

SUBMISSION TO
"CONSERVATION OF AUSTRALIA'S HISTORIC
HERITAGE PLACES INQUIRY"

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BACKGROUND

I have owned historic properties most of my adult life. I am attracted to their style and the deep feeling of connection to the past that such ownership brings, and I enjoy conserving such places for future generations.

Seven years ago my interest in historic places drew me to positions with the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) as Conservation Manager and later as Property Manager. These positions led to me becoming involved in heritage conservation both on the National Trust's portfolio of properties, and in the broader community throughout Victoria. I resigned from the National Trust in April 2004.

Since then, I have restored three historic properties in Western Victoria.

My submission is based in the main on my most recent experiences.

BENEFITS AND COSTS OF CONSERVATION OF HISTORIC PLACES

Historic places provide a strong sense for communities of connection with the past. Communities "own" such places, and demonstrate a great deal of passion whenever historic places in their area are under threat. When we purchased our Western District properties, the questions from local people concentrated around our intentions for the properties. Were we going to restore them? Were we going to modify them? Did we know their history? Many had childhood memories of being there, and all had stories associated with the place. We have since received many requests from community organisations for permission to visit, and we have been pleased to see how spectacularly such a visit brings alive the whole period of early settlement of Victoria by white people.

Our ownership and restoration of these properties will therefore result in a social benefit in that an important building will be conserved for future generations.

There is also an environment benefit in that we improve the historic gardens around the homesteads, and in one case, are protecting significant remnant vegetation adjoining the property.

The costs are considerable. Our most significant property benefited considerably from one particular family who were owners for over sixty years from 1920 and were fiercely committed to its survival. But restoration work on historic properties is never-

ending. We have embarked on restoration work on our current property and gardens with lots of enthusiasm and all the skill and advice we can muster, but with very limited private funds to support our work.

CURRENT ROLES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

It has been an eye-opening experience to move from a senior role in a heritage protection organisation, where private owners are seen with a sympathetic but to some extent controlling eye, to being one of those owners. As I have immersed myself in this new role I have become more and more aware of the simple fact that by far the majority of Victoria's heritage buildings are privately owned. Private owners are restoring heritage buildings throughout Victoria for a variety of reasons including economic benefit, aesthetic/lifestyle reasons and in some cases out of a strong sense of community responsibility. However other private owners simply do not have the skills and resources required, or are simply not interested or equate "old" with "second rate" and seek to demolish and build new buildings.

When we commenced ownership of our most recent property our first task was to research the property's history carefully. This involved contact with Heritage Victoria, the National Trust of Australia (Victoria), local historical societies, the University of Melbourne, and the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, as well as discussions with numerous local residents. Bit by bit we are piecing together a "jigsaw" of information which then helps inform our restoration plans. All the organisations we contacted have been of assistance to a lesser or greater extent depending on the resources available to them. Of particular alarm to us has been the realisation that due to the age of many of the people telling us their stories about the place, within a generation, unless such anecdotes are recorded in some way, much of the history of the place will be lost forever.

We are now moving into the physical restoration phase, and staff from Heritage Victoria have offered to visit and provide advice and ideas, which is greatly appreciated. We feel a general sense of support from the local community and beyond, which is great. But we know that we are the ones who have to write the cheques and do most of the work.

INCENTIVES AND DISINCENTIVES

We accept the responsibilities associated with our current property being listed on the Victorian Heritage Register and protected in the local planning scheme, particularly with support and advice being provided. We appreciate the fact that there is the possibility of receiving a grant or loan under the Victorian Heritage Program, and we intend to submit an application in due course.

The more degraded a heritage place is, the more difficult it becomes for a private owner to restore and maintain it. Our building is in reasonably sound condition but still requires an extensive program of conservation work. As well as applying for a grant, we have had many discussions about ways of raising funds from the property itself, all of which have an adverse impact in some way on the building. Open Days can lead to physical degradation in all sorts of ways unless well managed. Using the property for film shoots usually requires some modification of the heritage fabric.

Conversion of the building to a function centre or accommodation facility usually requires extensive modification of the building and often, construction of additional buildings nearby.

There is an important role for government agencies in assisting private owners in resolving the issue of how to protect and conserve a heritage place in the context of the economic and skill limitations. Grants, loans, advice and practical hands-on assistance all have a role in particular applications.

EMERGING TRENDS

In my time at the National Trust there was a well-publicised trend, which I supported, towards selling Trust-owned heritage properties to private owners, leasing them out or handing them over to State or local government. I observed that State and local governments were also often keen to hand heritage properties under their management to community organisations or private owners.

Such a trend makes a great deal of sense in that owners/direct users of heritage properties are strongly committed to them and have a direct interest in their ongoing maintenance.

However, whenever more major restoration work is required, many such owners or users lack the required funds to carry out such work. This is where grant and loan programs, and support and advice, are so important. There is no point in delegating responsibility unless adequate resources are allocated to supporting those holding the future of heritage places in their hands.

POSSIBLE POLICY AND PROGRAM APPROACHES

1. Advisory Services

Because I had worked in a heritage protection organisation for seven years, I had a reasonable idea of the services that are available to people restoring heritage properties. Most people will not have this knowledge.

A "one-stop shop" for heritage advice in each State, with a toll free enquiries number, would greatly assist owners of heritage places find their way through the restoration process including the relevant regulations.

2. Assistance with the preparation of Conservation Policies and Plans

Because of my work with the National Trust I was also aware of the need to develop a set of conservation policies to guide the restoration process, and of the importance of working to a plan. Having commissioned a number of such reports while Conservation Manager, I had worked on the development of policies for particular properties and was able to apply this knowledge to our own property, so we commenced the project with a reasonable sense of direction right from the start.

Most owners of historic properties will not have such knowledge. If informed by relevant authorities that they should prepare a Conservation Policy and Plan, their first

question is likely to be: how much do we need to pay for such a report? When they discover that a typical report costs \$5,000 - \$10,000 to prepare, they will understandably say "I could buy so many litres of paint, sheets of roofing iron and metres of spouting for that sum, and such purchases are a much greater priority, given the condition of the building".

Many local Councils have heritage advisers, at least on a part-time basis, who may be able to assist in a general sense with policy preparation advice but they do not have the time to become deeply involved with a particular property. Also, heritage property owners do not always know of the existence of Council heritage advisers, and even if they did, may be reluctant to make contact, fearing a regulatory rather than advisory response.

"A financial assistance program for the preparation of Conservation Policies and Plans, together with carefully prepared booklets outlining how an owner goes about preparing their own policy and plan should their funding application not be successful, would contribute significantly to raising the quality of conservation work in Australia."

3. Assistance with conservation work

For owners of properties listed on most State registers, there are, I understand, grants and loans which can be sought to assist with restoration. However these programs have limited funds.

For heritage properties without such listing which are protected in local planning schemes, the level of assistance available is much more variable and in many cases non-existent.

"A much more extensive program of grants and loans for owners of heritage properties would greatly assist, particularly for major structural work on roofs, foundations and external timbers. "