

Submission to Product Commission Enquiry on Built Heritage Conservation

Conservation of Historic Heritage Places

Submission by the Balmain Association Inc.

The Balmain Peninsula has been a conservation area for at least 35 years. It was the first industrial suburb of Sydney when shipbuilding and repair facilities developed in the 1830s. Although William Balmain was granted 500 acres of the peninsula in 1801 the area was not subdivided until 1836 when John Gilchrist began to release the land. The delay was due to court challenges by Balmain's descendents to the transfer to Gilchrist for five shillings just before Balmain returned to Scotland.

Balmain is of heritage significance because it "demonstrates the first surge of suburban growth that sprang from the consolidation of wealth initiated by the 1850s gold rush. . . Through their intactness these remarkable collections of buildings provide the 'diary' of the area's development" (Leichhardt Heritage Review Godden Mackay Logan). Since the end of World War II the collapse of the shipbuilding industry has brought a significant change of land use. Former industrial sites can now be identified by modern multi-unit residential development. The Balmain Association was in the forefront of the successful challenge against the NSW Government appointment of an Administrator of the Leichhardt Council in 1990. However the main issue for the Association and conservationists is the protection of the built heritage on individual dwellings. After a series of workshops in the precincts of the Municipality, the Leichhardt Council proposed demolition controls.

Householders interested in modernising 19th Century cottages have not always observed the conservation controls. The Association is not opposed to changes provided they respect heritage values. Balmain has a very diverse range of building styles and this is used as justification for modern boxy structures unsympathetic to the streetscape. When people make an investment of \$1 million some seem to demand their right to extensively modify and in some cases demolish the original dwelling. Our representation on the local Planning Committee ensures that our policies are promoted.

The Balmain Association was formed in 1965 and its first project was the conservation of local lockup, the Balmain Watch House designed by

Edmund Blacket in 1854. Being a sandstone building, maintenance is costly but we finance the work by renting the exhibition facilities to local artist and craft workers. This also ensures the use of the building that respects its heritage values.

The major disadvantage to volunteer organisations such as ours is the exorbitant cost of insurance. In a building open to the public we are required to take out public risk insurance as well as covering our volunteers.

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