

**Royal Insurance Group Building
430-444 Collins Street, Melbourne**

**Heritage Council Registrations Committee Meeting
Friday, 22 August 2008
Members – Gaye McKenzie (Chair), Damien Cash, Robert Sands**

DECISION OF THE HERITAGE COUNCIL

Having conducted a meeting to consider the submissions made to it, pursuant to Section 42(1)(d)(i), the Heritage Council has determined to refuse to register the Royal Insurance Group Building. It however refers the submissions to the Melbourne City Council for its consideration regarding amending the Melbourne Planning Scheme to apply the Heritage Overlay over the property.

**Gaye McKenzie
(Chair)**

Damien Cash

Robert Sands

Decision Date – 2 September 2008

INTRODUCTION

The Place

- 1 The Royal Insurance Group Building at 430-444 Collins Street, Melbourne, is an 18 storey, pre-cast concrete-clad International Modern style office building. The place was designed by the architectural firm Yuncken Freeman in 1962 and construction was completed in 1965.

Nominations

- 2 The place was nominated by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) on 14 June 2007. The nomination documentation states that the place is one of the most important 20th century Modernist office blocks in Melbourne and is of state-level architectural and aesthetic significance.

- 3 Under 'How is it Significant?', the nomination documentation states:

Architecturally and aesthetically, (the Royal Insurance Group Building) is one of the most elegant of Melbourne's post war skyscrapers...(the place) was the most accomplished of the early pre-cast concrete clad office blocks, leading the field away from the light-weight curtain wall facades in Melbourne of the previous seven years. It was also the first notable central city office block by the firm of Yuncken Freeman, subsequently responsible for a number of the city's best skyscrapers, most importantly BHP House.

Recommendation of the Executive Director

- 4 The Executive Director has recommended that the place not be included in the Heritage Register. The Executive Director has recommended that the place be referred to the relevant planning authority for inclusion in the planning scheme.

Site/Object Inspection

- 5 The Registration Committee conducted an external site inspection on 22 August 2008. The publicly accessible areas on the ground floor were also inspected.

SUBMISSIONS RECEIVED

Nominator

- 6 The National Trust of Australia (Victoria) lodged a submission opposing the Executive Director's recommendation. In the submission the Trust queried the following bases on which the Executive Director's recommendation was made:

6.1 *Three post-war curtain wall towers are already included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) – The Trust contends that this reasoning does not consider that dozens of high-rise buildings were constructed in the two decades after WWII across Melbourne. In this context, three places is a small number to be included in the VHR. The Trust also contends that this number is small when compared to the number of office blocks included in the VHR from the immediately preceding interwar period.*

- 6.2 *The lower floor interiors of the place have been lost, reducing its significance* – The Trust states that the interiors of the three post-war high rises included in the VHR have also largely been lost with Eagle House existing only as an external skin; BHP House having its ground level lobby re-built in the 1980s (similar to, but not exactly the same as, the original); and the ICI building having had the undercroft enclosed.
- 6.3 *The importance of the place has not stood the test of time (as evidenced, in part, by Philip Goad's 2003 reassessment of those buildings which have won past RVIA medals in Judging Architecture. The Royal Insurance Group Building was not nominated as one of the 30 best RVIA winners)* – The Trust challenges the appropriateness of using this publication as a guide to significance for the following reasons:
- Many buildings that are now considered highly significant did not receive an RVIA award (or were even nominated for an award);
 - As the publication itself notes, the process was not objective and the participants all took different views as to how they made their nominations (some specifically chose lesser known examples or ignored whole periods); and
 - There is limited correlation between a place being included in the VHR and receiving a nomination in this publication – some places not in the VHR received nominations, while other places included in the VHR did not receive a nomination.

The Executive Director

- 7 The Executive Director submitted that although the building was recognised for its architectural merit by the award of the 1967 RVIA Victorian Architecture Medal, it has not stood the test of time. Beginning in 1997, the place underwent major works to the lower levels of the exterior and also to the interior, the character of which was integral to its significance. The diminution of the significance of the building as a result of these changes is reflected in it being graded A in the 1993 Central City Heritage Study Review, but in the 2000 Central Activities District Study, following the alterations, it was downgraded to B. It is submitted that the place is not now considered to be of sufficient cultural heritage value to warrant inclusion in the VHR.
- 8 In response to other points raised by the National Trust the Executive Director submitted as follows:
- 8.1 The interwar office buildings included in the VHR represent a variety of architectural styles and each is considered to be the most important example of its type. While it might be true that buildings of the 1950s and 1960s are not yet well represented in the VHR, the Executive Director considers that the most important of the International Modern style office towers have already been included in the VHR and that the style is therefore adequately represented.

- 8.2 It is not appropriate to add a substantially altered building to the VHR on the basis that other buildings in the VHR have also been altered. If the Royal Insurance Group Building were intact its significance would be higher, but it is not logical to argue that because other altered examples are in the VHR then this place should also be added.
- 9 In the document titled ‘Submission by the Executive Director pursuant to section 41 of the *Heritage Act 1995*’ (dated 22 August 2008), the Executive Director recommended that the appropriate resolution for the Registrations Committee is as follows:
- Having considered the Executive Director’s recommendation, and examined all submissions, the Heritage Council hereby determines that the place is not of cultural heritage significance and should not be included in the Heritage Register (s.42(1)(a)).*
- In attachments to this submission (titled ‘Recommendation and Determination on a Nomination to the Victorian Heritage Register’ and ‘Officer’s Assessment Report’), the Executive Director further submitted that the place should be referred to the local planning authority for inclusion in the Melbourne Planning Scheme.

REASONS

- 10 The Committee notes that the application by the National Trust to have the Former Royal Insurance Building included on the Victorian Heritage Register was based on the opinion that it is of ‘architectural and aesthetic’ significance to the State.
- 11 In considering the application made by the National Trust the Committee identified the key issues as:
- The extent the alterations to the front façade and the interior at ground and ‘mezzanine’ levels have had on the significance of the building.
 - Setting aside the alterations to the ground and mezzanine levels whether, architecturally and aesthetically, the building is of state significance.
- 12 Having considered the written submissions of the National Trust and the Executive Director and having inspected the exterior of the building and the public parts of its interior, namely the ground floor shops and the office foyer, the Committee is of the opinion that:
- The Royal Insurance Group Building is a representative example of a high-rise office building in the International Modern style.
 - The 1962 design of the building related closely to its primary function as the office of an insurance company. A dark, imposing tower “floated” over a largely transparent entrance consisting of a lift well and escalators rising to the mezzanine level containing the

insurance hall. The Perspex illuminated ceiling of the first floor, which has since been removed, was central in creating the sense of lightness in the lower levels.

- The integrity of the design overall, in terms of the connectivity between the street and the insurance hall, has been lost as a result of the removal of the escalators and the ‘filling in’ of the void to the mezzanine level.
 - It appears from photographic material and inspection of the building that modifications have been made to the spandrels separating the ground and first (originally the mezzanine level) floors and this has created a heavier appearance at these lower levels. The Committee considers these changes are ‘at odds’ with the original design intent.
- 13 The Committee is of the view that the layout of the ground and mezzanine levels of the building formed an integral part of its design and any significance that may have originally been attributed to the building. It has concluded that the substantial nature of the alterations at ground and the previous mezzanine levels have reduced the significance of the building to the extent that it does not satisfy the Criteria used to assess cultural heritage significance. In particular the Committee is of the opinion that while the building is a ‘representative’ example of a building of its period it does not demonstrate rarity or uniqueness (Criteria B) nor does it exhibit characteristics that elevates it to a building of state significance (Criteria D).

CONCLUSION

- 14 The Committee has determined that the Royal Insurance Group Building does not reach the threshold for State significance in relation to the Heritage Council’s criteria for inclusion in the Victorian Heritage Register.
- 15 The Committee recommends that the submissions made by the Executive Director and the National Trust be referred to the Melbourne City Council for its consideration in relation to amending the Melbourne Planning Scheme to include the place in the Heritage Overlay.

ATTACHMENT 1

Criteria for assessment of cultural heritage significance, adopted by the Heritage Council on 6 March 1997 pursuant to Sections 8(1)(c) and 8(2) of the *Heritage Act* 1995.

CRITERION A:

The historical importance, association with or relationship to Victoria's history of the place or object.

CRITERION B:

The importance of a place or object in demonstrating rarity or uniqueness.

CRITERION C:

The place or object's potential to educate, illustrate or provide further scientific investigation in relation to Victoria's cultural heritage.

CRITERION D:

The importance of a place or object in exhibiting the principal characteristics or the representative nature of a place or object as part of a class or type of places or objects.

CRITERION E:

The importance of the place or object in exhibiting good design or aesthetic characteristics and/or in exhibiting a richness, diversity or unusual integration of features

CRITERION F:

The importance of the place or object in demonstrating or being associated with scientific or technical innovations or achievements.

CRITERION G:

The importance of the place or object in demonstrating social or cultural associations.

CRITERION H:

Any other matter which the Council considers relevant to the determination of cultural heritage significance.