

The Glebe Society Incorporated

SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION Inquiry into Conservation of Historic Heritage Places

INTRODUCTION

About the Glebe Society

The Glebe Society was formed in 1969. It stemmed from a community response to the despoliation of Glebe through indiscriminate development. The distinctive Victorian character of the suburb was being destroyed by the demolition of terrace houses to make way for flats. A freeway proposal threatened to cut the suburb in three, at the same time destroying *Lyndhurst* (1836), a fine Regency villa, now in private ownership.

The Glebe Society, led by Professor Bernard Smith of the University of Sydney, successfully opposed these threats, and in 1970 the Society prepared a Master Plan for the area which resulted in the National Trust listing Glebe as a Conservation Area in 1974.

The Glebe Society has approximately 300 members, drawn from virtually every street in the suburb. The Society continues to actively support the preservation and enhancement of the suburb's built environment and its heritage buildings, including the Glebe Estate.

Glebe's history & character

Fringed by Blackwattle and Rozelle Bays, Glebe was home to the indigenous people of the Cadigal clan for thousands of years before being settled first by Europeans in the late 1820's. Glebe is also the birthplace of Australia's first Prime Minister, Sir Edmund Barton.

Modern Glebe¹ has retained many of its grand Victorian homes, Federation houses, terraces and modest workers' cottages. These contribute to the unique streetscapes and character of the area. As a peninsula community, Glebe has a village atmosphere and residents have a strong sense of identity.

Glebe is characterised by:

- Its human (low-rise) scale and its classification as a Heritage Conservation Area
- Its relatively dense population and broad mix of social and economic groups
- A transient student and tourist population
- A significant number of tourist beds
- A large area of public housing (The Glebe Estate)
- Long-term residents who contribute to the village atmosphere
- Many successful small businesses (including cafes, restaurants, bookshops, etc)

¹ For the purposes of this document, the term "Glebe" includes Forest Lodge.

Glebe's Built Heritage

Glebe has a human-scale, coherent and largely intact 19th century townscape, which is listed on the original Register of the National Estate and Classified as an Urban Conservation Area by the National Trust.

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Apart from its classification as an Urban Conservation Area, a significant number of Glebe properties have been given formal heritage status:

- 17 are listed on the original Register of the National Estate
- 10 are listed on the State Heritage Register
- 48 are classified by the National Trust
- 161 are itemised on the current Local Environment Plan

Many others, although not listed, are of particular historic and/or architectural interest²

The Glebe Society's comments to the Productivity Commission are predominantly gained from, and related to, the Glebe experience.

The following comments relate to the items set out in the Terms of Reference.

1. The main pressures on the conservation of historic heritage places

Glebe is a much sought after place to live. It is close to the CBD, is well provided with all the desired services and amenities, and provides dramatic views of city skyline and harbour waters along which parklands and foreshore walkways run. But it is also Glebe's built character that makes it so popular. It is one of predominantly century old one- and two-storey dwellings, comprising cottages, duplexes, much in the terrace form, and a sprinkling of remaining old estate houses. Across all is displayed building styles that speak of : Regency, Post-Regency, Victorian (Italianate, Picturesque) and Federation.

So location and built character have combined to create such high market values in a climate where every developer is searching for any opportunity or weakness in planning controls that will allow the construction of more dwellings. The pressures to demolish or drastically add to are hence very real.

The ever increasing growth and spread of Sydney have prompted the State Government's recent Metropolitan Strategy Paper. This document suggests that existing suburbs, including the inner city ones, accept substantial additional building floor space.

One might conclude that the successful conservation of Glebe is more likely to rest with the initiatives of Local Government , than with those of the State.

² Smith, Kate and Bernard *The Architectural Character of Glebe*, Sydney University Press, revised 1989

2. The economic, social and environmental benefits and costs of the conservation of historic heritage places in Australia

Glebe is an area of extremely significant historical and social importance for Australia as a whole – indeed it is one of the founts of the nation. As such its conservation significantly benefits the whole fabric and heritage of the country.

- One of the earliest centres of European settlement in Australia
- One whose character and proximity to the centre of Sydney has meant that it has played an influential role in the nation's subsequent development across a wide range of sectors:
 - emerging political scene in Australia
 - trade union development (especially on the waterfront) and later the Labor Party
 - intellectual and educational growth of the nation with location in or adjacent of:
 - the University of Sydney
 - and more recently UTS and various other secondary and tertiary institutions
 - a leading national centre of literary and artistic pursuits
 - important role on indigenous issues (especially through Tranby College)
 - early religious development – range of historic churches and even the name “Glebe”
 - prominent in early development of Australian sporting ethos :
 - all codes of football, cricket, hockey
 - rowing
 - tennis – Harry Hopman, Lew Hoad
 - harness racing
 - early beginnings of multiculturalism – e.g. Sze Yup temple
 - Glebe Markets – icon in Sydney

The Glebe community today is also a microcosm of the nation comprising many vibrant groups of people - as such merits proper conservation on these grounds alone:

- Some who have lived in its Victorian terraces for generations
- A growing number of more recent arrivals seeking inner city life
- Many with strong University connections – both academic staff and students

- With many of the latter coming from overseas and adding a cosmopolitan touch to Glebe
- A significant indigenous community
- A growing transient population – largely young and back-packers

But so also is Glebe a centre of increasing attraction for foreign and domestic tourism which in turn provides a vital stimulus for the community's continued economic and commercial survival.

- Heritage built environment – one of best restored and maintained in Australia
- Cultural pursuits – especially range of quality bookshops, galleries etc
- Foreshore of Rozelle Bay and Blackwattle Bay – just being developed but rich in history of waterfront industry
- Restaurants and coffee shops – “badge” of Glebe
- Glebe Markets, fairs and other cultural festivals

Glebe is very valuable real estate and retaining its heritage character is a constant challenge. The all-too-obvious problem is how to marshal the resources – public and private – to protect, maintain and enhance the benefits listed above.

3. The current relative roles and contributions to the conservation of historic heritage places of the Commonwealth and the state and territory governments, heritage owners (private, corporate and government), community groups and any other relevant stakeholders

3.1 Commonwealth

The Commonwealth has played a very major role in conservation, when in 1974 it purchased the whole of the Church of England estates of Bishopthorpe & St. Phillips (bounded by Parramatta Road, St Johns Road, Mt. Vernon Street and Wentworth Park Road) and so saved this historic area from demolition for redevelopment.

Later this housing was transferred to the NSW Department of Housing and, with the Lyndhurst Estate, became the largest urban restoration / renewal project in Australia. The Commonwealth recognised its value by listing Glebe as an Urban Conservation Area on the then Register of the National Estate.

3.2 State

The NSW Government's present attitude towards the Glebe Estate appears currently to be one of:

- Ongoing maintenance, some would say at an insufficient level; and
- selling off individual dwellings as they become available.

However, the government as the “one owner” of the Glebe Estate, has applied professional heritage paint colour schemes which have accentuated the visual presentation of the terrace form

and thus added to its heritage appreciation. The selling off of individual dwellings runs counter to this, but is claimed to provide in time a more constructive social mix.

The NSW Government's Heritage Act (1977) would seem to only safeguard the "large & illustrious", so leaving the "everyday and ordinary" heritage of our forefathers, which makes up the bulk of Glebe's housing stock, to best fend for itself, perhaps with some help from local government, as below.

3.3 Local government

Glebe has recently moved from the Leichhardt LGA to the City of Sydney.

- The City of Sydney sees much value in the built heritage of Glebe (and other similar surrounding suburbs) and so is hoping to prepare much stronger planning controls to ensure its conservation. Their vision is of surrounding urban villages displaying their different histories/heritages and so providing greater richness to the city as a whole.
- The Glebe Society sees the local government arena as the preferred place (and level of government) to safeguard local heritage, despite the vagaries of their past performances. Perhaps State Government should maintain their present overarching control.
- Councils have provided, and should continue to provide, building restoration advice to home owners.

3.4 Community groups

- The Glebe Society, as referred to in the introduction, has provided strong leadership and support over the past 36 years in the (successful on the whole) safeguarding of Glebe's built heritage through active oversight of development proposals, education (publications and talks) and information sharing.
- Professor Bernard Smith (the Glebe Society's first President) and his wife Kate published the seminal work *The Architectural Character of Glebe* which was a benchmark in focussing attention on the richness of Glebe's heritage
- The Leichhardt Historical Journal has over the years produced numerous papers on the early days of this area. Our local historians, Max Solling OAM and Michael Foster, have contributed to these and to our appreciation of our history/heritage in many other ways.

3.5 Coalitions of Community Groups

The Glebe Society has taken initiating roles in the formation of two coalitions of community groups. The first is a coalition of some 16 resident groups within the City of Sydney Local Government Area (CityRAGS, <http://www.gangart.com/city/>). Foremost amongst its aims is to protect the City's heritage and environment, to improve residential amenity, and to enhance the social capital of the City of Sydney in general and our neighbourhoods in particular. (How?) The second is a Coalition of Glebe Groups, COGG, which is made up of representatives from The Glebe Society Inc., The Glebe Chamber of Commerce Inc., The Glebe Community Action Group and The Glebe Point Residents Group. These groups, which are active and meet regularly throughout the year, represent a wide cross-section of residential and commercial Glebe. COGG aims to harness the energies and aspirations of the residents and the business community to provide City of Sydney Council with agreed advice on such priorities as enhancement of local business activity and preservation of heritage within the Glebe/Forest Lodge community.

3.6 Owners of heritage buildings

Comparisons with the photographs included in *The Architectural Heritage of Glebe*, published 30 years ago, shows the extent of effort and money which has been expended by private owners to sympathetically restore and/or maintain their heritage dwellings. It is their collective effort which has so greatly benefited the Glebe community.

3.7 The National Trust

The National Trust has :

- Classified 48 properties (or groups of buildings)
- Classified Glebe as an Urban Conservation Area

These listings have significantly strengthened the community's arguments against inappropriate development. The Glebe Society Inc is a member of the National Trust.

3.8 Historic Houses Trust

The Historic Houses Trust have restored one house in Glebe, namely "Lyndhurst", an 1831 Regency Villa. They have no interest in collections or streets of Victorian heritage. As such their role in Glebe is limited.

4. The positive and/or negative impacts of regulatory, taxation and institutional arrangements on the conservation of historic heritage places, and other impediments and incentives that affect outcomes

- Potentially effective planning and building controls have been available under the NSW Heritage Act 1977 and the NSW Environmental Planning & Assessment Act 1979.
- The use of these controls by Leichhardt Council (which formerly administered Glebe until May 2003) was haphazard, inconsistent and not comprehensive, in terms of the designation of 'heritage items' for protection from demolition and inappropriate building development, and an overall and effective balance of controls and their management.
- A major review, now underway, of these controls and opportunities by the City of Sydney Council offers significant hope for improved application of the NSW heritage controls through the local environmental plan and development control plan. The City of Sydney Council has superior financial and staff resources and decision making ability for this task and management, and enjoys the confidence of the community.
- Conservation is not just about buildings, it is also about the conservation of significant heritage streetscapes, precincts and places of cultural importance. This applies particularly to Glebe where the heritage streetscapes comprise 75% of the total housing stock. In contrast, there is currently only 4% of the housing stock which has been identified, evaluated and formally listed for protection. The use of mechanisms such as Urban Conservation Area classification is therefore essential for the protection of such areas.
- Some property owners are reluctant to accept heritage controls believing them too restrictive and resulting in loss of property value. More effective and diligent consultation with stakeholders is required to overcome or address this resistance.

- State governments and Councils may neutralise the effectiveness of heritage controls by inappropriate Floor Space Ratios.
- The NSW Government is compromising heritage values and controls by new legislation setting up undemocratic Development Authorities (such as the Redfern-Waterloo Development Authority and the proposed Parramatta Road Development Authority) with powers to override heritage controls.
- Commonwealth interest in and legislation for heritage controls at the State or local level is largely non-existent.
- Better outcomes for conservation of building and places could be achieved by the following Australian Govt initiatives:
 - taxation incentives in the form of deductions on tax liability to individuals, institutions and companies for expenditure on conservation of heritage buildings
 - direct grants to local government for employment of heritage advisers, to give direct advice to property owners, on basis of assisting the national interest in conservation of key areas and heritage building stock of importance to national culture and tourism, and beyond the normal scope or resources of local government, and
 - Council rate exemptions or reductions to properties owners of heritage buildings where the conservation of the buildings is in danger, and subsidies to local government by State or Australian Govt for loss of rate revenue. At present only charitable organisations and religious bodies are exempt from rates. Subsidies are necessary since the burden of rate exemptions would be uneven over the state.

5. Emerging technological, economic, demographic, environmental and social trends that offer potential new approaches to the conservation of historic heritage places

Glebe, like other inner city suburbs, has experienced far reaching changes in the last thirty years. From being regarded as a slum ripe for demolition, the suburb is now regarded as among the most desirable. This is largely owing to its good state of preservation and the actions of The Glebe Society in identifying the suburb as suitable for urban renewal. This resulted in its classification by the National Trust and the purchase and renovation of the Glebe Estate by the Federal and State Governments.

In general there has been a move back to the inner city because of its proximity to the economic, intellectual and cultural centre. With Glebe, the demographic has shifted markedly up the social scale and this, coupled with the advent of PCs and internet connections, has enabled many residents to work from home. Combining home and office provides the impetus and the cash flow to more effectively restore and maintain heritage houses.

6. Possible policy and program approaches for managing the conservation of Australia's historic heritage places and competing objectives and interests

Existing situation/conflicts

- On the one hand we find, with Glebe in particular, ever-increasing pressures to increase densities (see 1 above) which if unfettered, will see the demolition of heritage building stock..
- On the other hand the community at large, in looking for safeguards, finds a bewildering collection of authorities and non-statutory bodies who may, or may not, have some control to stop indiscriminate demolition. They also find a bewildering range in the degree of protection afforded.
- An informed community understands that a living organism must gradually change and evolve. It must, and does, accept the reality of these pressures but seeks to be in a position where it is confident that legislative mechanisms will sensibly and clearly guide this gradual evolution.
- An informed community will pressure Local (and other levels of) government to achieve the best settings for their heritage conservation controls.

Way forward

- Promote the growth of "an informed community". This will come about when they are exposed to, and educated about, their own particular local heritage, and where the value of heritage is demonstrated by the attention and funding provided to it by the highest level of government.
- Recognise that it is at the level of Local government, as argued in (1) and (3) above, that the advancement of heritage conservation will be most successful.
- Note that areas will differ in their needs. In Glebe's case, we have –
 - A particularly high heritage value in terms of harbouring the beginnings of numerous national institutions and movements.
 - In addition to some listed buildings, we have a particularly large (ie.75%) proportion of heritage housing (see (4) above). It is these streets of heritage that require conservation. Legislative measures to achieve this will require careful drafting after extensive research.
- The Commonwealth is seen as having a leadership and funding role in the above. This would see the Commonwealth being active in, for example:
 - publicising successful examples of conservation;
 - providing meaningful grants for programs which aid local government in the identification, evaluation and listing of built heritage including the use of Urban Conservation Area protection;
 - providing a range of subsidies, grants and exemptions to owners of heritage properties

The Australian Council of National Trusts submission has 7 recommendations in its Executive Summary. These are in line with our submission and are fully supported by this Society.

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The Glebe Society Incorporated

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