

Heritage issues

Introduction

- 6.1 Five places on the former *HMAS Platypus* site have been listed on the Interim List of the Register of the National Estate. These places are:
- the former Coal Bunker;
 - the former Exhauster House;
 - the former Retort House;
 - the sandstone sea wall along the waterfront of the site; and
 - the modified cliff line on the site.¹
- 6.2 The site has also been listed under various regional and local New South Wales environmental plans.² Significant European heritage exists from the former use of the site as a gasworks.³ No items of significance exist from the naval operations on the site. The entire gasworks site has been listed under the Sydney and Middle Harbour Regional Environmental Plan No. 23 and also listed in the North Sydney Local Environmental Plan.⁴
- 6.3 Items of heritage significance identified as significant in the findings of Justice Sheahan in the LEC case were:

1 Exhibit 16, p. 29.

2 Exhibit 16, p. 29.

3 Exhibit 16, p. 29.

4 Exhibit 16, p. 29.

- the Compressor House (former Exhauster House);
- the framework of the stores Building (Retort House); and
- the Bunker House (former coal store).

The Retort House

6.4 The Department of Defence (DoD) in its submission to the Committee stated that three of the five heritage items will be adaptively reused following the remediation work, these being:

- the Compressor House (former Exhauster House);
- the framework of the Stores Building (Retort House); and
- remnant Sea Wall.⁵

6.5 The structural frame of the former Retort House was manufactured in Scotland in approximately 1882, shipped to Australia and erected at Neutral Bay as part of a complete package gas-making plant.⁶ After 1940 it was stripped and refitted inside as a storage facility and continued in this use for the RAN until 2000. The Retort House is the oldest surviving structure on the site.⁷ The structure's frame is assembled using nuts and bolts, with joints specially shaped to match with each other. The heritage consultants of the DoD consider the Neutral Bay Retort House to rank as one of the last and probably most advanced of the prefabricated iron-framed buildings imported into Australia in the nineteenth century.⁸

6.6 The single-piece, hollow iron columns of the structure represent iron-casting technology at its peak.⁹ The wrought-iron roof trusses demonstrate an early proficiency with metal structures and the wrought-iron lattice girders are examples of a type of structural beam that was considered the most advanced available in the late nineteenth century.¹⁰

6.7 The Committee asked the DoD at the public hearing to elaborate on its intentions regarding the Retort House, Bunker House and Exhauster House. The DoD advised that the Retort House would be dismantled and

5 Evidence, p. 12.

6 Exhibit 18, p. 1.

7 Exhibit 18, p.1.

8 Exhibit 18, p. 1.

9 Exhibit 18, p.1.

10 Exhibit 18, p. 2.

placed in storage throughout the remediation and then be reassembled at some location on the site yet to be finally determined.¹¹ The DoD also advised that the Exhauster House will be retained in its present condition without any substantial works.¹² With respect to the Bunker House at the top of the cliff at the end of the car park, the DoD advised the Committee that it is to be entirely removed.

6.8 The Committee noted that the Australian Heritage Committee advised that the re-erection of the whole, or part of the Retort House on its original site, would assist in minimising the adverse effect resulting from the decontamination process.¹³

6.9 At the public hearing the Committee questioned the DoD whether it was true that re-erection of the Retort House on its original site was not in the prerogative of Defence to ensure. The DoD advised:

The Heritage Commission have expressed a preference that it be reassembled in its current location. That would render null and void the approvals that we have in place at the present time. It would change the format of the approval substantially. What we undertook to do, in discussion with the Heritage Commission and prior to their coming to that view, was that it be reassembled on the site precisely in a site to be determined in association with them and the future owner.¹⁴

6.10 Following the public hearing, the DoD through its heritage consultants¹⁵, advised the Committee that the approved development proposal for the site includes approval for the re-erection of the structural frame of the Retort House in the public open space area of the site, standing on the raised platform on the foreshore approximately where the RANTME administration building is presently situated.¹⁶

6.11 The DoD also advised the Committee that space constraints on the site has meant that the structural frame would not be entirely re-erected within the proposed location, that is, six of the eight bays of the frame are proposed for re-erection.¹⁷ The Committee was further advised that there are potential compensatory factors arising from this situation, including that

11 Evidence, p. 38.

12 Evidence, p. 38.

13 Evidence, p. 154.

14 Evidence, p. 39.

15 Godden Mackay Logan Pty Ltd.

16 Exhibit 18, p. 2.

17 Exhibit 18, p. 2.

excess columns from the sides may be reused to replace missing columns.¹⁸

- 6.12 The Committee notes that it is also open to the developer of the site to seek a variation to the development consent to allow for re-erection of a larger portion, or all, of the structure in another location.

The cliff line

- 6.13 The upper level of the former *HMAS Platypus* site has a length of 180 metres and width of 20 metres. This level is situated between the cliff face and the existing Iora residential development and is approximately 18 metres above the lower level of the site.
- 6.14 The cliff line on the site is a human modified topographical feature which was created by the excavation of the land adjacent to the waterfront. Its face is predominantly sandstone. The features of the face of the cliff are remnants of the operation of the gasworks and include retaining walls and patches, remnant pipes and traces of tar and other chemicals. These features are aspects of the heritage value of the cliff line. Another aspect of the cliff's heritage is its role as part of the landscaping undertaken for the creation of a waterfront industrial facility. In this context, the cliff face at Neutral Bay is representative evidence of the work performed for the operation of the former gasworks.
- 6.15 The proposed remediation of the site includes works to address contamination in the cliff. The proposed works include:
- removal of the top surfaces of the cliff line, including all materials and a proportion of the bedrock below;
 - removal of the vertical face of the cliff, including all brick, stone and concrete;
 - excavation of the bedrock of the cliff face to clean out contaminants along fault lines; and
 - excavation of the remaining bedrock to level the site.
- 6.16 The outcome of the proposed works from a heritage perspective is negative, as the physical evidence of gas making, such as seeping tar and chemical seepage will be removed.

- 6.17 The Committee notes that the Australian Heritage Commission, to which the proposed works had been referred under section 30 of the *Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975* (Cth), has advised:

The Commission therefore agrees that substantial removal of existing cliff line fabric is the only prudent and feasible alternative if decontamination of the site is necessary.¹⁹

- 6.18 Following the public hearing the Committee sought from the DoD additional information regarding the impact of the proposed remediation on the heritage significance of the cliff line. The DoD advised, through its heritage consultants²⁰, that:

After the excavations required for remediation are complete, the cliff may assume a range of profiles depending upon the extent of excavation required to remove the contaminants. ... If the excavations are finished by recreating a straight, vertical face at the rear of the site, the cliff will continue to appear as a single excavation alongside the waterfront. For this reason, the heritage values remaining (after the contaminated surfaces have been removed) will best be conserved if the remediation works produce a cliff which largely reproduces the existing faces, albeit in new locations.

Whether this new cliff face is one metre or five metres back from the present alignment is of no consequence to the heritage values of the remediated cliff. Whether there is a terrace level at three, five or twenty metres above the present ground level is also of no substantive consequence (given that the original terrace level is gone). For this reason, the excavation which is proposed so as to achieve the planned future site levels ... will not further adversely affect the heritage values of the cliff (given that one aspect of heritage significance has already been destroyed for remediation).²¹

- 6.19 In all of its reports, the Committee has given specific attention to heritage and environmental issues. These issues must continue to have priority of concern in any works proposal submitted to the Committee for consideration – they can never be an afterthought. Features of cultural and historical significance attached to public works should be, as far as practicable, preserved and bequeathed to future generations.

19 Evidence, p. 24.

20 Godden Mackay Logan Pty Ltd.

21 Exhibit 16, p. 3.

- 6.20 At times, the Committee has had some issue with how such features are assessed to be significant culturally and historically. With regard to remediation of the former *HMAS Platypus* site, the Committee experienced challenges in ascertaining how features such as retaining walls and patches, remnant pipes, traces of tar and other chemicals and the cliff's profile had captured the imagination of some in the community to the extent that they had demanded their preservation. However, the Committee expects the DoD to photograph and carefully document those features of heritage and historical value that have been identified. That should be done in consultation with the Australian Heritage Commission and the Australian National Archives.
- 6.21 With respect to the heritage values of the cliff's profile, the Committee is of the opinion that if the excavations are completed by recreating a straight vertical face at the back of the site, the cliff will continue to appear as it currently does, that is, a single excavation alongside the waterfront.

Recommendation 4

- 6.22 **The Committee recommends that the excavation of the cliff line at the former *HMAS Platypus* site proposed by Department of Defence proceed after features of heritage value, identified by Australian Heritage Commission have been photographed and appropriately documented. This should be done in consultation with the Australian Heritage Commission and the Australian National Archives.**

Recommendation 5

- 6.23 **The Committee recommends the excavation of the cliff line at the former *HMAS Platypus* site proposed by the Department of Defence proceed, to the extent that the cliff's profile reproduces the basic vertical character of the current cliff line.**