

What is the Titles Office?

The Titles Office was included in the Victorian Heritage Register in 1982 and is of architectural, technical and historical significance to the State of Victoria. It was designed by the Public Works Department and completed in stages between 1884 and 1889.

The Titles Office demonstrates the architectural restraint of the Public Works Department under the leadership of William Wardell and signifies the change of law for the recording of land ownership. In 1862 the Real Property Act introduced the Torrens System to Victoria, and dealings under the new Act were administered exclusively from this building. Its former use is demonstrated through the design and layout of the office building and separate Strong Room, as well as a range of fire precaution and security measures throughout the complex.

Located in Melbourne's Law Precinct, the Titles Office is also significant as one of a number of public and civic buildings designed by the Public Works Department in the second half of the nineteenth century.

What has happened?

On 24 September 2020, Heritage Victoria received a permit application for proposed works at the Titles Office. The proposed works included demolition to allow for the construction of a 30 level tower (plus plant) above the Strong Room and adaptation and conservation of the office building for museum use.

On 21 January 2022, the Executive Director, Heritage Victoria accepted a proposal to amend the application to include a reduction in the height of the tower from 30 levels to 22 levels (plus plant) and a change of the proposed use of the office building and Strong Room from a museum to offices, affordable community spaces and hospitality venues.

On 14 July 2021, the Executive Director, Heritage Victoria refused the application on the grounds that:

- The construction of a tower straddling the Strong Room would have significant physical and visual impacts on the heritage place. The height, width and overall mass of the proposed tower would visually overwhelm and dominate the view of the office building, reducing it to a podium to the proposed tower. From the proposed internal street, the Strong Room would appear as the lower levels of the tower rather than as a freestanding building in a courtyard.
- The demolition of areas of the Titles Office, including areas identified in the Conservation Management Plan as being of core significance - namely the southern wing of the 1877 building, the boiler room and the Former Receiving and Issuing Hall - to allow for the construction of a tower and the insertion of a large new entrance and lobby fronting Queen Street would cause substantial harm and irreversibly diminish cultural heritage significance of the place.
- The structural requirements to construct the columns supporting the tower propose a risk to the place. The intervention required for seismic strengthening are substantial and the addition of a tower increases these requirements.

- The proposal is based on highest and best use, and is considered to be an overdevelopment of the heritage place.
- The economic use assessment acknowledges that the Internal Rate of Return is 'on the cusp of viability'. There is a risk that the project may fail or not be fully realised which may result in the Titles Office being left in a more perilous state than it currently is.

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.