

## Responses for the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Built Heritage

### Quarantine Station and North Head

The basic submission from the North Head Alliance and the Friends of Quarantine is that it is a '*Government responsibility to ensure that any profits that derive from a growing tourism sector – that of interest in environmental and heritage based tourism – should be reinvested in those public sites rather than in shareholder profits*'. And '*[they] believe there is a very strong rationale for substantial, continued government investment in the conservation of Australia's heritage places where those are places of national significance.*'

The National Trust of Australia (NSW) has long supported this view. The handing of the North Head Quarantine Station to State Government from the Commonwealth in 1984 began a long series of buck passing of responsibilities. The leasing process began in 1987 but has never been straightforward. In many ways that is a blessing as some 18 years have passed and the place has been inspected, reported upon and inquired into many times and our knowledge, and appreciation, of it has grown as a result and little physical change has occurred. The downside is that very little maintenance has occurred either and the threat continues.

The process of approvals and the '233 additional conditions of consent' has followed an almost inevitable line and has highlighted a few inadequacies in the planning and approvals processes not least the impossibility of considering the 'best' outcome in place of the development proposal under consideration. The Commonwealth governments relinquishing of the North Head Artillery School to the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust has opened up many apparent possibilities for the management of North Head, almost, as a whole. The frustration, and in some cases, despair however is that there is an 18 year old process in place for leasing the Quarantine Station and that part of North Head is State Government and part Commonwealth with part private. The problems seem insurmountable but at the same time largely bureaucratic; with the end tantalizingly in sight but out of reach.

It is felt by the Trust that if State Government, as represented by the National Parks and Wildlife or Department of Environment and Conservation will not look after a place as important as the Quarantine Station then there is little hope for the rest of the cultural assets under their control. Quarantine is an important and fragile site of arguably international, and certainly national, significance.

This case study also highlights an apparent divide between natural and cultural assets which is to the detriment of both. The North Head Quarantine Station is a microcosm of endangered species and endangered cultural heritage and yet NPWS feel they cannot look after it even though it has been making a decent income with little effort for some time.

Many of the submissions received by the Productivity Commission have highlighted and discussed the role government should play, not only as regulators, but as responsible asset managers; to lead by example. It seems to many that Government is increasingly shirking its responsibilities for its own and indeed sees 'its own' as other than 'publicly owned'. (In fact in a recent battle over the Hospital at Hay a Health Department representative contacted the National Trust to let us know that we were wrong and that the hospital wasn't publicly owned. It was owned by the Department of Health).

The need for Government Departments to 'self fund' and yet be responsible owners of heritage gives them a problem at budget time which should not occur. The lack of back up to the regulations and legislation makes for tension and unease in the system. It is little wonder then that they look to 'surplus' or troublesome assets and try to divest themselves of them. Unfortunately the new Commonwealth Heritage legislation is suffering the same fate: sounds okay but there are no resources to implement it.

Government is increasingly being seen as retreating from the community, of making laws and then not abiding by them itself, of setting up systems doomed to failure due to lack of financial support and finally of 'selling off the public farm' for profit.

## Pettit and Sevitt Houses, St Ives

This case study illustrates a number of issues about the appreciation and acceptance of 'heritage value' of recent examples and of conflict between State and Local Government jurisdictions.

Built and sold in the mid 1960s the Pettit and Sevitt display village is evidence of an important step in the architectural development of housing in the modern era. To someone in his or her 70s the houses no doubt seem recent and 'ordinary'.

It is not surprising that there has been debate over their worth and not surprising that comparative research has been slow in preparation. What is in some ways surprising is that as early as 1988 Ku-ring-gai Council felt that the group may indeed be worthy of listing.

The recognition of the recent past is probably the most problematic of all categories of listing as it is inevitable that value will be revealed over time, our perceptions change and the influence of individual places becomes recognised.

What is difficult for the listing authorities and the owners is the buck passing of responsibility between local and State agencies. For the NSW Heritage Council to determine the group was not worthy of State listing, although probably an accurate assessment given the available information at the time and the wording of the Act, gives a confused message to local council who are more likely to be swayed by the individual plight and emotion of the current owner than the wider argument over the significance of the places in question. Further research by the RAI has demonstrated what many already believed, that the group is indeed of primary importance in the history of architecturally designed affordable housing. It is highly likely that the group will meet the 'threshold' for listing at State level in the not too distant future. It was a mistake on Council's part not to check that no 27 was a Pettit and Sevitt house and to remove it from a list on hearsay. Local Councils often don't have the available expertise and this was particularly true in 1988.

The financial argument over the effect of listing on the property value is without evidence and may well reflect the prejudices of the valuer in question rather than the reality of the market. Although it must also be acknowledged that at the time of this discussion there has been a drop in the Sydney property market which has no doubt affected the potential resale value of the house and the house is also on a main road with heavy traffic. It is true though that in certain sectors there is a fear of the implication of listing which is largely without foundation. To suggest that alterations cannot be made is spurious at best.

The owners of 400 Mona Vale Road are angry about the process but unfortunately that is inevitable when dealing with contentious areas such as recent heritage. What 'vested interest' the professionals may have is a mystery of course but it is true that if comprehensive research had been done earlier then a lot of the discussion would have been circumvented. How, though, do you predict what research needs carrying out when? It is regrettable that it wasn't carried out in 1988 when the matter was first raised. If the listing had been carried out at that time the confusion now would not have arisen.

Listing cannot be comprehensive at any given point in time and as said above our perceptions of value will alter over time. During the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Georgian Society in the UK deplored anything Victorian in design. That Society is now the Architectural History Society and no longer holds such prejudices. The National Trust is also regretting some decisions it made not to list in the early 1960s items whose loss is now deeply regretted such as the Regent Theatre in Sydney which was considered 'too recent' to list at that time. Time gives us a perspective that nothing else is able to do. Buildings of the 1960s however are in that transition time of being very recent to someone in their 70s but ancient history to someone in their 20s or 30s.

It is not appropriate to discuss the relative merits of the proposed listing in this Commission however the situation does illustrate a common complaint and that is the powerlessness that the owners describe. Unfortunately that sense of powerlessness is felt on both sides of the argument. The use of 'level' of listing thresholds skews the arguments and exacerbates the feeling of powerlessness because you are arguing with different agencies and professionals. The case study highlights the fear of listing in the community and the perception that professionals

somehow have other agendas. This needs to be tackled because it is not helpful from anyone's point of view. The question obviously is how? Public education is certainly the key.

There is community consultation as part of the existing processes and it is not unusual for those who present arguments that are not agreed with to say they haven't been heard. The owners clearly acknowledge the points made by the RAIA, the National Trust and others. They just don't think it matters; as he says 'it isn't Hadrian's Wall'.

To consider compensation accepts listing as a negative however some incentive for being proud of being the owner of a listed property is desirable for a number of reasons, including encouraging and allowing the owner to keep it in good order.

## **Braidwood**

The potential listing of the town of Braidwood on the State Heritage Register has been the subject of much heated debate and emotional discourse. As outlined in 2 of the 3 submissions received which specifically deal with Braidwood the town meets the criteria for designation as 'heritage'. It is also beautiful in a wider sense and seeking mechanisms to manage that, and manage inevitable pressure for change is seen by many in the town to be an advantage.

The submission from Jon Matthias unfortunately contains a lot of misleading and emotional comments but as noted above it is not the role of this Commission to determine what should or should not be listed. The Braidwood case study though illustrates a number of issues, not least of which why there should be such an outcry at potential listing. Mr Matthias's point about incentives is well made however. Although it should also be noted that ALL buildings require maintenance and in general repairs to a listed property cost no more than to a non-listed property if one is 'doing the right thing by a place'. However recognition that a place may be making a larger contribution than simply to the owner should be addressed through an incentives programme.

That the maintenance of 'heritage' helps tourism has been well illustrated in Australia and many other parts of the world and it is clearly not necessary, or desirable, to have every 'heritage property' open to the public. It is the ambience of the place that provides the key. What you go past on the way to the cafe or wherever you wish to spend your money makes an enormous difference to your willingness to linger in a town.

Public consultation has been extensive in Braidwood with a regular newsletter, 'Braidwood Matters', going out with the local paper, extensive public meetings and endless correspondence. Even the opponents of listing don't argue that the place isn't worth listing; they just don't like what it will mean. Unfortunately the opposition group are being alarmist about what it will mean and one wonders if they are being deliberately so. In terms of the extra approvals there are numerous 'standard exemptions' for regular works to a place and generally permission is required for things that the applicant would need to take to Council anyway. Not being listed does not give an owner carte blanche on their property.

The question that needs to be addressed is why the negative reaction and why the complete misinterpretation of the regulations? It would be more appropriate to lobby about the local LEP and DCP that will be influenced by the potential listing. There is clearly a perception in the community that listing is a negative. This perception must be addressed through education, policy and incentives.

In neither England nor Scotland is public consultation part of the listing process and there is rarely public outcry about listing. This is probably because they have lived with the system for so long that it is generally understood. I have been involved in many a battle over works to listed buildings in Scotland but never did that battle concentrate on whether something should or should not be listed. Of course listing there comes with the potential availability of grant monies for repair and maintenance works which can mean substantial sums for the applicant.

Perhaps it is simply the fear of the unknown but the it is interesting that considerable monies are being expended on fighting the potential listing which will inform development, not prevent it, and open the doors for potential grant aid (admittedly limited amounts at present but still monies are available).