

Major Threat to Historic Shopping Strips

We face a major heritage threat from an unexpected quarter. The historic shopping strips of our inner and middle suburbs are largely protected by local heritage overlays, not by the state. Since the radical makeover of our planning system in the 1990s, heritage overlays have been significantly weakened. Then, some time ago, the state government designated all of Melbourne's historic strip shopping centres as Activity Centres. This encourages major development in these areas and such development is in tension with the heritage which makes these centres so popular.

This problem has come to a head with Planning Scheme Amendment C231 for the Queens Parade shopping strip in North Fitzroy. The ostensible aim is to conciliate heritage and development. But the method proposed is to encourage six-story development just six metres behind the facades of heritage buildings. This is virtual facadism. Little of the historic buildings will remain and the new development will loom over the typically double-story streetscape. If Yarra Council proceeds with Amendment C231, it will destroy everything that is good about the Queens Parade shopping strip.

Even more frightening, apparently under state government pressure, similar amendments are in train for many other precincts. So if Yarra Council accept, this will extend to other historic shopping strips, with devastating consequences.

On Friday, 30 November, the RHSV lodged the submission with Yarra Council explaining the dangers of C231. It was written by Ian Wight of the RHSV Heritage Committee, a town planner one-time National Trust Conservation Manager, who has recently spent some time uncovering the issues posed by C231. The submission demonstrates clearly, with striking illustrations, the oppressive development which this new planning scheme would encourage.

Yarra Council is a progressive council comprising Green, Labor, Socialist and independenta. If these councillors understand the threat, they will surely abandon C231. If, after reading our submission, you agree that C231 would destroy the character of Queens Parade and other historic shopping strips, write to the Yarra Councillor of your choice urging her or him to reject C231.

Charles Sowerwine,
Chair, Heritage Committee,
RHSV

RHSV Submission to Yarra Council
Proposed Planning Scheme Amendment C231

30 November 2018

1. Introduction

This submission focuses on the Activity Centre Precinct (Precinct 4 [Queens Parade]), being the primary heritage shopping precinct, but many of the concerns expressed will also apply where a similar approach has been adopted in other precincts.

In the strategic assessment of this amendment that appears in its Explanatory Report, the claim is made that the amendment implements the heritage objective of planning in Victoria. To quote the report:

‘Heritage has been an important consideration in preparing the planning controls which will ensure that those buildings which are of aesthetic, architectural and historical interest are conserved’.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Instead of conserving buildings of aesthetic, architectural and/or historic interest, the controls encourage their destruction. In Precinct 4, the demolition of all but the front six meters of heritage buildings is encouraged to make way for new development of at least six stories. As this new development is only required to be set back six metres, it will destroy the skyline identified in the statement of significance:

‘the picturesque shop-row skyline, visible from across Queens Parade, with its gabled or hipped roof forms and many original chimneys’

and will clearly overwhelm what remains of the historic buildings.

This needs to be called out for what it is: namely facadism, a practice long discredited as an approach to heritage conservation and specifically discouraged by the heritage guidelines in the Yarra Planning Scheme. Worse, this facadism is not the result a bad decision from VCAT or poorly drafted heritage controls; it is actually being promoted by the planning authority itself. ostensibly as a means to conserve heritage buildings.

In trying to resolve the conflict between the objective of encouraging new and more intensive development in the Activity Centre and the objective of conserving heritage assets, heritage has emerged as a very poor second.

2. Proper Approach to Conservation.

As soon as the state government decided to designate all of Melbourne’s historic strip shopping centres as Activity Centres, it was immediately apparent that it would take serious work to reconcile the conservation of these centres’ historic buildings with the policies for intense development attached to Activity Centres.

So after a number of false starts involving the preparation of structure plans which proved to be ineffective, the Council is now to be respected for undertaking the detailed lot-by-lot examination required to identify and protect the heritage fabric and to identify areas that can accommodate more intensive development.

The amount of detail in the data gathered for this project is exemplary, as are the quality of the graphics that displays them.

With all this information to hand, one could reasonably expect that the first task would be to identify the key heritage precincts and declare these as minimum change areas, while encouraging new development to locate in the larger post-industrial sites.

The heritage minimum change areas should then be managed like other Heritage Overlay areas, where demolition of significant and contributory buildings is discouraged and new development is permitted but only of a mass and scale that does not compromise the significance of the heritage place.

The Yarra Planning Scheme's Guidelines for Sites subject to the Heritage Overlay at Clause 22.02 have provisions that discourage demolition and control the visibility of extensions and additions. To quote part of sub-clause 22.02-5.1 :

Generally discourage the demolition of part of an individually significant or contributory building or removal of contributory elements unless:

- That part of the heritage place has been changed beyond recognition of its original or subsequent contributory character(s).
- For a contributory building:
 - that part is not visible from the street frontage (other than a laneway), abutting park or public open space, **and the main building form including roof form is maintained;** (our emphasis) or
 - the removal of the part would not adversely affect the contribution of the building to the heritage place.

And for new development, alterations and additions, sub-clause 22.02-5.7 provides the following general guidance:

Encourage the design of new development and alterations and additions to a heritage place or a contributory element to a heritage place to:

- Respect the pattern, rhythm, orientation to the street, spatial characteristics, fenestration, roof form, materials and heritage character of the surrounding historic streetscape.
- Be articulated and massed to correspond with the prevailing building form of the heritage place or contributory elements to the heritage place.
- Be visually recessive and not dominate the heritage place.
- Be distinguishable from the original historic fabric.
- Not remove, cover, damage or change original historic fabric.
- Not obscure views of principle façades.
- Consider the architectural integrity and context of the heritage place or contributory element.

Many other councils also have heritage guidelines for Heritage Overlay areas that have successfully maintained the most significant parts of contributory buildings but often allowed up to two-story extensions to the rear, where these are not too visible from the street or other public areas. Usually this involves retaining the principal roof of the dwelling, its chimneys, and normally at least the front two rooms. This is also the approach taken by Heritage Victoria's model guidelines for various residential types of setting. Incidentally these guidelines also discuss facadism:

A facade is an exterior wall to a building or structure. Buildings are conceived in three dimensions. For a building to continue to be a Contributory Element,

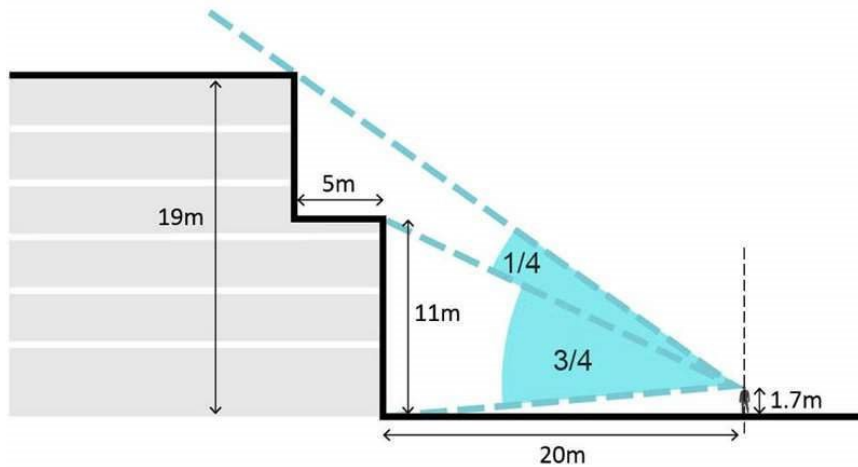


Figure 2 (from: *Swan Street Built Form Heritage Review*, p. 87, taken from DDO 18 from Moreland Planning Scheme).

This gives every indication that six stories was the desired height in the first place and that the degree of visibility was selected to suit this height. Otherwise why would a 1:1 ratio be acceptable in Queens Parade but not in Swan Street?

Figure 3 (below) makes clear the impact of the development rising above and dominating the heritage retail frontage (although we assume that Figure 3 shows the five-story version, not the six stories now enshrined in the exhibited DDO).



Figure 3 (From *Queens Parade Built Form Review*, Appendix, p. 9).

What this visualisation does not illustrate well is that the pale yellow mass rising behind the shops is located only six metres behind the heritage façade. In reality it will be quite obvious that these heritage buildings have been chopped off by the new development, leaving them as dwarfed tokenistic remnants.

This reality can be better appreciated from Figure 4 (below). It illustrates the tokenistic nature of the ‘little bit of heritage’ and also the extent of domination of the new works. Once again, one needs to bear in mind that this is now proposed to be six stories high, not five as shown in this illustration.

The irony of this illustration is that it shows how deep these blocks are. A proposal that considered heritage first could comfortably retain the principal roof still leaving more than half the site available for significant new development .

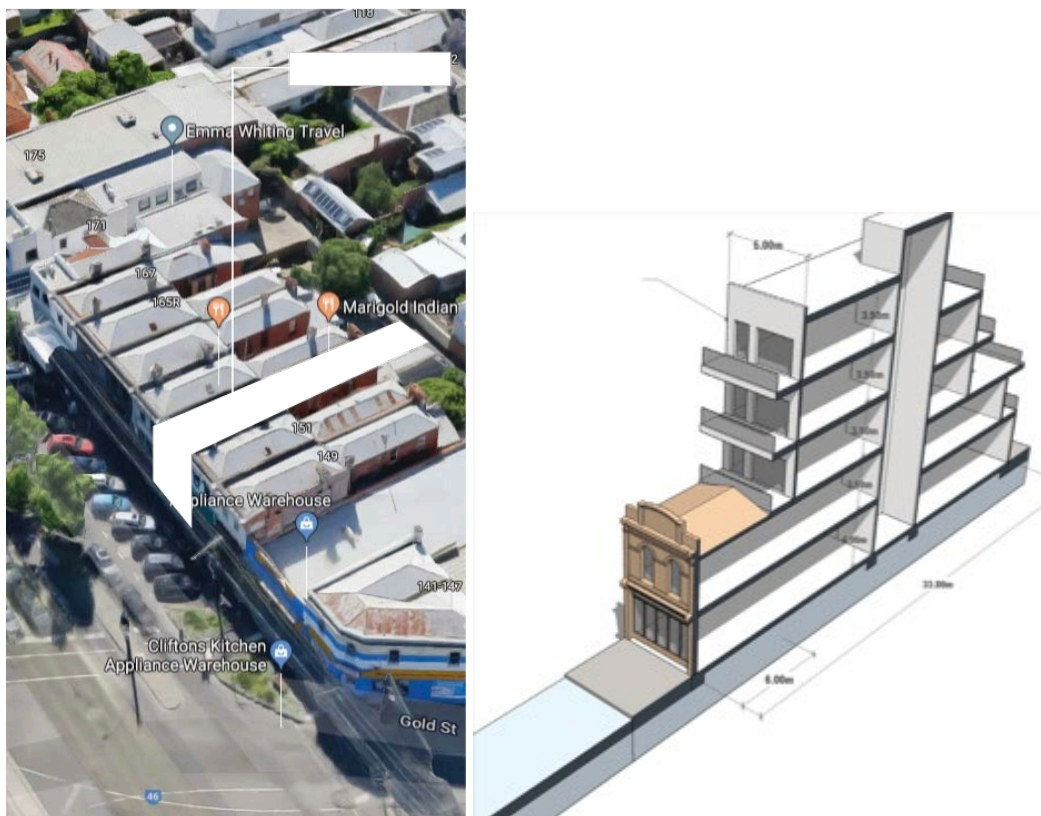


Figure 4 (From *Queens Parade Built Form Review Appendix*, p. 12).

4. Proposals for Other Historic Strip Shopping Centres

The RHSV is aware that the approach adopted for this project has also been taken for plans for other heritage strip shopping centres in Yarra as well for other inner- and middle-ring suburbs.

We also understand that Yarra Council has been under pressure from the responsible state department to maximise development in Activity Centres. We have been told by Council officers and Councillors that the Department has said that this type of amendment is ‘as good as you will get’ in terms of heritage conservation and height controls. It seems that we are being carried by a relentless tide of inappropriate controls orchestrated from the centre by state bureaucrats whose blinkered vision will result in the effective destruction of all our historic strip centres.

These amendments also create precedents that threaten the proper administration of the Heritage Overlay across the State.

This process must be stopped, starting with Amendment C231, and the best council to take this on is the Yarra City Council because:

- Yarra contains many of the best strip centres in the metropolitan area and has the most to lose if these proposals go ahead.
- Yarra has a track record of winning campaigns against state government misguided policies.
- Yarra has well-informed and articulate residents who have shown themselves ready and capable to support change for the better.

5. Conclusion

This amendment is ill-founded and will destroy everything that is good about the Queens Parade shopping strip. There is a wealth of current information that has now been collected about the area that would make its replacement with an amendment that respected the areas heritage assets a much easier task.

Amendment C312 however is fatally flawed and we ask that it be abandoned.