

Planning is Destroying Melbourne's Historic Strip Shopping Centres

Town planner and former National Trust Conservation Manager Ian Wight, a member of the RHSV Heritage Committee, offers a column here on a very serious threat to heritage, not only in Yarra, but to all Melbourne's Victorian and Edwardian shopping strips.

Launching the National Trust's Advocacy Toolkit at History House in May 2018, Trust Chair Kristin Stegley issued an impassioned call to arms against the increasing threat to our built heritage from developers and VCAT alike. 'Who ever said that facadism is OK?' she asked.

What most of us failed to realise was that the propensity to grant development permits that retain only façades arises not just from overreaching developers or the vagaries of VCAT decisions. Rather, a concerted bureaucratic thrust to legitimise façading of historic buildings throughout the historic strip shopping centres of the inner and middle suburbs threatens to undermine the effectiveness of the Heritage Overlay (HO).

Inner city councils, frustrated by very loose interpretations of 'preferred' height controls, have been lobbying the Department of Environment Land Water and Planning (DELWP) to introduce mandatory height controls, particularly in activity centres where state planning policy encourages intensive development. However, it is also state planning policy to grant mandatory controls only in exceptional circumstances. It appears that DELWP officers are using this exceptionality as a bargaining chip to advance urban consolidation objectives over those of urban conservation.

Height limits are effected through Design and Development Overlays (DDOs), which allow preferred and mandatory heights and setbacks (both maximum and minimum) to be specified, effectively creating a building envelope within which development can occur.

In heritage areas, if the building envelope follows the existing buildings' form, it can provide further protection for built heritage. Conversely, if the volume of the envelope substantially exceeds that of the existing built form this would allow development that exceeds what could normally be expected under a Heritage Overlay (HO). An impossible tension is

set up between the objectives of the HO, which are to conserve heritage fabric, and those of the excessive DDO, which are to promote development.

Unfortunately, in almost every case the DDOs being introduced in the historic strip centres provide for development greatly in excess of the existing built form.

Despite some variation from centre to centre the basic approach is the same. The first step is to establish the 'street wall height': the maximum height for buildings at the street frontage. This is usually 11 metres, not much more than the existing building heights.

A setback for development above 11 metres is then selected. This varies between centres and precincts within centres but is usually only 5 or 6 metres. The next stage is to determine how much of the new development will be visible. This also varies but usually results in development of around 6 storeys.

This diagram quickly dispels any thought that heritage fabric might be retained in the setback area. The words in the hatched area of the right-hand buildings read: 'Heritage Façade'!

The falsity of this approach is apparent in the ready visibility of the higher built form, rising just 5 metres back from the frontage. It is uncomfortably obvious that the retained façade has nothing to do with the new building behind and appears to have been just 'pasted on'.

Most of the amendments seem to focus on achieving height controls at the immense cost of encouraging demolition of almost all of the heritage fabric in these centres.

This amounts to a major policy shift at state level that has been occurring largely unnoticed. These amendments have all been negotiated one by one by different councils so their cumulative effect is not appreciated. It will also take some time for their destructive consequences to become obvious, and by the time the outcry does happen it will be too late.

The one exception has been Queens Parade in North Fitzroy where local resident groups have combined to try to stop this formula being applied to their centre.

The RHSV Heritage Committee supports this coalition, which achieved 400 submissions against the proposal. Our

committee is also working to raise awareness though opposing similar amendments, engaging with the National Trust and making a submission to the Heritage Council, emphasising that:

Burra Charter principles should be applied to administration of the Heritage Overlay starting with the need to understand what is significant about the place and see that it is conserved.

The type of heritage guidelines that have had success in managing heritage precincts in residential areas should also apply to industrial and commercial areas.

The heritage part of the shopping strip is usually a small section of the area designated as the activity centre, and scope usually exists for intensive development just beyond this part.

These historic strip centres are valued by existing and potential residents. If protected they could continue to be major drivers of urban consolidation.

Ian Wight

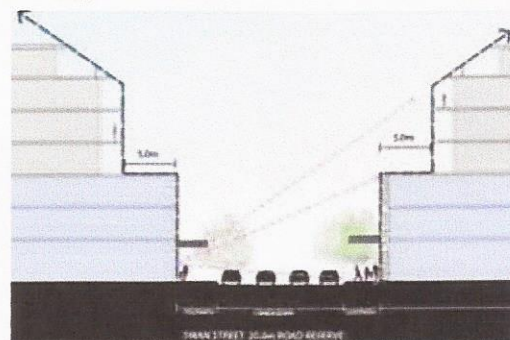


Figure 1: Sight Lines and building envelopes Swan Street Richmond. Source: City of Yarra amendment C191 Swan Street Activity Centre Built Form Framework p. 31



Figure 2: 3D Visualisation of Swan Street Richmond looking west from Church Street showing chopped off buildings. Note that it is unlikely any of these roofs will survive.

Source: City of Yarra amendment C191 Swan Street Activity Centre Built Form Heritage Review p.77