Australian Heritage Strategy Submissions

Heritage Branch

Department of the Environment

GPO Box 787

Canberra ACT 2601

Sydney, Thursday 8th May 2014

**“A Strategy for Australia’s Heritage” – Draft April 2014**

Dear Sir/Madam,

My submission to your strategy relates to the issues raised in ***Section 2: Pursue innovative partnerships*** and ***Section 3: Encourage communities to understand and care for their heritage***, in your draft strategy document.

My interest in heritage is primarily focussed on those heritage assets held in private hands. I have spent some time over the past 6 years focussed on the protection of a heritage house in Perth’s Peppermint Grove. This involvement has shown me some of the problems with past and present approaches to privately owned heritage assets which I think needs to be carefully considered in the development of not only national heritage strategies, but also state and municipal heritage strategies. As these heritage strategies cascade from world heritage to local heritage I think that leadership from the Commonwealth is vitally important in this regard.

The Cliffe is a jarrah weatherboard house originally built in 1894 by Neil McNeil, a significant figure in the life of the Western Australia at the end of the 19th century. It is quite possibly the largest jarrah weatherboard house in existence. The house has been home to a succession of significant owners and has retained almost all of its original fabric throughout. The house was classified by the National Trust in 1984, included on the Register of the National Estate in 1992, first listed on the WA Register of Heritage Places in 1994 and included on the initial municipal heritage inventory on 1996. It is a house with undoubted heritage significance.

However, it also has the unique distinction of being the only property ever removed from the WA Register of Heritage Places. That occurred in 2008. The action by the WA parliament to de-list it was, I understand, contrary to the advice of the WA Heritage Council. Subsequently, the local shire council issued a demolition permit for the property even though the house was still classified as a Category 1 building on the municipal inventory, still classified by the National Trust and still recorded on the Register of the National Estate.

Demolition was avoided, but not before the local shire commissioned a study of current state of the house and the possible options available to its retention. I understand the Cliffe Future Options Report cost around $50,000.

The house has recently changed hands and the new owners, in contrast to the previous owner, have undertaken significant maintenance and restoration of the property. In the previous 20 years no maintenance had been undertaken on the house and it was falling into serious disrepair. The quality of its original construction appears to be the single most significant factor in preserving the house.

It is worth repeating that for a 20-year period, throughout which the property was “protected” by various national, state and municipal heritage registers, no maintenance was undertaken. This significant and widely recognised heritage asset was allowed to effectively suffer what is commonly referred to as “demolition by neglect”.

Demotion by neglect is a term that has been used widely in the Sydney press in recent times to describe the deterioration of state-owned heritage properties in Millers Point and The Rocks.

Demolish by neglect also appears to be a means by which private owners can sufficiently degrade heritage assets to a point where they can no longer be restored. It is often the case that heritage properties are in locations that are particularly attractive to developers. The cost of renovating heritage properties is high and many interesting and sympathetic owners may be discouraged from buying such properties because they can’t afford, both the purchase price (often inflated by location and size of the block of land) and the restoration costs. Developers may be able to afford the purchase price and can happily “park” the investment until the property is sufficiently degraded that development is approved when restoration becomes impossible or highly unlikely.

Your draft strategy talks of greater education and promotion of heritage understanding, but there are, I believe, some more direct issues that must be addressed.

I found in my time advocating for the preservation of the Cliffe that there was little tangible support for community members trying to fight for the preservation of such places. And sadly it is a fight. In my time I was threatened with defamation action (which did not eventuate), as well as incurring the wrath of media readers, one of whom suggested that the Cliffe should be burnt to the ground with me in it. I found little support and no useful guidance or assistance in contacts with the National Trust, nor with your own department. And while I received private encouragement from people within the Heritage Council in WA, there was no tangible assistance that could be offered after the WA parliament had voted to remove the house from the State Heritage Register.

I’m now seeing a similar pattern begin to play out with the battle for the heritage properties in Millers Point and The Rocks. Your strategy paper rightly points out that the term ‘heritage’ includes both natural and cultural environments, but this fact is seemingly being disregarded by the NSW state government in the case of the Millers Points public housing estate.

With privately owned properties there is an added difficulty that must be negotiated by heritage advocates, both institutional advocates and ordinary citizens like me. I could never afford to buy a property like the Cliffe and treat it in the manner it deserves. And when a sympathetic owner does appear I am very mindful that it is their property. What I do share with the owners, and with other members of the community however, is the significance of that place. The house that they have made their home also has a place in our hearts as an important part of our shared history.

How do we, as a community, a national, state and local community, recognise that fact? How do we recognise those emotional ties to a place, without making the homeowners prisoners to our dreams of our past, and without the community feeling that this significant piece of our history is being mistreated?

That, I think, is the primary issue for all privately-held heritage assets… how do we respect the rights of the owner and at the same time, ensure the heritage connection with the community?

The new owners of the Cliffe are very gracious. And I sincerely believe that they recognise this difficult issue. I think that this is a matter that we struggle with ourselves; how do they honour the community regard for their property while still being able to live a life of their own choosing and how do I, as an advocate for the continued preservation of the property hope to ensure the house’s survival beyond their current tenure?

I think that any heritage strategy must clearly recognise and honour the role of owners as custodians of our heritage. Heritage must be made to be attractive to owners and the community must be educated to understand the difficulties of being a heritage property owner.

If we, as a community, sufficiently value the heritage of a place, then we must also contribute to the maintenance of the heritage asset. Where national, state and local heritage registers simply identify things of significance we have seen that those lists can grow to such a size that they are no longer manageable. I understand that is what occurred with the Register of the National Estate and caused the register to be discontinued. But that also brings problems, with community representatives believing that such registration has ensured the significance of a place has been recognised, only to have that withdraw with (in the case the of the Register of the National Estate) little to replace it for many of the places previously assessed and registered.

Placing a ‘real value’ of heritage would have the added effect of being a limiting factor on any tendency for heritage classification to relax or tighten over time.

By ‘real value’, I think of financial gestures such as:

* making well-maintained heritage properties free from municipal rates and taxes,
* allowing maintenance and renovation costs for recognised heritage assets to be tax deductable (in whole or part), and
* providing grants and interest-free loans for the maintenance of heritage properties.

The community needs to recognise our stake in the preservation of these places. Money spent on these properties is, to me, equivalent to supporting public education, infrastructure, charities or the Arts.

I also believe that establishing charitable funds, administered by state and municipal heritage bodies for the maintenance of heritage assets is another desirable thing. Your strategy paper talks about crowd-funding, but crowd-funding opportunities usually exist to undertake a particular task. Each project would require a separate crowd-funding project. I would prefer to see something along the lines of a ‘heritage bank’ which could accept donations and make grants and interest-free loans from this capital.

Your strategy paper says, at one point that “…recent public surveys show that many people see heritage as simply ‘history’ and ‘old buildings’…” I recognise that heritage represents a great deal more than this narrow notion of the urban built environment. But I also understand that in an intensely urban society like ours, these are often the most tangible and familiar elements of our heritage. And they also represent the immediate face of heritage to the majority of the community. Get this bit right and the educational and awareness projects should be easier. If the community can understand how our urban heritage is assessed, recognised, protected and celebrated, then that is a great foundation for the future.

If the owners of heritage properties are proud to be identified as such; grateful for the benefits of heritage recognition and safe in the knowledge that their heritage properties are valuable assets to individuals as well as the community, then we may see the end of the ‘fight’ to retain heritage or at least see a fight where the entire community is on the same side.

Regards

Brian Waldron