall framework for heritage conservation and protection is not working effectively for our community.

Given the ongoing campaigns, one might expect that the constant wishes of residents across the entire Peninsula would be sufficient to drive more coherent and effective heritage values and related planning policies.

### **Preserving heritage is always a struggle**

Preserving Balmain's heritage is always a struggle and is seemingly a series of ad-hoc and relentless battles. Broad interpretation of planning controls and commercial pressures continue to place our heritage at risk. The Productivity Commission should investigate this and make recommendations for change in order to develop a more coherent and workable framework which will provide all interested parties with clarity and guidance, and which will leave our history intact. This framework should ensure that heritage becomes a highly valued and fundamental priority rather than a constraint to be worked around as individual cases arise.

### **The foresight of our owners in preserving our heritage**

Our local residents should be recognized and credited for their work and effort in restoring many of the old residences in Balmain. At great cost, effort and facing very slow Development Application processing times, these residents set their goals to improve their residence, while at the same time saving a part of Balmain's heritage and improving the local streetscape.

Balmain looks as it does today because it has retained its heritage and it will continue to improve in the future solely because of the desire of many of its residents and business owners to keep it that way.

### **Heritage buildings are widely used community resources**

In many suburbs across Australia one often sees that the oldest structures in that town or suburb are used for community purposes.

The Balmain Watchhouse is a valued public resource which hosts art and other exhibitions and also features our local history through a variety of photos and other memorabilia.

Other buildings that provide an ongoing community resource include Clontarf Cottage (which has been wonderfully restored). This building is used for our residents meeting and is constantly booked by clubs and for social events. Our

Town Hall is a widely used community resource and the Hannaford Centre provides important services to the aged.

### **Importance of heritage**

The importance of heritage is manifested in many ways. Many people research their family history and keep family memorabilia which has tremendous personal significance. When loss of this occurs, people often feel a sense of personal loss. Similarly, losses of built heritage in Balmain over many years has resulted in a feeling of community loss which unfortunately continues to grow.

In Australian society, recognition of heritage includes special days of national significance. The bi-centenary provided a wonderful opportunity to focus on heritage but what is next?

Some industries are based around heritage such as antiques, vintage cars and other memorabilia. Sovereign Hill and Sandhurst Town are two well known theme towns dedicated to reliving our past. Books and TV documentaries record our history. Museums and galleries treasure our history and heritage.

Unlike books, TV programs and other, our buildings are 'living' heritage. Here in Balmain buildings stand as they did over 150 years ago in the same location and context, giving people a very real experience and perspective on our history and development as a community.

### **Past losses of heritage**

The need for continual activity and protest by resident groups suggests that the overall framework for heritage conservation and protection is not working effectively for our community.

The 1960s saw a period of development in which whole streets were replaced by high density apartment blocks. Some of our earliest dwellings were demolished during this period.

Development proposals today still place at risk heritage buildings. Unfortunately, demolition of some buildings still occur.

Today, the stock of our heritage buildings is limited.

### **Public forums on heritage**

Early this year, Leichhardt Council held several public meetings to discuss the proposed new Heritage Conservation Areas. These meetings drew possibly the largest attendances of any public meetings held in recent years demonstrating the strength of public feeling toward this issue. The Balmain Precinct Committee includes 'heritage' as a standing item on its monthly agenda. Some key issues for residents from these forums are:

- Residents feel very strongly that protection of our heritage is one of the most important issues for our community.
- Many residents do not understand the nature of heritage management and protection in the Leichhardt Municipality.
- Residents recognize that a fair approach to management of our heritage is needed, one which provides scope and flexibility for owners but within a broader set of heritage values. The aim is to ensure that dwellings are viable to suit today's lifestyle and hence will be an asset as well as a source of pride for owners.
- Balmain seems to be behind other suburbs/areas in terms of a public recognition of heritage and, moreover, effective results in this area.
- The need for publicly accessible information about heritage values.
- The need for information and guidelines about heritage for owners or potential buyers of heritage properties.
- The loss of industrial heritage in and around Balmain has been unprecedented.
- Residents suggest that when a heritage item needs significant redevelopment that a policy of 'replacement' with a similar design be favoured. This will preserve streetscapes, design and context.
- Many residents had taken the opportunity to restore dwellings while also making alteration and additions to make their home viable for 21<sup>st</sup> century living.

### **A national or multi-level government focus on heritage is required**

A national focus on our built heritage would be a significant achievement of this study. For those places in Australia having a national significance, heritage guidelines and protection should be based on a coordinated response from the three levels of government.

### **Too many different Council approaches and focuses**

Some Councils value their heritage with great care while others might not have the same focus. NSW has 176 Councils with potentially 176 different planning policies, interpretations and outcomes on heritage. This needs to be reviewed.

One wonders if there is a supply of qualified people with such important heritage assessment and protection skills across 176 Councils.

The Rocks, Hunters Hill, Haberfield and North Sydney have a strong focus on heritage and treat heritage as a broad overlying principle.

Marrickville Council seems to have a stronger heritage focus than our own Council.

With so many different approaches by Councils there is some concern that heritage may further suffer as it could be used as a political tool.

Some Councils might see a loss of control if national and state governments established the framework for heritage protection and controlled heritage policy.

It doesn't help when one person tells another person, who lives across the road, but in a different council area, of the vast differences in application of heritage assessment and planning controls. Particularly, when both might live in an 1870's sandstone house!

### **Special heritage areas/regions**

There is an opportunity to create special 'heritage areas or regions' within Sydney which cover a specific timeframe of development. These areas could be managed by a combined Council committee and residents.

Naming conventions for these areas could include: Colonial, Pre-Federation, Federation, etc

### **Planning controls**

Local planning controls do not appear to provide a coherent framework for residents, for owners of heritage buildings, or for developers. There is no statement of values and planning controls seem 'open-ended'.

### **Statement of Heritage Values**

Councils which have areas of heritage significance should set out a statement of values which allows their community to appreciate their commitment to heritage.

It would be fair to say that the majority of our community, here in one of the oldest suburbs in Australia, would not be able to articulate the heritage values of our area!

Other than the awareness of a number of planning controls there are no defining statements to our people which encompass our values.

While some may see these as no more than 'motherhood statements', it will serve the greater purpose of defining to our current community, to people who want to move into our community, to business owners, architects and developers how much we value our heritage. It will bring all of these groups together to work more effectively and cooperatively on preserving and enhancing our heritage.

## **Encouraging the preservation of our heritage**

There seems to be some level of misinformation surrounding the ownership of heritage properties. The focus is on strict controls, additional costs, insurance complexities, expensive design advice and lengthy Development Application processes with little support, assistance or guidance.

Owning a heritage property should not solely be about restrictions and control. Incentives and assistance for owners should be provided. There should be the flexibility for owners to create a viable home or business.

As stated above, a huge number of homes in Balmain have been modified to suit 21<sup>st</sup> century living requirements while still maintaining the streetscapes, similar architecture to the original, and even using similar materials.

An alarming issue that is faced by many areas is 'demolition by neglect' whereby heritage dwellings are almost completely neglected to the point where the condition of the dwelling is irretrievably damaged. For some reason investment properties are unusually represented in this category. Given the substantial incentives for investors such as good rental markets in this area and excellent rental earnings, negative gearing, realizable capital gains - which no owner-occupiers of heritage properties achieve - it is sad to see this neglect occur.

It's very easy to list a dozen properties which fall into this category of demolition by neglect.

On several occasions we have seen some of the oldest buildings in Balmain subject to development applications which seek multi-story units or sub-division.

Balmain has many elderly residents and retirees, some of whom may not be able to cope with household maintenance as they once did. These people may not have the resources (health and/or financial) that investors might have and are specifically excluded from the above.

## **What to include as built heritage**

Any type of built structure should fall within the scope of built heritage. In Balmain this includes: public buildings, residences, churches, shops, hotels, boatsheds around the foreshore

## **Materials used in shopping areas**

Many business owners on the Balmain Peninsula have achieved remarkable results in restoring the heritage nature of our shopping area, or at least have tried to blend in with the local context. In some circumstances, there has been over use of glass, steel and aluminium for redevelopment of shopfronts which can be out of context. This should not be seen as a criticism of business owners who have invested time, effort and money to provide our community with good quality shopping. Nor is it



necessary to recreate the Balmain shopping area of the 1890's. Designers and planners should be encouraged to advise business owners more on 'streetscape and context' rather than treat the new business as a totally isolated establishment.

Where possible business owners should be encouraged to use 'original style' materials to maintain the heritage nature of our shopping areas.

We expect that business owners would be very aware of the positive economic benefits arising from maintaining the heritage of the shopping area. There are many examples where a heritage façade (and even interior) adds substantially to the appeal of the business e.g. The Rocks, Leura & Morphett. Both internationally and in some Australian country towns a strong focus on preserving heritage has created both strong and thriving business precincts which attract people from far and wide.

### **It's time for leadership on heritage issues**

Residents feel that Councillors should be encouraged to provide the necessary leadership and vision which will give our community a stronger and a more coherent focus on heritage.

Council need to set an example for maintenance, restoration and funding of heritage. Current focal points are: Bells Store, the Glasshouse, the pumphouse in Gladstone Park. The Town Hall itself is in need of attention.

Council should support community efforts. Our community has done tremendous work in restoring their homes and businesses. Council must support this by ensuring that our basic infrastructure: streetscapes, footpaths, main street and local parks is brought up to standard. This basic infrastructure should showcase our heritage not detract from it.

Council should ensure that its public buildings are the leading examples of heritage preservation, not the worst.

### **Heritage is underfunded and under-resourced**

Heritage is the major attribute that Balmain offers at a State and National level - this is what Balmain is about to many of us - yet it remains underfunded and resourced. Other areas of Sydney appear to devote reasonable resources to this most important area.

It would be reasonable to suggest that heritage is not given the appropriate level of resources that it demands.

### **Heritage committee ... should be re-established**

After the 1991 Council elections, Council established a Heritage Committee which included a Councillor, senior planner, heritage architects and interested residents. This committee no longer exists and has been subsumed into Councils' Planning Committee. It was given the specific interest of one Councillor that the committee

was established. After that Councillor left Council, the committee was not continued. This, in some way, demonstrates how fragile the focus on heritage is.

During that period, in 1993, Council appointed its first fulltime Heritage Officer after 50/50 funding from State and Local Government was agreed. After 1995 (the Council elections), this fulltime position was ceased. Today, in 2005, the position of Heritage Officer, we believe, is not a fulltime position and has been allocated to a senior planning officer who now has a very diverse portfolio to manage.

One of the priorities of the Heritage Committee was the compilation of the first 'heritage list' using the services of an external consultant. This process provided a very unique opportunity to focus on heritage and to identify and explain why items should be included on the new register. The Heritage Committee saw significant risks to maintaining our heritage unless steps were taken to initiate a formal process for identification of heritage and its place within our community.

Limited funding did not allow for completion of this heritage list and more activity has recently been done in identifying more items. The great benefit of the listing process has been that any development application on our most important built heritage will require an 'heritage assessment'. Yet, the problem exists that, while affording protection, this assessment can still be quite subjective and can be over-ruled by the Land and Environment Court.

Given some of the issues discussed above, at times, the process of heritage listing can bring worry and concern for the owners. This can be further exacerbated by creating division amongst neighbours or other local residents. It is a shame that the listing of a dwelling can potentially become a negative event.

The establishment of Heritage Committees at Local Government level or across broader identifiable 'heritage regions' should be investigated.

### **Balmain's heritage is on permanent display**

Today, tour groups, architectural and engineering researchers and students, and historians visit Balmain to capture the essence of the earliest development in Australia. Other people visit Balmain just to walk around the streets to catch a glimpse of where their ancestors lived, or just to visit a unique and historic location, once a vibrant centre of industry.

The location and geography of Balmain also makes our heritage more unique. Visibility from the water enables harbour users to appreciate the views toward land as in days gone by – where some of the older structures remain.