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Submission to the Productivity Commission on the Enquiry into the Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places

About the Friends of the City of Unley Society, Inc.

The Friends of the City of Unley Society, Inc, (FOCUS) was formed in October 2003 and later incorporated in June 2004 by residents concerned about preserving the historical character of the City of Unley, in Adelaide, South Australia.

FOCUS has the following aims and objectives:

- Promote planning policies that ensure retention of existing amenity: character, gardens, open space, and trees throughout the City of Unley.
- Influence development application assessment that insists on rigorous criteria to ensure only high quality and sympathetic development proceeds in the City of Unley.
- Seek Council control over demolition of buildings built prior to WWII and significant trees with consultative, transparent, and accountable decision-making processes.
- Establish and maintain the Society as a force that asserts its views at every opportunity to all levels of Government that regulate development in the Unley area.
- Establish and maintain the Society as a force that, as a matter of course, all development authorities consult, on the basis of good faith, before strategic development decisions are made.

In 2005 FOCUS had a number of achievements, including

- Presented a submission on the Sustainable Development Act Amendment Bill in 2004.
- Presented a submission on the Heritage Act Amendments in 2004.
- Collected 2,020 signatures for a petition to give Council demolition control over buildings built prior to 1940 in order to retain the historical and architectural character of the City.
- Organised a Public Meeting with other established resident associations in April 2004 to discuss the proposed Sustainable Development Amendment Bill.
- Met with the Minister for Development and Planning to present the petition and to voice residents' concerns on the destruction of character.
- Liaised with PlanningSA and Unley Council on establishing criteria of character residents wish to maintain.
- Liaised with local MP, Mark Brindal to present our petition in Parliament in a Grievance Debate.

- Lobbied a number of state politicians on demolition control.
- Developed a website: www.focusonunley.org
- Organised silent protests and demonstrations to save character homes.
- Assisted residents in their objections to unsympathetic development.
- Involved the media in our fight for our heritage via television, radio and newspapers.

Character properties and urban infill in Unley

Around 70% of Unley housing stock can be called “character” or historic period buildings, ranging from Victorian workers cottages, Edwardian villas and Federation bungalows. This character contributes greatly to the amenity of the area and is highly valued by the community.

However, recent years have seen increased pressure of urban infill, resulting in significant demolitions of historic character houses and their “two for one” replacement with modern properties that are generally highly unsympathetic with the surrounding neighbourhood (Please refer to the presentation “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly” on the FOCUS website for examples¹).

City of Unley² data shows that between 49 and 59 dwellings of historic value are demolished per year over the past three years. Current estimates are that 25%, or 2240, historic character properties could be at risk for demolition and urban infill and replacement with modern unsympathetic dwellings, based on a lack of adequate planning controls for the preservation of character properties.

Much is made of the economic impact of the construction of new dwellings. However, it should be noted from the 2005 Unley Urban Morphology Study that for the year 2004/05, new dwelling approvals lead to a \$13.58 M capital investment in the City of Unley, yet alterations and additions to existing dwellings are estimated to have led to a \$72.3 M capital investment. This also states that the true per sq m replacement costs of pre-WW2 buildings exceeds both the market prices and property valuations given to this building stock i.e. \$3.6bn of total \$4.2bn replacement value and these replacement costs and built form qualities and materials are not commercially achievable.

It is clear that the development industry regards historic and character buildings as simply having land value only, and can make significant margins by their demolition and subdivision. The character and historic value, not to mention their sympathetic relationship with the surrounding neighbourhood, are not factored in to the market’s forces.

The SA Government receives pressure from the building industry to maintain or increase employment, thus more payroll tax revenues from new building works. Councils conduct development assessment with one eye to the rate base, knowing increasing property taxes come from an increase in the number of rateable properties. SA Councils’ Planners act as defacto free-of-charge Planning Consultants to advise developers how to maximise the number of dwellings that can be fit on historic heritage places before the developer lodges an informed development application then denies information to would-be objectors.

An examination of the facts in 0above would indicate that the current spate of demolition and urban infill development is not providing an optimal return on investment for the value of the Unley area. FOCUS believes that a much more intelligent approach would be to address skills shortages in stone masonry, decorative plastering, French polishing and multi-disciplinary historic conservation curricula, and then to value add the existing historic character housing stock through sympathetic alterations and additions.

Comments on the draft report “Conservation of Australia’s Historic Heritage Places”

FOCUS accepts in principle a number of the draft findings and recommendations in the report, in

¹ http://www.focusonunley.org/joomla/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_details&gid=4&Itemid=27

² “Unley Urban Morphology Study: Residential Character & Heritage Study” 2005 (Ruan Consulting in alliance with URS)

particular

- Draft finding 7.7 regarding inadequacies of assistance to private owners
- Draft finding 6.2 regarding the costs for heritage places being born by the private owner
- Draft recommendations 3.1, 7.4 and 7.5 regarding the collection, management and reporting of information on heritage places

However FOCUS strongly rejects the majority of the remainder of recommendations

In particular FOCUS rejects the key recommendation, 8.1, which essentially states that a property can only be listed as being of heritage value provided that the current owner agrees to it being so, i.e.: a negotiated conservation agreement has been put in place. If a property, already heritage listed, is not desired to be so by the current owner, then it can be de-listed. In other words, this is voluntary listing of properties as being of heritage value.

It is the opinion of FOCUS that the practical implication of this recommendation would be the wholesale delisting of the majority of heritage listed private property.

It is also the opinion of FOCUS, based on our experience in Unley outlined above, that the majority of these newly de-listed properties, now free of the market distorting effects of the heritage listing, would have their market value increase, and then be regarded as being at risk for sale for development. As research has shown, we could expect to see 25% of these properties in this category at risk for demolition and replacement with urban infill properties such as the ubiquitous Tuscan Villa. The housing development industry has been demonstrated to treat these properties as having land value only and will happily take part in short sighted cash raising exercises by property owners.

FOCUS believes emphatically that this recommendation should not be accepted, as it will lead to an overall loss of heritage properties by their delisting and bulldozing for redevelopment into flats or townhouses.

As demonstrated in 0above the capital value growth that could be attributed to sympathetic restoration and additions to historical character and therefore heritage properties could be far in excess the value of replacement new buildings. Combined with research data showing the replacement costs of such properties massively exceeds the current market value, it would appear that providing the current owner of a property the decision of whether to consign to the bulldozer is extremely short sighted.

FOCUS accepts the draft findings relating to providing support to private owners in the maintenance and upkeep of heritage properties. FOCUS believes that support should be provided by Local and State Governments though a range of novel activities such as

- Insurers could be indemnified from liability if genuine hardship of the owners of historic heritage places is caused from regulation.
- Powers of dispensation from development controls e.g. minimum allotment size might be offered to SA Councils for the regulation of historic heritage places for, say, urban in-fill to occur provided the subject historic heritage place is restored.
- Provide for 25 year depreciation allowances for the refit and restoration of heritage properties
- Provision of free or subsidised skilled labour for plasterers, stone masons and other skilled restoration trades as part of their apprenticeship.
- Council rating gives incentive to owners of historic heritage places to run them down, as they pay less as their capital value hence their rates diminishes and they are given a bonus when heritage listing is removed when they become commercially-unsuitable for restoration and the owner reaps the development potential value of the land. Relief from council rates could be a solution here via innovative schemes such as reverse mortgages.

Concluding remarks

Recently in North Adelaide the Adelaide City Council implemented a heritage-listing scheme whereby the property owners were notified of the impending listing of their properties. This resulted in an increase in the demolition of historic and character properties, and their substitution with unsympathetic modern buildings of much higher density than the previous building. It was not a “good planning outcome” by any means, and has resulted in the net loss of historic building stock in the North Adelaide area. It is also a loss to the people of South Australia as these buildings are the embodiment of our history, and once gone they are gone for good.

A recent letter to the editor of the Eastern Courier Messenger identified that it is the intrinsic attributes of the property itself that warrants classification as being of heritage value, and not the opinion of the current owner. FOCUS supports this comment completely – there are attributes that the neo-liberal market can and will not factor into its calculations, such as a sense of history, character or sympathy with streetscape, and these are therefore placed into the domain of the community decision-making process. As has been seen in recent month in the Victorian local government elections, the issues of urban infill and destruction of the historic character of suburbs is angering residents into taking action by voting in representatives who oppose this. It would be interesting to see if this occurred at the State and Federal level based on the potential de-listing and demolition of 25% of current heritage listed properties.