



## ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF VICTORIA INC.

239 A'Beckett Street, Melbourne 3000

13 July 2020

Professor Duncan Maskell, Vice-Chancellor,  
The University of Melbourne,  
9th Floor, Raymond Priestley Building,  
The University of Melbourne,  
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Dear Vice-Chancellor,

### GMH Fishermans Bend Site Engineering Campus

The Royal Historical Society of Victoria congratulates the University on its plan to build an engineering campus at the GMH Fishermans Bend site. If the University makes the best use of this historic site, it can truly be a world-class engineering campus, comparable to such acclaimed sites as the Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation, New York, the Copenhagen City & Port Development Corporation, the Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation, London, and the Paris et Métropole Aménagement.<sup>1</sup>

The plan for the GMH site has enormous potential for good if carried out appropriately, in a manner to make effective use of the extraordinary and extraordinarily appropriate heritage value of the site. See Appendix, below, for a summary of that value.

The first detailed indications of planning to date, however, are not promising. Indeed, they are deeply concerning. The documents submitted to the City of Melbourne Future Melbourne Committee, Meeting 7 July 2020, Agenda Item 6.3 Ministerial Amendment C371 Fishermans Bend Campus, short circuit the heritage and planning processes needed to realise the full benefit of this superb historic site. If this process continues, the result of this will be not only the loss of significant heritage, but also the failure of the project as a whole to deliver full benefits to the University of Melbourne, to the Fishermans Bend community and to Victoria as a whole.

The CoM officers' report offers an excellent analysis of the shortcomings of Planning Scheme Amendment C371 prepared by the Minister for Planning for The University of Melbourne's new Fishermans Bend Campus (Report to the Future Melbourne (Planning) Committee, Agenda item 6.3 Ministerial Amendment C371 Fishermans Bend Campus, 7 July 2020).

Foremost among these shortcomings is that 'the heritage elements [are] overwhelmed in scale' (Report to the Future Melbourne (Planning) Committee, p. 123). The officers note surprising

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<sup>1</sup> These sites are discussed in Attachment 2: 'Governance Case Studies: International Best Practice, Report to the Future Melbourne (Planning) Committee (City of Melbourne)', Agenda item 6.4, Proposed Revised Governance Structure for Fishermans Bend, 7 July 2020.

sloppiness of the proposals as submitted: ‘maximum building envelope heights and discrepancies with indicative massing diagrams make likely built form outcomes difficult to ascertain (p. 121). This, they note, leaves open built form up to 141m, heights which, as the officers gently point out, are ‘excessive in this location’ and ‘are not responsive to the heritage context’ (p. 121).

Typical of the plan’s disregard of heritage is, as the officers found, its ‘inconsistent information about the proposed extent of demolition. ‘The Incorporated Document incorrectly refers to the Social Centre as being nominated for demolition’ (p. 122).

Failure to pay sufficient attention to heritage leads to significant shortcomings in broad planning terms. The officers point to a poor ‘balance between built form and public realm,’ and ‘poorly articulated public realm provision, with what appears to be limited open spaces within the site, and limited opportunity for tree plantings’ (p. 118).

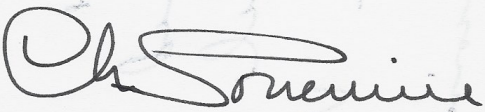
Sloppy planning, loss of heritage, inadequate open spaces and overwhelming bulk of new buildings (as high as 141 m). The officers’ report is an indictment of the process to date. To deliver the world-class campus which the community and the University expect, proper process must be followed.

We are therefore urging the Minister for Planning to put the planning process on hold until the Heritage Council report has been published for public scrutiny and the site registered or refused registration. Only then should planning resume. The first step in that planning would be application for the appropriate permits from Heritage Victoria.

I cannot stress the importance of following this process to ensure that maximum benefit is gained from the site. I therefore ask the University to support us in urging the Minister to defer the planning process and then to engage on the basis of effective preservation of the significant parts of the site as per the recommendations of the Executive Director Heritage Victoria.

The University will thereby gain auspicious location of the Engineering Faculty at this architecturally meritorious and historically significant site, so that it can inspire future Australian engineers to emulate their predecessors, who from this site led Australia’s emergence as a modern, independent and technologically capable nation. The Fishermans Bend community will thereby gain an exciting hub and much-needed public open space. And Victoria as a whole will thereby gain a focal point for Victoria’s emergence as the technological leader and manufacturing hub of Australia.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ch Sowerwine', is written over a light grey rectangular background.

(Professor) Charles Sowerwine,  
Chair, Heritage Committee,  
Royal Historical Society of Victoria.

## Appendix:

### Significant Heritage Value of the GMH Fishermans Bend Site

The recommendation of the Executive Director, Heritage Victoria, dated 20 November 2019, and the National Trust's supporting submission to the Heritage Council, dated 22 January 2020, together provide a remarkably strong case for registration of this site. The RHSV has supported that case from the outset and made a strong submission to the Heritage Council (24 January 2020).

As the Executive Director notes in his recommendation for nomination, 'GMH Fishermans Bend is architecturally significant as a notable example of an automotive factory complex.' The Administration Building, Parts Building and the elegant Social Centre are notable examples of Moderne-style architecture in Victoria. And, as the National Trust has pointed out, the Social Centre is also significant as 'evidence of the substantial commitment by General Motors Holden to the provision of well catered and comfortable service facilities for its employees'. In this context we stress the cultural and symbolic importance of the two murals painted by GMH employee Eileen Robertson for the opening of the Social Centre and their preservation in situ.

The Executive Director, in our view, should have given greater weight to the sites social value to the 'broader Victorian community', beyond but transcending and including particular local, social or cultural communities. Key to the significance of this site to Victoria is the facility's 'association with the development, production and launch of the Holden 48-215 (the FX Holden) the first Australian made, mass-produced car', in 1948.

The launch was a national occasion that focussed attention on Victoria: Prime Minister Ben Chifley launched the car, and, as the eminent historian Graeme Davison writes, the FX 'was a striking realisation of Australians' wartime dreams'.<sup>2</sup> It was marketed as 'Australia's Own Car' and then as 'Australia's Most Popular Car'.<sup>3</sup> The FX in particular and Holden in general effectively symbolised Australia's mid-century emergence as a prosperous, industrial nation. Great community interest persists in the Holden as a symbol of Australian independence, a symbol associated with Melbourne and Victoria through its location at this site, which, in Professor Davison's words, makes 'Fisherman's Bend a very significant site in Australia's industrial history'.

Professor Alistair Thomson, one of the lead authors of the ARC Study 'Social Histories of Holden in Australia', points out:

*From 1936 the General Motors Holden plant at Fishermans Bend was a pivotal site in Australian industrial and social development. GMH didn't just make cars at Fishermen's Bend. Tens of thousands of Australians made their working lives, and created Australia's iconic Holden, across the best part of a century. Countless post-war migrants made their start in Australia at the Holden plant, and it is fondly remembered for the opportunities it provided and for their own significant contributions to Australian history.*

For all these reasons, no site could be more appropriate for the new engineering campus. But to realise the value of the site, listing on the Victorian Heritage Register as per the extent of registration and the protections in the Executive Director's recommendation is the first step. That and only that will give the University a solid foundation on which to build the new campus.

<sup>2</sup> Graeme Davison and Sheryl Yelland, *Car wars : how the car won our hearts and conquered our cities* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2004), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> John Wright, *Heart of the lion : the 50 year history of Australia's Holden* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1988), pp. 61, 62, 71. Cf. John Wright, 'The untold story of the Holden car' (Ph.D., University of Melbourne, 2008).