

A REPLY TO LOUISE THOM

Ms Thom expresses the view that Wollongong City Council's 'Advertisement for "Demolition of Heritage Items" is...a good indication of the seriousness with which Wollongong City Council takes the management of our Heritage.'

I, however, still beg to differ.

Even after many further readings, the advertisement still appears to me to have been presented in such a way as to almost ensure it would receive zero response from the public.

The absence of any details at all about what was to be demolished was the prime source of my concern.

For most people it is difficult to even know that a development is about to take place. It is then usually a major effort on the part of an individual to even lodge an objection to a known development. It makes it almost impossible for an ordinary member of the public to take the effort to traipse into Council to examine the documents relating to the demolition of a piece of our heritage when they don't even know what it might be in the first place.

Any member of the general public who sighted the ad (and you'd be surprised how few people read such notices) would have weighed the title "Demolition of Heritage Items" (with no other details provided) against the name of the applicant - "Yallah TAFE" - and would have no doubt concluded that the demolition must be occurring for sound educational reasons. Hence - no objections from the general public.

For those with a little more experience of Council's Heritage Inventory, they could at least attempt to guess - as I did - that any "Heritage Items" in that particular area were likely to be rural out-buildings accorded the status of "Local Significance" only. I personally decided that a single objection from me (one of the usual suspects) against the pressing educational needs of TAFE would have been futile. I am a passionate defender of many almost lost causes but I am not interested in taking up causes which are utterly and absolutely hopeless.

The only action I could take, therefore, was to whinge about the ad in the Bulletin and to urge Michael Organ (our Society representative on the Heritage Committee) to raise the matter with the Heritage Committee. This he duly did and hence my two actions are the only reason, as Ms Thom admits, that "it was discussed at our [Heritage Committee] meeting in June" for, again as Ms Thom remarks, "it is not within the terms of reference of that Committee to look at development applications which affect items of Local Significance."

That threats to items of "Local Significance" are not dealt with by the Heritage Committee is a source of real concern for the vast majority of the items on Wollongong Council's Heritage Inventory are only of local significance. Hence if such items are not even with the Committee's terms of reference then there is not much possibility of Council's Heritage Committee taking steps to preserve them unless bothersome people like myself ask a member of the committee to raise the matter.

Ms Thom is indeed right to suggest that I have no fondness for Council's Heritage Inventory. Put simply, I found its errors and omissions annoying and frustrating. I also believe that the term "Local Significance" is held in contempt by many planners and councillors.

I have long believed that we would be better off without a heritage inventory.

Rather, the compulsory advertisement of all demolitions in Illawarra with a clear statement of locations, dimensions and details of the building(s) to be demolished would do more to lift the profile of heritage in the region. This would be particularly so if the details were publicised in the same part of The Wollongong Advertiser each week. After an initial period of publicity that this new procedure would be occurring, I feel such a procedure would surely lead to a greater awareness of heritage and its loss on the part of the

general public. At the very least, it would enable each and every building to be fought for on its own merits and without the stigmatising appellation "of local significance only" to hasten its demise.

Ms Thom is also a little unfair to suggest that my remarks and submissions amount to "ridiculing the hard work and commitment of the Heritage Committee."

No doubt - like all committees - the IHAC has its share of timeservers but I am not in a position to judge this for I do not personally know all the members of the Committee. However, I wish to state as forcefully as possible that I have nothing but admiration for "the hard work and commitment" of Michael Organ, Mick Roberts, Ray Brown, Ben Meek and Greg Scott - the only five members of the committee of whom I am aware. Moreover, the physical evidence of the hard work and commitment of these five is today evident in a number of heritage buildings and structures still standing in Wollongong thanks to their efforts.

As for "exempting" myself "from any responsibility for the protection of heritage in our city" I only wish this were true. I'd certainly have a more relaxing life. One can only assume that Ms Thom cannot conceive that there might be other ways of promoting and preserving our Heritage than simply serving on heritage committees.

And even though I'm less than pleased with the current heritage set-up, I nonetheless attempt to conscientiously make use of whatever leverage the existing heritage frameworks allow. Perhaps Ms Thom has just caught me at a uniquely busy time but here is a summary of my heritage activities for the months of June and July, 1997.

1. Provided heritage details and photos for residents opposed to redevelopment pro proposal for Headlands to present at the Informal Planning Conference at Council.
2. Wrote long submission opposing Headlands development
3. Attended Informal Planning Conference on Headlands Development on 12 June.
4. Asked questions at same conference.
5. Asked a very helpful Wollongong Council Manager of Planning to send me copies of all Heritage memos and studies on Headlands in Council's possessions - some of which turned out to be authored by Ms Thom. I then showed these to Michael Organ who assured me that most had not been presented to the Heritage Committee - even though one of the studies gave the building "Regional Significance."

7. Appeared as one of 4 speakers at a Council Informal Planning Conference opposed to the subdivision of a block of land containing a large stand of trees which photographic evidence in my possession demonstrates has remained uncleared since 1879.
6. Wrote a formal submission on Headlands for presentation to the Wollongong Heritage Advisory Committee - requesting a serious and detailed heritage study of the buildings and site. The submission was presented by Michael Organ and the motion was passed unanimously.
7. Researched the full history of Thirroul Swimming Pool complex and associated buildings (none of which are on Council's Heritage Inventory). I then authored (anonymously) a summary of its history and heritage values at the request of a local resident who wished to argue a case for its heritage listing to Area Three Neighbourhood Committee.
8. As a result of this above action, I have been asked to prepare and am currently helping to finalise similar submissions on the Austinmer Bathing Pavilion (another building not on the Heritage Inventory) for submission by another local resident.
9. Asked for the third time by the Sydney organiser of a monument to DH Lawrence in Thirroul to allow my name to be forwarded to Ms Louise Thom as being willing to write a "Lawrence Walk" tourist brochure for Council. Reluctantly agreed after being pressured.
10. Attended Site inspection of rock placement for D.H. Lawrence monument at request of the Sydney applicant, a representative of the DHL Society of Australia and the head of Thirroul Village Committee.
11. Having previously written pre-emptive (but unsuccessful) letters to Council on traffic matters, after hearing a rumour that the owner of a local bus company planned to demolish one of a pair of classic and very rare well-to-do-fibro cottages (constructed by the same builder) on the main road at Thirroul. Drafted a letter to Ms Louise Thom, Heritage Officer, seeking her views on how best to go about attempting to protect at least the front facade of a piece of "unrecognised" heritage which is not included in the Heritage Inventory.

These sort of activities seem to me an unusual way of "exempting" myself "from any responsibility for the protection of heritage in our city". All of them were unpaid, time-consuming and completed at the cost of sacrificing time with my 3 young children. Perhaps such efforts on my part don't approach "the hard work and commitment of" the five activist members of the Heritage Committee - Michael Organ, Mick Roberts, Ray Brown, Greg Scott and Ben Meek - but it's my sincere response to what I see as a pretty depressing heritage scene in Wollongong and it's the best I can do.

I have never met the current Heritage Officer but I can assure Ms Thom that I have an acute appreciation of the difficulties of her job. As the NSW Heritage Office Staff (recently separated from the Department of Planning) is fully aware any Heritage Officer whose superior officer is a Planner is going to find the pressures of the job not simply "more difficult", as Ms Thom phrases it, but well-nigh impossible. And this is not the result of the ill-will of particular individuals, it is just a reflection of the fact that development and heritage are not easily compatible. Heritage itself is a very difficult concept and it is at its most difficult when we are dealing with buildings that are neither old nor especially grand. Too often such structures are either ignored or given the kiss of death by having the term "local significance" applied to them.

Council's Heritage Status "local Significance" has no legal force and there is basically little a Heritage Officer can do than either bluff or use some moral suasion to suggest that the owners with either demolition or building intentions might be better off developing some other site. As a last resort, a Heritage Officer can suggest - where alterations only are planned - that the extensions be slightly less horrific in terms of heritage impact than the applicant may have originally planned.

It wouldn't be a fun job - although you might get to see some nice buildings and locations in the course of your other all too frustrating duties - and Ms Thom can at least feel confident that there are not too many people who would aspire to her position.

I have no personal desire to make Ms Thom's near impossible job "even more difficult" but I am not about to remain silent and make it even easier for those who wish to destroy the beauty and heritage I see in Illawarra's built and natural environments.

To use Ms Thom's words, I do not think the local Heritage Advisory Committee either needs to be or will be "discouraged" by anything I might have to say or write.

The Illawara Heritage Advisory Committee does need to feel "discouraged", however, by the fact that Heritage Items of local significance are "not within the Terms of Reference of that Committee" and that not a single member of the general public responded to the recent advertisement for "demolition of Heritage Items" placed by Council.

Now that Ms Thom has discovered the existence of the Illawarra Historical Society Bulletin I invite her to make full use of it to promote the cause of heritage in Illawarra.

Joseph Davis