



Preserving Our Heritage
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SUBMISSION REGARDING THE WORK OF THE GREATER SYDNEY COMMISSION

The Hunters Hill Trust was formed in 1968 by a group of concerned local citizens who were dismayed by the unchecked destruction of the old houses of Hunters Hill as developers of the time moved in to take advantage of spot rezoning of residential lots for 3 storey walk-up units.

The decade of the 1960s was a time of Progress with a capital P and every local government area had its Progress Association. Anything older than a couple of decades was considered past its prime, old-fashioned and ready for the demolisher's ball. What was happening in Hunters Hill was symptomatic of what was happening throughout the Sydney metropolitan area.

The scars of this time can be seen dotted throughout Sydney today. One of the most damaging impacts of 1960s progress on Hunters Hill in particular was the construction of the Lane Cove Freeway, which required the demolition of many fine historic houses and resulted in the bifurcation of the suburb of Hunters Hill by a canyon containing a six lane highway plus its on and off ramps.

The idea of heritage conservation was virtually unknown at that time. There were no safeguards in the local planning regulations to provide protection for heritage. However, in the couple of decades following, thanks to the Herculean efforts of the National Trust and a number of local conservation groups including The Hunters Hill Trust, The Glebe Society, The Paddington Society, The Haberfield Heritage Society and the Balmain Association together with local historical societies - heritage, conservation and preservation became accepted as essential cultural values that needed to be considered when planning for the desired character of our neighbourhoods.

Today, over half a century on, the wheel has turned again. After some decades of success in preserving our built and natural heritage, enthusiasm for the job has waned dramatically. People increasingly see their house as an investment opportunity rather than as a home and governments, state and local, facilitate this with land rezoning for higher density development. This attitude is not conducive to developing a sense of belonging to a local community, which is an essential ingredient in good place-making.

We seem to now be living in the 1960s redux. Progress is once again the driving force of our economy and is now coupled with growth with a capital G together with a mindless determination to continuously increase population with no thought as to its impact on scarce resources and the health of the planet.

Heritage is considered a dirty word and an impasse to progress, development and growth.

With mechanised construction techniques that were unknown in the 1960s we can now pull down and rebuild with twice the speed. Our old buildings, public places and suburban bushland are under extreme pressure and, like an endangered species of animal, at risk of extinction.

Most of what is being built in this development rush, particularly the high-density stuff, is ugly and badly located along high-traffic, heavily polluted roadways with toxic air quality, traffic noise and safety concerns.

At the same time there has been virtually no increase in the provision of public amenities like parks, public transport, libraries, schools etc. The so-called private open space provided in the units in these awful structures is restricted to a tiny open balcony opening onto the roadway. With their glass balustrades, which expose the occupants to the public gaze of the thousands of people using the roads, these balconies cannot even qualify as private.

Other building solutions to the provision of higher density housing such as town houses, terraces and the retrofitting of existing large houses have been abandoned as developers push to maximise profits from high-rise unit construction that the latest ill-considered planning controls have facilitated.

Meanwhile in the suburbs there has been and continues to be a proliferation of ugly oversized project houses that now take up most of their lots. Couple this with the reduction in lot size from what was standard in the 1960s and the result has been the virtual disappearance of the backyard and the positive contributions that backyards make to our quality of life, the air we breathe and habitat for various native birds, lizards and other wildlife.

From the little we have read about The Greater Sydney Commission, The Trust understands that one of its prime concerns is to facilitate the creation of great places for people to live, and to do a whole lot better than just allowing development to roll on holus bolus with no attention to place making.

We applaud this ambition – it is sorely needed.

To date, however, we have seen no reference in the Commission's publicity material to heritage or conservation and the essential place of these essential elements in the planning of the built and natural environs of Sydney.

We believe that it is essential for the creation of places that people can enjoy that primary consideration is given to recognising and describing the existing characters of our suburban places. This should be undertaken before any planning takes place and before planning controls are set. It is vital to good place making that we preserve, conserve and maintain those things that people recognise as being important to their love of a place. Heritage and conservation should not be an add-on to place making. They must be there from the start.

We are therefore concerned that these critical considerations have not, as far as we can gather, figured in The Commission's objectives.

The Hunters Hill Trust was one of the pioneers in heritage and conservation planning in NSW and we have been instrumental at the local level in ensuring the recognition and implementation of heritage and conservation protection in Hunters Hill's planning instruments.

Now 50 years on, we are facing a heritage and conservation crisis and much of the work of the last half century is being undermined.

We sincerely hope that the Greater Sydney Commission can recognise this threat and that it will ensure that heritage and conservation are enshrined as core values when it sets out its objectives.

The Trust is keen to be part of any discussion of strategic issues that may benefit from our input.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tony Coote". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Tony Coote
President
The Hunters Hill Trust