



ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF VICTORIA INC.

239 A'Beckett Street, Melbourne 3000

13 July 2020

The Hon Richard Wynne MP,
Minister for Planning,
Level 16, 8 Nicholson Street,
East Melbourne VIC 3002.

richard.wynne@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Minister,

GMH Fishermans Bend Site: PROV H2399

The Royal Historical Society of Victoria has strongly supported and continues to support registration of the GMH Fishermans Bend Site on the Victorian Heritage Register. We note that you have used Ministerial discretion to call the application in.

In view of the significance of this site on heritage grounds and the potential for a great focal point for this area and the whole of the City of Melbourne, we urge you to release the Heritage Council report and to decide the registration of this site before The University of Melbourne's plan for an engineering campus is considered. This plan has enormous potential for good if done appropriately. That will require the process being followed in the appropriate sequence. We write this letter to substantiate the case for appropriate process.

1) The Case for Registration

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.

As the Executive Director notes, '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 site's 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’.¹ It was marketed as ‘Australia’s Own Car’ and then as ‘Australia’s Most Popular Car’.² 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 Australian Research Council 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.

I hope that you will agree with us that the General Motors Holden plant at Fishermans Bend deserves registration as per the extent of registration and the protections in the Executive Director’s recommendation.

2) The Problems with C371

We are concerned that, as evidenced by the first proposals emanating from the documents submitted to City of Melbourne Future Melbourne Committee, Meeting 7 July 2020, Agenda Item 6.3 Ministerial Amendment C371 Fishermans Bend Campus, the consideration of the site’s heritage status has been conflated with The University of Melbourne’s development plans as client/applicant. The result of this, we believe, will be not only the loss of significant heritage, but also the failure of the project as a whole to deliver the greatest 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 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).

¹ 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.

² 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).

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 what the community expects and what we know you expect, proper process must be followed.

3) The Case for Appropriate Process

It appears that you have acceded to The University of Melbourne's request that a Planning Scheme Amendment be considered concurrently with the Victorian Heritage Register nomination, under Section 20(4) of the Planning and Environment Act.

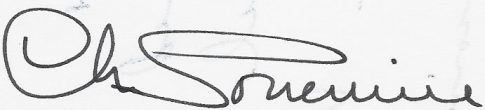
On calling in the nomination, you said that you would make your decision **after** receiving the Heritage Council report. We believe that, given the shortcomings in the plans identified by CoM officers, consideration of planning must not proceed until the Heritage Council report has been published and the site registered or refused registration.

We urge you, respectfully but strenuously, to withdraw Ministerial Amendment C371 and to publish the Heritage Council's report to the Minister for public scrutiny. Following that scrutiny and hopefully some form of consultation, we trust that you will confirm the Executive Director's recommendation and list GMH Fishermans Bend on the VHR.

Only then should planning resume. The first step in that planning would be application for the appropriate permits from Heritage Victoria.

I cannot sufficiently stress the importance of following this process to ensure that maximum benefit is gained from the site. 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,



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