

## “ DRUG ADDICTS’ BEACH-HIDEOUT TO BE BULLDOZED! ”

It's hard to believe it, but this headline actually appeared in the May 6 edition of the Wollongong Advertiser. It was used to describe the decision of Wollongong City Council to demolish the existing North Beach Kiosk.

Apart from the appalling beat-up of a very sordid little story, what angered me is that the article revealed that yet again it would be necessary for me to go public about the destruction of yet another heritage item on Wollongong's finest pedestrian promenade.

In the winter of 1983, Peter Spearitt, Australia's foremost urban historian, and Rosemary Auchmuty (then lecturing at Wollongong University) wrote an article for the magazine *Heritage Australia* in which they declared:

“The Illawarra coastline has long been appreciated by those who have the good fortune to live beside it. Where once upon a time a railway line ran along North Wollongong beach to the boat harbour, now pedestrians stroll past pavilions, dressing sheds and Continental Baths built in the interwar years. Just past the baths are the North Wollongong dressing pavilion and the Surf Life Saving Club's premises. Together these buildings, with their spectacular ocean setting make an architectural and aesthetic precinct of considerable grace. Permanent conservation orders should be placed on all structures in this pedestrian precinct.”

Even though I was then unaware of these remarks by Spearitt and Auchmuty, it was Wollongong Council's appalling decision to demolish the Continental Baths pavilion that first launched me into print in the *Illawarra Mercury* on June 6, 1984 (p.45).

In an effort to convince ratepayers that the 1927 Continental Baths Pavilion was beyond repair, the Council attached chicken wire to the interior walls of the

Pavilion! Presumably this was meant to indicate that the building was riddled with concrete cancer and about to fall down. What they failed to explain satisfactorily was how the chicken wire they'd attached was actually going to help hold the building up.

I lost that fight and the Pavilion was demolished. But when the then North Beach International Hotel attempted to persuade Wollongong Council that the North Beach Dressing Pavilion was an 'eyesore' and that it and the nearby Kiosk should be demolished, I once more ventured into print. Amazingly, the *Illawarra Mercury* gave me a full page with 3 photos and no advertisements (April 15, 1989, p.22).

But all this effort on my part was a waste of time.

What saved the Pavilion was not mine or anyone else's pen, but a single swift action by the South Coast Trades and Labour Council. They simply and elegantly placed a black-ban on all demolition work.

For a while there last week I thought I was going to have to play the write-for-the-*Illawarra Mercury* game yet again, but fortunately Paul Matters has quickly stepped in to remind Council that the South Coast Trades and Labour Council black-ban on demolition had never been lifted and that Union labour certainly would not undertake the task. (see *Illawarra Mercury*, 14 May, 1992, p.4).

This incident sharply reinforced my suspicion that it's necessary to urge Wollongong Council and its Environmental Heritage Committee (EHC) and Heritage Officer to adopt a more active and outspoken role when it comes to threats to our heritage. At present the EHC does not speak out publicly, regularly relies on outsiders to highlight the threat to the heritage significance of particular buildings and, sometimes, simply ignores that particular buildings are under threat, as in the case of the recent demolition of the Austinmer Beach Kiosk. I kept silent for over two years waiting for a defence of the heritage value of this building (yes, there was *that* much advance notice!) but not a word of outcry was uttered.

I also waited in vain for some public pronouncement from EHC when the sale of Glennifer Brae was mooted recently, but none came. It seems to me that the relationship between the Environmental Heritage Committee, Council's Heritage Officer and Council's Planning Department is just a little too close. There seems to be insufficient room for any genuinely independent voice of concern to be raised.

The Heritage Officer is in a hapless position. Possessing no real power, it is exceedingly difficult for the incumbent of this position to cross swords with the City Planner, for the simple reason that the City Planner is, in effect, the Heritage Officer's immediate superior.

The only solution to this difficult situation I can see would be for the South Coast Trades and Labour Council to seek Heritage Council assistance to fund the salary of a truly independent South Coast Heritage Officer. As the South Coast Trades and Labour Council is at present the *de facto* spokesperson for heritage in the Illawarra already (and actually has some power to back up its words), why not make it *de jure*. Conflicts of interest would no doubt arise here too, particularly when Heritage had to be traded off against construction jobs. But despite this I nevertheless feel that if the Labour Council had possessed a Heritage Officer and

an Environmental Heritage Committee during the last 10 years it would have shown a better track record than the City Council's Officer and Committee.

A quick listing of the buildings that have been lost since the appointment of a Heritage Officer and the advent of Council's Environmental Heritage Committee is salutary. It is truly disturbing to consider the number of significant buildings that we have lost since 1980:

Austinmer Surf Club  
 Bulli Primitive Methodist Church  
 Wollongong Rest Park  
 Wollongong Hotel  
 Wollongong School of Arts  
 St. Anthony's Hospital, Wollongong  
 Continental Baths Pavilion  
 'Avoca', Campbell Street, Wollongong  
 Bulli Mine Managers' Residence  
 Wollongong Police Station  
 The Belmore Basin (Wollongong Birthplace) Site  
 Old Market Street Fire Station Building  
 Old Market Street Private Hospital  
 Former Smith Street AMES Building (former Maternity Hospital)  
 Art Deco Windows in Parsons Funeral Directors Building, Keira Street  
 Austinmer Beach Kiosk

What's more, this list is not inclusive. Council's Environmental Heritage Committee couldn't even bring itself to oppose extensions to Wyewurk at Thirroul or prevent the horrendously botched additions to the Crown Hotel from going ahead. What's more it supinely allowed the heritage value of the two historic churches (Catholic and Anglican) in Park Road, Bulli to be comprised and allowed the wholesale desecration of the architectural integrity of All Saints (Anglican) Church in Moore Street, Austinmer. The Committee also appears uninterested in making pre-emptive statements calculated to encourage developers to sympathetically extend and renovate existing heritage buildings where necessary. The Headlands Hotel Buildings are a classic example of a site that still cries out for such assistance.

Sadly, not even a reasoned defence of the architectural heritage value of the Former Wollongong City Council Chambers emerged from the Committee during the debate over its use as a site for the Art Gallery. The Committee even allowed carpet to be drilled to the marvellous parquetry floor of the Former Council Chambers during its conversion. There was also not the least bit of public discussion about the merits or otherwise of removing most of the mezzanine levels of the building. I imagine if a private developer had tried this there would have been howls of outrage from the NSW Heritage Council.

Obviously, a Council Committee can't win every fight, but Wollongong's EHC seems to have had an inordinate number of losses compared to victories.

I can only think of two successes, and both seem rather pyrrhic:

- 1) Battery Park, North Wollongong (this victory entailed the loss of considerable park space and was opposed by such important community organizations as the South Coast Peace Committee as well as nearby residents).
- 2) Bulli Miners Cottage (the city's greatest heritage white elephant; after three years no-one has any idea what to use it for!).

And it's victories like these two (involving the salvaging of maintenance-requiring/non-income earning public properties) that has the potential to give Heritage in Wollongong an even worse name than it already possesses. Developers surely need to be given at least some indication that the guardians of our heritage are interested in economic usages of Heritage Buildings and every opportunity should be taken to publicise bright ideas on how to carve a market-niche by capitalizing on Heritage minded extensions and additions. We dearly need more examples of economically viable Heritage Building Restorations to demonstrate that it is possible to make money from Heritage.

However, as the South Coast Labour Council is aware, there are times, such as the recent furore over Glennifer Brae, when we must draw the line and say, "This building belongs to the people of Wollongong and it is not for sale [or demolition in the case of privately owned buildings] at any price."

The only other local Heritage victory I can think of in recent years is the retention of the original Weatherboard Council Chambers building at Shellharbour. But I guess that hardly counts because it was an action of Shellharbour Council. Perhaps it is little wonder then that Shellharbour Council is now demanding that the combined Shellharbour/Wollongong/Kiama Heritage Officer (now based at Wollongong City Council) spend at least one day a week at the Shellharbour Museum.

I really do think its time for an entire re-think of the Heritage Bureaucracy in Wollongong. I'd be interested to know what others think and would welcome contributions from readers.

In the meantime, however, thank God for the South Coast Trades and Labour Council! Without this organizations spirited defence of Glennifer Brae and the North Beach Precinct, Wollongong would be much the poorer.

The Labour Council's stand on the kiosk is both a welcome and sensible one. After all the kiosk does possess an attached residence and it seems ludicrous to further reduce the city's housing stock in these times of increased homelessness. Moreover, when an architect goes to the trouble to design a kiosk to match the nearby Dressing Pavilion, it is insanity to demolish one building and yet save the other.

This is yet another problem with Council's Planning Department and EHC. They appear to be little interested in 'context'. The humble Miners Cottage at Bulli only makes historical sense in the context of the nearby spacious grandeur of the Californian bungalow style Mine Manager's Residence. Yet Council permitted the latter's demolition. Similarly, the terraces in Campbell Street, Wollongong,

only make sense if one knows that they were spec-built in order to finance the 'Avoca' mansion next door. Yet Council allowed the demolition of 'Avoca' and the site remains to this day a vacant lot.

Even worse is the fact that the architect of the 1927 Crown Hotel in Wollongong went to the trouble to match the bricks of the hotel with those of the nearby railway station. Today the bricks of both buildings are painted over (in different colours, of course!) and the once graceful Hotel itself disfigured by a grotesque extension. I suspect I'm the only person in Wollongong even vaguely aware that both buildings were once architecturally linked.

On the grounds of avoiding similar 'de-contextualization' alone, I would suggest that the North Beach Kiosk is worth preservation.

As for the proposed conversion of the northern end of the North Beach Dressing pavilion into a Kiosk cum Restaurant I also have grave fears that it will be a re-development that will be as about as historically sympathetic as the Crown Hotel disaster.

But, for the moment at least, thanks to the South Coast Trades and Labour Council yet another architecturally important building appears to have escaped the consequences of the refusal of our local heritage guardians to speak out.

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