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Historic Williamstown pub to be demolished, found to have 'no state heritage value'

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Fight goes on: The Save Williamstown group outside the The Oriental Hotel.

Australia's oldest three-storey pub is to be demolished after a government department declared it held no heritage significance at state level.

The 19th-century Oriental Hotel in Williamstown has been the focus of a community-led campaign for the past 12 months to save it from the wrecking ball. An appeal to the Heritage Council of Victoria failed, with experts finding it was of local but not state significance.

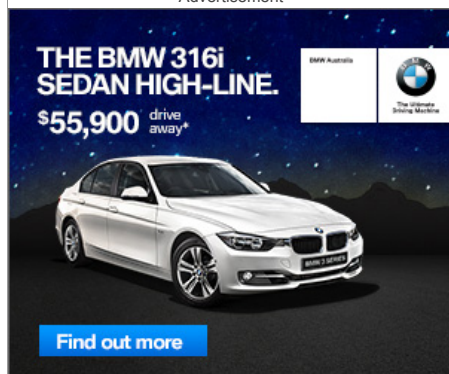
It followed a decision by the state's planning tribunal almost 12 months ago to grant a permit for the pre-Victorian building's demolition, citing its poor condition.



Tony Green of Save Williamstown. Photo: Eddie Jim

The Heritage Council of Victoria committee found the pub, which was built in the 1850s, did not meet any of the criteria for state significance regarding its historical or architectural features.

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"The three-storey building has undergone numerous alterations which changed or removed significant architectural detail," the committee said in its decision.

The building is registered on Hobsons Bay Heritage Overlay.

Save Williamstown spokesman Godfrey Moase said the decision was "tragic" and vowed to pursue any legal avenues left to save the The Oriental.

"For a good period of time in the early days of settlement, it was the tallest building in Melbourne," he said. "People would come and watch ships coming in from the bay.

"These buildings get knocked down because they can make money. What's happening is criminal."

The building is owned by Evolve Development, co-owned by former Fairfax chairman Ron Walker. The company plans to build a six-storey, 83-dwelling apartment complex.

Evolve Development managing director Ashley Williams said the council's decision was the last hurdle to overcome.

"There's been a lot of misinformation from the objector group. It's been an anti-development campaign dressed up as pro-heritage."

He said demolition would take place "as soon as the last paper work has been completed".

The pub, most recently operated as The Willy Tavern a decade ago, has had a colourful history during its 150-plus years and has been used as a morgue, hosted boxing matches, been a venue for inquests and in 1867 was visited by the Duke of Edinburgh during the first royal tour of Australia.

The building has been vacant for the last 10 years. It is one of six remaining corner hotels in Williamstown that was built during the gold rush.

Hobsons Bay Council supported the community group's bid to have the building declared of state significance. Councillor Peter Hemphill said the demolition would be a "sad day" in Williamstown's history.

"The Oriental is an integral link to our past, having been built during the gold-rush years of Victoria. It's been a tourist attraction, and a unique and soon-to-be-extinct example of its kind," he said.

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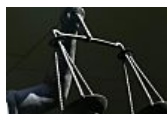
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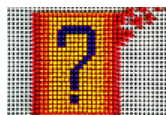
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“ ”

»Given a choice between having 86 dogbox apartments crammed into a multistory tower or having the change to tastefully renovate a heritage building into a dozen livable flats, all I can say is - I hope the protesters win! The influence developers have in this state is in direct inverse proportion to their taste - too much influence and good taste is almost completely absent... along with good sense.«

»

andilee | Melbourne November 07, 2014, 4:35PM

Reply

“ ”

»You would have to be kidding. The Oriental is way beyond renovation, and not worth saving. The property is an eyesore, and has been for years.«

»

formerly of Willi | Melbourne November 07, 2014, 5:37PM

“ ”

»formerly of Willi - please stop replying to every comment. We get it. You don't like the building and aren't sad to see it go. Maybe the building is nothing special but I can promise you the new development will also be just that - absolutely nothing special. An eyesore and another development cramming us into tiny apartments built in sheds in Brooklyn.«

»

Fiona | November 07, 2014, 7:16PM

“ ”

»What a sad outcome for the historic sea port of Williamstown. That section of Nelson Place is already partly ruined by ugly shapeless "units" The old heritage buildings like the Oriental Hotel are what brings thousands of tourists every weekend to Williamstown and if they are allowed to pulled down and destroyed by geedy developers like Ron Walker the town will lose its charm.«

»

Proud Victorian | Sandringham November 07, 2014, 4:35PM

Reply

“ ”

»Once our historic buildings are gone we can't get them back. This three storied building was unique in it's time and built in 1850 using convict made bricks. It is an important part of our history and The Williamstown and Melbourne story. I am all for appropriate development and sadly this site is highly inappropriate. How is demolishing our heritage and bringing 1000's of new residents to live next door to Mobil and Bae good development? Would this happen in the East?»

»

Williamstown resident | Williamsotwn November 07, 2014, 4:51PM

Reply

“ ”

»The Oriental is not an historic building, it is an OLD building, indeed one which has been derelict for a number of years. As stated in the article, it has no heritage significance. Our population is increasing rapidly, and we need to increase housing stock. I think the redevelopment proposal is a great idea.«

»

formerly of Willi | Melbourne November 07, 2014, 5:47PM

“ »«

»We can split hairs but I believe that being 160 years old makes the building historic.«

»«

Williamstown Resident | Williamstown November 07, 2014, 6:17PM

“ »«

»How typical. The old dame may not have so-called "state significance", but what about the importance to the people of Williamstown, and to the history of Melbourne in general? Imagine the stories that old building could tell! Will we not be satisfied until every last sovereign piece of architecture is torn down, and replaced with homogeneous, beige modern rubbish? Heavens forbid that we might actually embrace our historical identity and restore some of these magnificent buildings to their former glory instead of just pandering to the masses and the almighty dollar...«

»«

Cinnamon Girl | November 07, 2014, 4:51PM

[Reply](#)

“ »«

»Get a grip CG. This building is not a beautiful heritage building. It is a derelict dump in need of a wrecking ball. It has been an eyesore in Williamstown for years. In fact it detracts from rather than enhances the town. There are several other pubs in Willi still operating which will continue to maintain the town's character.«

»«

formerly of Willi | Melbourne November 07, 2014, 5:52PM

“ »«

»It has been allowed to become an eyesore due to developer neglect and willful damage. With the right treatment, this building could be made into a better attraction. You only need to watch Grand Designs to see the before/after treatments of many so-called 'dumps'.«

»«

Colonial Girl | Williamstown November 07, 2014, 7:52PM

“ »«

»You are right, I wouldn't want to live next. The building is next to Mobile and BAE, no one would want to live that close! The building needs a spruce up to bring it back to it's former glory. It has been left empty too long. The "current" residents of Williamstown aren't against progress, they are against inappropriate demolition and in appropriate building. The research and findings are available on the Save Williamstown web page.«

»«

local resident | Williamstown November 07, 2014, 8:47PM

“ »«

»Why is it the name Ashley something sticks in my mind - must be an icon or an I-con or something. I'd hate to visit England if it had been populated by Guys like Ashley Whathisname. Go Williamstown: being in support of heritage is the same as being anti-development in the Madden-Guy era of greased palms. So I am not sure what this Ashley bloke's point was. Perhaps it wasn't a point at all.I«

»«

Christopher | Watershipdownunder November 07, 2014, 4:59PM

[Reply](#)

“ »«

»Ashley Williams and his group should be lauded for having the gumption to redevelop the site. Obviously you've never seen the place. It has been an eyesore for years. If you were living next to it, you'd be singing a very different tune!«

»«

formerly of Willi | Melbourne November 07, 2014, 5:57PM

“ »«

»Ashley Williams thinks heritage doesn't matter and safety is a furphy which is interesting when you look at the history of Citylink construction in September 1999 "Australia: The tragic deaths of two Melbourne CityLink construction workers" ".....Andre Noonan, who worked with O'Connor, was the operator of the drilling rig. At the Coroner's Inquest he testified that a few days before the accident he had raised his concerns with the site manager, Ashley Williams. He complained that the site was unsafe because of the poor quality of backfill. Noonan recalled, "At this, Ashley just laughed at me and walked off."«

»I guess making money is the prime mover for developers and engineers«

»«

maryrobo | November 07, 2014, 6:43PM

“ »«

»What's wrong with being anti development? Who wants massive change to your community, to the streetscape and the endearing features of an area wrecked so a few cashed up individuals get to make megabucks?. Churches, dogtracks, monasteries, interesting old buildings etc just there to be bulldozed to build human termite mounds.«

»«

VK | November 07, 2014, 5:05PM

Reply

“ »«

»Some things should be retained, and some things should not. This is one thing which should not. What did you do with your analogue TV set? And your dot matrix printer?«

»«

formerly of Willi | Melbourne November 07, 2014, 6:02PM

“ »«

»A similar building exists in Salamanca Place in Hobart. It has been stylishly renovated and serves as an attraction. the Georgian architecture is plain but there lies the heritage.«

»«

Colonial Girl | Williamstown November 07, 2014, 7:50PM

“ »«

»History is so yesterday. I am not sure why the developers don't expand their plans further. Why not pull down all the old buildings down around Williamstown. Let's move to the future and have high rise all along the water line. It's such a waste of space the way it is and our heritage does not make money.«

»«

progress | Melbourne November 07, 2014, 5:14PM

Reply

“ »«

»You obviously haven't attended a ghost tour in the old streets of Williamstown lately. History is very IN.«

»«

Colonial Girl | Williamstown November 07, 2014, 8:05PM

“ »«

»In the last twenty years, Williamstown has undergone a lot of redevelopment, all of it good. Just look at what used to be the rifle range at North Williamstown; all the walking tracks; the landscaping of the backbeach; the redevelopment of Coles; etc. I have to say, the developers have the runs on the board.«

»«

formerly of Willi | Melbourne November 07, 2014, 6:07PM

Reply

“ »«

»Not these ones!! Ron Walker and his mate Ashley Williams have not scored any runs on the board as yet. They have friends with power and influence but to date they have never done anything developments in Williamstown before. Stop trying to take credit for the work of other people.«

»«

Jo | Willy November 07, 2014, 8:46PM

“ »«

»So much has been lost over the decades all over Melbourne including the CBD & suburbs. Nelson Place precinct incorporating all of old Williamstown is special & it is poor judgement by the developer & the government not to be able to see the significance of this building & spare one small pocket on the corner of the site. The prejudices of this government are all too apparent towards the area in having provided two ALP premiers & one last thing the building may not be grand but few 1850's buildings were & so few survive.«

»«

Thomas | November 07, 2014, 6:38PM

Reply

“ »«

»It is a pity The Age did not report the real issues here. The photograph with PRE SEPARATION 1850-1851 Building is the IMPORTANT Heritage issue. This is a very early building in Victoria - there are only 150 pre Separation buildings... In Williamstown the only remaining pre separation building on Section 1 in the Hoddle St plan of Williamstown. Williamstown was depressed in the 1840s and the wooden buildings have all gone - when the Ann St Pier was built in 1849 - it was the arrival point for immigrants to Melbourne - long before Station Pier in Port Melbourne. This Oriental Building was on the waterfront 1850 - Nelson Place had beach and water on the other side - no shipyards. It was built as a dwelling with commercial opportunity - not a Hotel or Pub - that was later. Skelton bought the land in 1849 and mortgaged it with valuable buildings already in place in June 1851 before the Separation of Victoria from NSW and before the Gold Rush. Skelton was a customs boatman but also a LAND DEVELOPER - when he died in early 1853 he left the Oriental and a building which became Union Dining Rooms - worth £800. He only borrowed £180 and handed over the title to the Building Society. Read Save Williamstown website if you are interested to read more. After 3 weeks in the Public Records Office and presenting 2 days of case for SW I am in a position to explain the issues at VHC. What a coincidence - Decided the day before Napthine Govt went into caretaker mode.... Another GREEDY developer decision«

»«

CMG | November 07, 2014, 7:04PM

Reply

« «

»I see Matthew Guy is spreading the love around by commenting on this article. :P«

»"Our population is increasing rapidly..." - so herein lies part of the problem. Maybe we should be looking at whether a rapidly increasing population is desirable? Maybe our demographers should be considering a sustainable population for our country, given it's narrow band of liveable terrain, our government's refusal to adequately invest in public transport, sustainable energy and (tertiary) education for anyone other than the elite? Our initially gradual-but-now-freight-train-speed loss of industry and jobs? Our complete sell-off of arable farmland to overseas interests whose only concern is ensuring the future-food needs of their own countries? Our birth figures, our death figures, the difference between the two - maybe this figure should be roughly what our immigration intake should be? And then maybe we wouldn't have the burning need to build el-crappo developments to house a rapidly-increasing population that we can't sustain...«

»«

Cinnamon Girl | My Grip is Firm November 07, 2014, 7:09PM

Reply

« «

»Facilitated by the Minister of Towers in the court of VCAT for developers further condemned by Heritage Victoria the day before government goes into caretaker mode. Democracy at work. Woeful planning by a Minister hellbent on looking after his own developer donating mates. Inquiry please.«

»«

AllyT | November 07, 2014, 7:37PM

Reply

« «

»There has been much thorough research done by SW on this building - the oldest 3-storey in Victoria. It was built in 1850 or 1851, actually before the state of Victoria was formed.

AS PER CHARMIAN "the government was still from NSW . It is PRE SEPARATION which makes it VERY IMPORTANT in Victorian history.... and likewise it is PRE GOLD RUSH which was first started in Sep of 1851 but the immigration rush was 1852. WHY CAN THEY NOT AT LEAST SAY what the case presented by the SW Community was - why can't they report that the Developer's heritage expert had to start the hearing with a MEA CULPA apology that he had misinformed both VCAT and Heritage Council about documents which were held in the Public Records Office which proved it is the only remaining building from a Survey in August 1853. It was built by Skelton not Cox. For the Executive Director HV to say there is no substantive evidence that the building was built before 1854 is public service misinformation.. We deserve a better quality of public service in this state".

Save Willi group is not against development 'formerly of Willi'. We support sympathetic medium density, not random demolition of history, and construction of monstrosity. The building in question could be restored, and in-character dwellings surrounding.

I challenge you to research the plans yourself, see that to which we object, and tell us it looks reasonable.

It is SHOCKINGLY out of character, and too dense, too close to a major hazard facility.

It looks cheap and squished and glassy- like a shiny concrete jungle..«

»«

Cecil | November 07, 2014, 8:23PM

Reply

« «

»Quite incredible how these complaints and protests emerge only 3 weeks before a State election. And very nice of The Age to incorrectly label the sources of these problems with quote "a government department" (first paragraph of article). «

»The article goes on:

"An appeal to the Heritage Council of Victoria failed, with experts finding it was of local but not state significance. It followed a decision by the state's planning tribunal almost 12 months ago to grant a permit for the pre-Victorian building's demolition, citing its poor condition."«

»Both these decisions did not come from Government departments, but from independent State statutory bodies. How about The Age and the protestors getting their facts right? Or is this about another agenda?«

»«

Tim | Melbourne November 07, 2014, 8:37PM

Reply

« «

»Who is this 'formerly of Willi'? If that were the truth I whole heartedly disagree. Their opinions are totally pro development without a care about Williamstown's history. As someone recently said to me no one from the old Williamtown would do that.«

»«

Jo | Willy November 07, 2014, 8:39PM

Reply

« «

»I also lived in Williamstown, behind the Oriental when it was in pretty good condition, about 20 years ago.

Save Williamstown has discovered 'convict bricks' behind a late Georgian/Separation building dating back to 1850-1, making it one of the oldest buildings in the country, unique to Victoria and it can be restored.

Moreover, despite the heritage and multiple recommendations -including Mobile's own concerns- NOT to build apartments near a possible 'blast' zone, VCAT agreed it could be demolished by the developer 'Evolve, owned by Mr Ron Walker and son-in-law, Mr Ashley Williams.

The VCAT decision indicates a disastrous step for Victoria's heritage but it will also risk the safety of hundreds of residents, unaware of the dangers from refuelling and possible inundations with the increasing sea-levels which coincide with King tides.«

»«

John | November 07, 2014, 8:43PM

Reply

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