

SUBMISSION BY THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

PURSUANT TO SECTION 41A OF THE HERITAGE ACT 1995

Hearing 4-6 August 2014

FILE NO: 13/006734, 13/009883

PLACE: FORMER ORIENTAL HOTEL

LOCATION: 57 NELSON PLACE, WILLIAMSTOWN

MUNICIPALITY: HOBSONS BAY

Officer Presenting: Ros Coleman

BACKGROUND:

The former Oriental Hotel, Williamstown was nominated for addition to the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) on 3 July 2013. It was nominated in response to concerns that the building was under threat of demolition as part of a proposed development. At this time an application to demolish the building had been refused by the Hobsons Bay Council and an appeal had been lodged by the applicant with the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT). At the time of the nomination for addition to the VHR, a VCAT hearing was underway. On 10 December 2013 a VCAT determination was made to allow demolition of the former Oriental Hotel.

The former Oriental Hotel, Williamstown is included in the Heritage Overlay of the City of Hobsons Bay Planning Scheme (HO211) and is surrounded by the Government Survey Precinct (HO8). It was identified as being of local significance in the Hobsons Bay Heritage Study by HLCD Pty Ltd in 2006 as an important hotel demonstrating the early development of the town, as an illustration of hotel upgrades made due to licensing law changes, and, although altered, as a rare three storey corner hotel which relates to similarly sited nineteenth century hotels in Williamstown.

On 21 February 2014 the Executive Director recommended that the former Oriental Hotel, Williamstown not be included in the VHR. The Executive Director recognises the cultural heritage significance of the former Oriental Hotel, Williamstown at the local level and considers that the Heritage Overlay is the most appropriate level of recognition for the Hotel.

In response to the Executive Director's recommendation, 54 objecting submissions were received, including detailed submissions from Ms Charmian Gaud, Mr Norman Roberts and Mrs Virginia and Mr Ralph Coghill, and a submission from Hobsons Bay Council. A number of submitters requested a hearing of the Heritage Council.

It is the Executive Director's view that a large number of claims in the submissions relate to significance of the former Oriental Hotel, Williamstown, at a local, rather than a state, level. The claims made by submitters include that:

- the place is the second oldest building, and the oldest hotel in Williamstown,
- the place provides a visual link to Williamstown's past and maritime history,
- the place is important to a collection of Williamstown hotels, built in a similar period.

Various claims are made in the submissions suggesting the place is of historical significance at a state level. These include:

- Williamstown's significance as the first port of Melbourne and the importance of large numbers of people passing through the town in the 1830s and 1840s. It is acknowledged by the Executive Director that Williamstown was highly significant to the development of the state in these early years, however the former Oriental Hotel does not date from this formative period.
- Williamstown's significance in the 1850s as the arrival point for large numbers of people travelling to the Victorian goldfields and the role the place played in the provision of accommodation for large numbers of people. The Executive Director notes that by the 1850s other Victorian ports, such as Sandridge (Port Melbourne) and Geelong, had become increasingly popular due to their convenience to Melbourne and the Goldfields of the Western District respectively. It is acknowledged by the Executive Director that many hotels were constructed in Williamstown in the 1850s and 1860s and the former Oriental Hotel is one of at least six which remain.
- The use of the hotel as a viewing platform for the arrival and departure of the Duke of Edinburgh in 1867. The Executive Director contends that this is of local interest and does not elevate the hotel to state significance.
- The use of the hotel as a morgue and for trade union meetings, boxing, crimping, inquests and as a viewing point for photographers and artists, as suggested in the submission by Norman Roberts. Most of these activities were common in hotels throughout Victoria and the Executive Director considers that none of these uses elevate the hotel to state significance.

A number of submissions make claims that the hotel is of architectural significance at a state level, as the only three storey unadorned Georgian building of its type in Victoria. The Executive Director submits that it is not necessary to represent in the VHR an example of every sub-group of building.

The Victorian Heritage Register Criteria and Thresholds Guidelines goes to this point at the exclusion guidelines for Criterion B (rarity) when it states that a place is unlikely to satisfy this criterion at the state level if there is a dependence on too many qualifiers (in this case, three storey + unadorned + Georgian). Uniqueness in itself does not make a place of state significance, rather it is the importance of the features that make it unique.

To establish architectural significance at a state level, comparison must be made with examples built at a similar time in Victoria, as provided in the attached Assessment Report. State-wide comparative examples are integral to the process

and not irrelevant as suggested by a number of submitters. The cultural significance of each individual place is assessed according to a range of criteria, and a claim made by one submitter that the Assessment Report 'states there are already sufficient examples on the register and thus there is no need to protect the Oriental from demolition' is erroneous. The Executive Director in assessing state level significance must consider the place in the context of similar places across Victoria. The Executive Director recognises that there are good examples of the Georgian style hotels surviving in Victoria, including a number already represented in the VHR, and does not consider the former Oriental Hotel to be an outstanding or intact example of the style. The Executive Director contends that its significance has been diminished by alterations that have been made.

In the attached Assessment Report comparison is made with:

- Contemporaneous examples of three storey hotels in the port location of Geelong, which are of more architectural interest than the former Oriental Hotel, Williamstown and more sophisticated stylistically. This does not disregard the simpler, plainer Georgian style of the former Oriental Hotel, but emphasises the conservative, and less distinctive, design of the latter.
- A number of two storey hotels from the early gold rush period in Victoria. It is the view of the Executive Director that it is appropriate to compare the place to a range of hotels from a similar period rather than using such sub-categories as two storey/ three storey buildings.
- Other 1850s hotels in Williamstown, which may post-date the former Oriental Hotel, but give at least as good an idea of the form of hotels of the period. The removal of original fabric from the exterior of the former Oriental Hotel should be noted. The submission by the Hobsons Bay City Council states that it seeks assessment for inclusion in the VHR of five comparative hotels in Williamstown, as identified in the attached Assessment Report. These will require formal nomination before assessment can be undertaken.

Additional comparative examples made by submitters are:

- The Bridge Hotel, Williamstown (VHR H1792). The Executive Director emphasises that this hotel is of significance as an extremely rare surviving timber hotel building.
- The earlier three storey interstate hotels, the Knopswood Hotel, Salamanca Place, Hobart, Tasmania (c1835, extensions, alterations 1842) and the Orient Hotel, The Rocks, NSW (1843-44), which are listed in their respective State Heritage Registers, but are not on the Commonwealth Heritage List as claimed by the nominator. It should be noted that interstate examples are not considered in assessment for the VHR. The Executive Director however recognises that both buildings are significant as important contributory elements in highly intact precincts (The Rocks and Salamanca Place) and were built in the Georgian style which was common in those places at the time. The Executive Director also notes that the Orient Hotel, The Rocks is of cultural significance at a local, not state, level for its individual aesthetic qualities (Heritage Council of NSW Statement of Significance).

A large number of submissions address the poor condition of the former Oriental Hotel and provide evidence that the building could be restored. The Executive Director recognises that the poor structural condition of the building does not necessarily diminish its heritage value and is familiar with reports undertaken on its current condition and possible restoration. The assessment was undertaken on this basis. No internal access of the building was available due to safety concerns; however numerous internal photographs were available to inform the assessment.

Many submissions express concern about the possible demolition of the place. The Executive Director acknowledges that the current concerns demonstrate the importance of the building to members of the local community. However it should be noted that threatened demolition is not relevant to Heritage Victoria's determination of a place's cultural heritage significance.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Executive Director submits that the place known as the former Oriental Hotel, Williamstown should not be added to the Victorian Heritage Register for the reasons outlined in this submission and the attached documents. This place is of high local heritage significance as reflected in its current inclusion in the local heritage overlay.

Accordingly the Executive Director suggests that the appropriate resolution for the Registrations Committee to make under s.42(1) of the Heritage Act 1995 is that the Former Oriental Hotel does not warrant inclusion in the Heritage Register.

TIM SMITH
Executive Director
Heritage Victoria

Attachments
Assessment Report and Recommendation to the Heritage Council