

1 Spring Street (Shell House), 1 Spring Street, Melbourne (VHR H2365)

QandAs

What is 1 Spring Street (Shell House)?

1 Spring Street (Shell House) was included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) in 2017. It was constructed in 1985-8 as the headquarters for the Shell Company of Australia Ltd. It was designed by highly regarded commercial architect and leading Australian modernist, Harry Seidler and was included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) in 2017 as an outstanding example of a late modernist office building in Victoria. Seidler designed the building using two counterpoint curved sections to maximise views to the south and east, to accommodate existing underground railway tunnels and to present a commanding entry point to the city. The building is a concrete structure with granite-faced lower facades and a repetitive floor construction system of clear span beams of equal length. Shell House has won a number of awards including the Royal Australian Institute of Architects Victoria Merit Award in 1991 and the National RIAA Award in the same year. It is highly intact both internally and externally.

Harry Seidler was trained by Modernist architects in the United States before arriving in Australia in 1948 and throughout his career his work continued to display the ideals of this movement. This included the use of basic geometric shapes, sculptural and simple form, visual expression of structure and generous civic spaces. Seidler continued to explore skyscraper design from the 1960s to the 1990s, producing a series of office buildings in Australia and overseas. Shell House is the only example of these built in Victoria. Seidler is considered to be one of the major talents in Australian architectural history who made a substantial contribution to Australian architecture.

What has happened?

On 11 November 2020, Heritage Victoria received a permit application for proposed works at 1 Spring Street (Shell House). The proposed works included demolition or partial demolition of the north plaza, theatrette, conference rooms, entrance passageway and the roof garden on Level 3 to allow for the construction of a tower above the existing basement comprising 31 tower levels with three plant levels above.

On 4 August 2021, the Executive Director, Heritage Victoria refused the application on the grounds that:

- The demolition of the existing north plaza back to the north face of the existing tower, including the entrance passage, conference centre, theatrette and Level 3 roof garden will cause substantial harm to the cultural heritage significance of the place. It will permanently and irreversibly demolish original fabric and spaces and will significantly diminish the legibility of Harry Seidler's original concept and design of the place.
- The construction of a 35 level tower on the north plaza will have significant physical and visual impacts on the place. Of similar footprint and taller than the existing tower, it will create an entirely new development at the place and will disrupt the visual and physical connections between 1 Spring Street and Flinders Lane. The scale and bulk of the new tower would dominate the north section of the place and almost entirely block views to the north elevation of the tower. The existing external plaza would be substantially reduced in size and the remainder of the plaza would be enclosed.
- The proposal is based on highest and best use of the place and not the cultural heritage significance of the place. It is considered to be an overdevelopment of the heritage place.

- The current commercial and public uses remain viable and the commercial use generates income to cover the costs of conservation and maintenance.

What happens next?

The owner or a person with a real and substantial interest in the place may request a review of the Executive Director's determination to refuse the application. A request for a review must be made to the Heritage Council of Victoria within 60 days of the refusal of the application.