YET ANOTHER HERITAGE SCAM IN AUSTINMER

Wollongong Council's latest heritage initiative, taking the form of a proposed amendment to Wollongong Local Environment Plan 1990 (Certificate Plan No: CP 8/98) was presumably designed to have local residents and heritage buffs jumping with joy.

The stated aims of the amendments are to identify four heritage items including (3) heritage Conservation area and to categorise the heritage items as items of local or regional significance. The proposed amendments apply to various lots in the vicinity of Moore Street and the Grove, Austinmer: the Princes Highway at Bulli between Point Street and Hobart Street; Hore Street, Prince Edward Drive and Brownsville Avenue, Brownsville; and Lot 1 DP 84344.

Superficially, this all seems very laudable.

But closer examination, reveals it (despite the no doubt good intentions of the local heritage committee and perhaps even the odd planner within Council) as yet another futile and out of date initiative based on very old fashioned notions of what might actually constitute 'heritage' in Illawarra.

The bare proposals themselves also look very much like a program of 'heritage for heritage's sake' conducted on the principle that there must be some sort of quota for heritage operating in Wollongong and that as there's a heritage precinct extending from Belmore Basin to Puckey's estate in Central Wollongong, to make it all fair and equitable we better have similar precincts in the northern and southern suburbs at Austinmer and Dapto. But then someone seems to have realised that there's a disproportionate number of the Bulli heritage lobby on the local heritage committee so Council had better whack in another token conservation zone there as well.

The real point, however, is that even the Central Wollongong Conservation Zone from Flagstaff Hill to Puckey's was too limited in scope, was declared too late (circa 1991-2; reports, studies and adjustments circa 1996-7) and has proved incapable of protecting the area against development onslaughts which already have and will continue to compromise its integrity.

As early as 1984, Peter Spearitt and Rosemary Auchmuty wrote in Heritage
Australia that the area extending along the beach from Puckey's to the Steelworks was one of the finest Heritage Precincts in all Australia and that a Permanent Conservation Order (PCO) should be slapped on all buildings within it. I would have gone further and argued that all the tacky sixties and seventies buildings still extant in Cliff Road (along with all the then-1984-survivors of earlier eras and land usages) deserved similar PCOs.

Instead Council demolished the magnificent Continental Baths Pavilion and built the current too squat and bulky replacement possessing none of the smooth lines and whitewashed charm of the 1927 original. A similarly important building - the South Beach Surf Club - is also about to be demolished and there has been not a single public murmur from the heritage lobby about its status because no-one has the vision to see that the seascape from Puckey's to the beaches known as 'Shitties' and 'Oilies' near the Steelworks is one of the most diverse and picturesque urban heritage landscapes in all Australia.

It probably still is (or certainly was in 1984) of National Heritage Significance but all Council's Heritage Study has done for it is to declare a part of it of Regional Significance and as the battle of the Brighton Lawn...
Kiosk in 1996/97 and the Wollongong Birthplace battle site opposite it (a fight waged from 1989-1996) demonstrated even the designation of a Conservation Precinct by Wollongong Council as of Regional Significance is no protection at all when it comes to the crunch and developers are willing to pay for the relocation of Kiosks to public open space.

Worse still the latest heritage manoeuvres for this precinct still (after a long and principled stand by the South Coast Labour Council) press for Commercial Development of the remaining unaltered architectural gem in the precinct - the grand North Beach Pavilion - as an outlet of Hogs Breath restaurant chain or some such other commercial abomination.

I don't have the space or time to devote my attention to all the proposed precincts listed in Council's latest token heritage initiative but I'll try to illustrate some of its problems by focussing on the Moore Street and the Grove precinct.

It is very difficult to find suitably qualified, distinguished and experienced architectural and landscape historians, planners and consultants to undertake the necessary hard slog and spend the inordinate amounts of time and money a serious heritage study necessitates. The necessary expertise to assess particular landscapes and buildings (items which often have a very distinctive and peculiar local significance) is not easy to acquire. Sufficiently qualified and experienced consultants are very thin on the ground nationally and it is usually expecting too much for the individuals or organisations employed locally to deliver a truly informed study by the set date within a very constrained budget.

The current exhibited proposal for Austinmer reveals all the hallmarks of the rehabilitation of someone's very outdated and sketchy idea. This seems to be confirmed by the vintage photos of Moore Street currently displayed in the Council's Planning Department and the first paragraph of the summary rationale which declares the area to have been settled by Captain Westmacott.

The photos look to me like they were someone's bright idea about eight years ago (try finding a building that looks like the Church of England on display at Council today!) and whether or not Westmacott actually built a
house or ever lived at Austinmer is something which is completely unknown to local historians. But the current exhibition confidently has him as the founder of Austinmer. Even if this was right, has the council’s heritage consultant never heard of Henry Reynolds and The Whispering in Our Hearts?

As for the proposed amendments themselves they’d probably be fine if they were implemented in 1978 (that’s a full twenty years earlier) and if the terms local and regional significance actually had any teeth.

As far as I can determine, however, the only heritage significance Moore Street, Austinmer had (and maybe still has, in places) is that it was (after the jetty, at least) the birthplace of modern Austin and that it was a mixed commercial and residential district unusually running west of the Main Road.

The only things that gives it its presumed heritage charm and significance are its pedestrian amenity and its tree-lined road-way.

Until the construction of the horrendous squash courts on the south western side in the late 1970s, the street was a gem.

The reason was that it was alive (although very quietly alive) because it mixed business and housing and it allowed people to park in front of shops or wait underneath shop awning verandahs for Dion’s buses to pick them up or drop them off.

But the main reason it had a life unlike other streets in Wollongong is that no vehicular driveways breached the footpath. You could walk from one end to the other on the footpath and never be hassled by a car. That’s because both sides of the street had rear lane vehicular access.

Once some mad council planner let the squash courts be built in the late 1970s, the rot well and truly began to set in. And because Council had no interest in the heritage value of miners shacks and disused guesthouses in the late 1970s, the street has been gentrified in a piecemeal and unplanned fashion and the pedestrian amenity has been breached in many locations.

The worst heritage disaster was the tiny wooden Church of England which was brick veneered and has now been transformed into a mega residence and whose Moore Street Driveway adds another breach to the pedestrian
amenity of the Street.

My suggestion is that Council forgets the notion of a Heritage Precinct and simply applies a tree-preservation order for all trees in the street and moves to amend the Local Environment Plan (LEP) so that the few shops with surviving awning verandahs have to make application to alter or remove them. Most importantly it needs to amend its LEP to encourage all land holders to use their lane-ways to provide vehicular access and to disallow future attempts to allow vehicles to cross the footpath for any property facing Moore Street.

Declaring an entire heritage precinct therefore seems unnecessary to me and rather like using a sledge-hammer to crack a nut.

Context is all important when it comes to heritage and, collectively, Moore Street and the Grove have charms that few others Illawarra streets possess. But it is a ragged charm that's already lost what was worth forever preserving at circa 1978. It now possess an equally ragged charm that extends from one or two unaltered shacks to brick veneered single story kitsch, to double-storeyed wooden gentrified shacks to concrete blockhouses, along with former Schools of Arts cum RSLs transforming into Evangelical Churches of England and Car Parks.

Moore Street has an evolving heritage which looks interesting and heritage does not need to be given an even worse name than it already possesses by freezing something that's already lost by declaration of an entire precinct when a few minor planning controls would be a far better instrument to use.

It will also avoid the scam of allowing the owners of real estate in one of the most affluent thoroughfares in Wollongong to claim heritage grants and rate concessions because they are the proud owners of a building in a heritage precinct that was declared too late.

The Grove is a similar case. Even the proposed amendments recognise that the Grove has landscape value only so why bother to declare it a Heritage precinct when simply enforcing the current Tree Preservation Order would serve just as well?

The Grove is already a warren of units and town houses on the southern
side but its unusual vegetation hides most of the ugliness. What it has lost, apart from nearly all its built heritage values, is pedestrian amenity. A thoughtfully constructed elevated walkway or even low impact uncurbed footpath are the only suggestions I can make for a street in which you take your life in your hands every time you attempt to walk through it.

The incredibly wealthy Captain Young knew that The Grove had lost most of its heritage values when in 1924 he immediately left his mansion - Rathane - and moved to Bowral because Ellstree was then being constructed next door, destroying both his view and his privacy. Both properties survive as testimony to this but are on private property and almost impossible to view from the road. They therefore have zero community value as heritage in terms of public access.

If Council is in the market for a Heritage Percent in the northern suburbs to fulfil some weird and imagined geographical heritage quota then I'd go for Railway Avenue or even Oceania Parade. The latter has had its heritage as badly compromised and in similar ways to Moore Street but the single sided street facing the railway which is Railway Avenue is still largely intact and
unrenovated. But the real Heritage Precinct items in Austinmer are the ones that Council seems to have little will to protect - the entire Headlands site and the entire beachfront containing the fabulous Tudor arches of the 1930 bathing pavilion and the marvelous grassed area under the Norfolk Island pines near the War Memorial.

The Headlands site has more landscape value than every street in Austinmer combined and is only now belatedly having a heritage study prepared - at the owner's request. Presumably if the owner jumps through all the right hoops Council will probably allow demolition of the entire structure because Council appears to have little interest in protecting landscape values, be they heritage or otherwise, when there's a chance of constructing yet another big hotel.

The owner will no doubt be assisted in this by the declaration of The Grove and Moore Street as Heritage Precincts because even though the Headlands site is the most significant item of landscape heritage in Austinmer the suburb will already have two entire streets declared as Heritage precincts and it would be obviously excessive to declare another.

As for the bathing Pavilion, I suspect that it will be allowed to die quietly of concrete cancer and be replaced with a desultory and ersatz replica, just as happened at Woonona because some consultant forgot (as has happened at Austin) to include it on the Region's heritage inventory.

The declaration of Heritage precincts is laudable (and really the only sensible way to go if you believe that heritage must have a context) but its senseless trying to do it too late, when there's little left to save and when other planning instruments could it better. But if it's got to be done, then it's best to do it in precincts that count - like the publicly accessible Headlands site and the Austinmer beachfront.

The Headlands site is a genuine landscape heritage precinct and not just a cute jumble of weatherboard and brick heritage kitsch that will look good on the cover of its annual report or corporate plan. But this is a site where big money is at stake - and big money will continue to override heritage values until the wider public has been sufficiently educated to try and place a community value on property which is not their own and which does not impinge on their own private bit of real estate.
The only people the current heritage proposal for Moore Street and the Grove in Austinmer will benefit is those already affluent landowners who'll be able to apply for heritage grants and rate concessions in order to salve Council's concern to be seen to be doing something constructive about local heritage.

Council also needs to get away from a fixation with buildings as heritage. It's useless and even where a mini-heritage precinct of local significance has been declared - in places like Lachlan Street, Thirroul - it's proved totally unworkable and Council has no power to stop facades from being demolished or altered and the only people who benefit are the resident owners who do what they like because Council has no power to stop them and the still claim $500 heritage grants from Council for maintenance even though they've altered their houses in such a way that there is no heritage left in them.

Real heritage in places like Austinmer is not collections of cutesy renovated weatherboard shacks, but ageing low impact fibro and timber housing on blocks of land with backyards that go on forever.

A serious heritage policy would be tackling this landscape issue and declaring precincts where dual occupancy was outlawed and pedestrian amenity and public and private open space were the prime heritage concerns. But there's no money to be made by Council in holding back the tide of urban consolidation sweeping the northern suburbs. So they're not interested and even the handful of planners who might be are held back by Council's supinely flexible planning, building and zoning regulations.

And so heritage in Wollongong continues to remain a middle-class scam where a few wealthy individuals gain financial windfalls and the real heritage and character of our region is ignored while Council moves to protect the kind of pointless heritage kitsch which looks good on their brochures and annual reports.

It's time to forget about declaring Heritage precincts in Moore Street and The Grove, Austinmer, and start focussing on preserving places like the Headlands site, the Austi beachfront and the real heritage of our region which is best characterized by that small stock of ageing housing on massive blocks of land that is fast being planned out of existence in Illawarra's north-
ern suburbs.
Council needs to think bigger, longer and harder about heritage and the community, rather simply tinkering incosequentially at the margins as is occurring with the present draft proposals for a heritage precinct at Austinmer.

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HYMNS & HOUSES
I’m still trying to establish further details about the wording of the Amy monument and the location of Sid Hoskins house in Corrimal Street. As mentioned in the last bulletin I have had much help from society members but will delay publication until later in the year.