**Submission on Melbourne Planning Scheme Amendment C394**

**4 July 2021**

The Royal Historical Society of Victoria strongly supports the proposed amendment.

The Fishermans Bend precinct bears witness to Australia’s extraordinary mobilisation for World War II and, more generally, to the industrial development which preceded the war and laid the foundations for that mobilisation, as well as to the take-off of Australian industry after the war, in particular of the automotive industry. These developments supported nearly four decades of increasing prosperity and equality. This mobilisation took place through government initiatives which enjoyed widespread popular support. In the current era, such witness to our national ability to organise ourselves in the face of an international crisis is particularly important. All the sites identified for protection are critical elements of this heritage and indeed some are still operational.

The planning controls under consideration result from a remarkably thorough and insightful report, ‘Fishermans Bend In-Depth Heritage Review and Stakeholder Engagement’, prepared by Helen Lardner Conservation and Design (HLCD). We congratulate HLCD on the report. It is an exemplary heritage report, providing excellent contextual work in urban, industrial and architectural history and superb detail The statements of significance are outstanding.

We are pleased that the report provides such a sound basis for proceeding with VHR nominations where merited and for protecting locally significant sites. The solid work here will help defend these sites, once the planning controls are adopted, by virtue of their thoroughness. Heritage Overlays only work if the responsible authority can see the basis for the HO. Thanks to HLCD, this will be the case.

We note three important sites recommended for HO.

1) The Former Kraft Vegemite Factory clearly merits inclusion (it would be hard to oppose it given the cultural significance of Vegemite to Australian identity) and it is heartening that the owners are supportive.

2) The 1935 Electricity Substation, 224 – 236 Salmon Street is an unprepossessing site, but its protection is clearly justified by its role in the development of manufacturing in Fishermans Bend. It is an intact witness to the effectiveness of the SEC in furthering government plans to enable the development of Fishermans Bend as an industrial precinct.

3) Shed 21, Berth 21 South Wharf, was constructed in 1956 as part of an ambitious plan to increase Port capacity. This site bears witness to Australian capacity for technical innovation through its unique transverse bridge crane system, which tripled its capacity to unload steel.

The case for protection of the site as a whole is strengthened by the importance of the three site recommended for VHR listing..

1) The first is the Former Government Aircraft Factory (GAF) is a very important part of Victoria’s industrial and wartime heritage. That a small nation with a limited industrial base could build such a complex and produce 500 Beaufort Bombers by November 1943 is justification for VHR listing, especially as the report shows that the complex is not only important but also sufficiently intact amply to justify VHR. It is particularly pleasing that it presents, as the consultant reports, as substantially intact in terms of its significance as a wartime complex and the ‘collection of buildings within the recommended extent retains a high degree of integrity and intactness’.

We regret that the Boeing Corporation does not support nomination, no doubt failing to appreciate Australia’s past record of independent industrial activity on this front. This should in no way slow progress toward VHR listing.

2) The second site proposed for VHR listing that has not yet been considered is the West Gate Bridge. The bridge is sufficiently well-known as a symbol of Melbourne’s 20th-Century development and ongoing identity to need no further discussion on our part.

3) The third site discussed in regard to VHR listing is the GMH complex at Fishermans Bend. The listing of this site has a problematic history since the Minister called it in. We understand that the Minister approved registration in December but that the extent of registration is not yet known. If that is the case, it is extraordinary. Surely registration should be a public matter and the extent is a most important issue of which the public should be informed.

Buildings of significance, as per the consultant’s report, are the Australian Headquarters, Victorian Administration Building, Plant 3, Technical Centre, Social Centre and Plant 5. By good fortune, the most important buildings are, the consultant reports, highly intact with exterior high integrity, and the others are high to moderately intact. We strongly believe all these should be registered.

The significance of the site is unquestionable. The complex was the result of the Metropolitan Town Planning Commission’s vision for Fishermans Bend, with GMH being the first industry established. And during World War II, the site made a major contribution to the wartime effort through the manufacturing of engines. For many years, GMH was the only automotive company that designed and engineered complete vehicles in Australia, and this was the only facility in Australia where a car could be completely designed and manufactured.

What is most significant about the site, however, is of course its association with GMH and the Holden motor car, the first Australian made, mass-produced car. Prime Minister Chifley launched the Holden 48-215 (the FX Holden) at the Social Centre, one of the sites proposed for registration, in 1948. The launch was a national occasion that focussed attention on Victoria. As the eminent historian Graeme Davison writes, the FX ‘was a striking realisation of Australians’ wartime dreams’.[[1]](#footnote-1) It was marketed as ‘Australia’s Own Car’ and then as ‘Australia’s Most Popular Car’.[[2]](#footnote-2) The FX in particular and Holden in general effectively symbolised Australia’s mid-century emergence as a prosperous, industrial nation.

The site’s significance is further demonstrated by the fact that two of the other buildings proposed for registration were opened by Prime Ministers. The streamlined moderne Australian Headquarters and Victorian Administration Building were opened by Prime Minister Lyons on 5 November 1936 and the Technical Centre, designed by the leading architectural firm of Stephenson and Turner in the Late Twentieth Century International style, was opened by Prime Minister Menzies on 10 June 1964.

To sum up, the proposed planning amendments are measured responses to a unique opportunity to preserve some extremely important parts of Victoria’s and indeed Australia’s most significant industrial history so that future generations can understand how Australia developed so rapidly in the mid-20th century. We urge the Panel to recommend that the Amendment be gazetted.

**This submission was prepared on behalf of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria by the Chair of the RHSV Heritage Committee, Professor Charles Sowerwine, with the assistance of other members of the Committee. Please direct any queries to Professor Sowerwine** **c.sowerwine@gmail.com** **/tel. 0414 250-046.**

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. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)