

# Forrest Hill Structure Plan Response to Heritage Issues

20 October 2006

## 1.0 Introduction

I have been asked to provide comment on heritage issues arising from the Forest Hill Structure Plan (Beca Pty Ltd, 2005). In particular this report addresses recommendations made as part of the Structure Plan in favour of multi-storey development to the western side of Chapel Street between Forrest Hill and Alexandra Avenue. Sites in this locale abut the highly graded Melbourne High School Site.

This report should be read in conjunction with the Forrest Hill Structure Plan.

No substantial research into the history of the School has been undertaken in the preparation of this report as this has to a large extent been undertaken by others. Much of the information provided below is drawn from the School's own website. ([http://resources.mhs.vic.edu.au/mhs/about\\_history.asp](http://resources.mhs.vic.edu.au/mhs/about_history.asp)).

## 2.0 Current listings or controls

Melbourne High School is included on the Victorian Heritage Register (H1636) and is covered by an individual heritage overlay under the City of Stonnington Planning Scheme (HO2).

Melbourne High School is included on the Register of the National Estate (File no. 2/11/042/0032) but has not been classified by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria).

### 3.0 History

*The following is based on limited amount of research largely comprising secondary sources, in particular the history provided on the school's website.*

Victoria's first state secondary school, the Melbourne Continuation School, was opened in 1905, with an enrolment of 135 girls and 68 boys. It was housed in the Old National Model School in Spring Street, and was renamed Melbourne High School in 1912. The school came about through the efforts of Frank Tate, Victoria's first Director of Education, who strove to provide students from state primary schools with the opportunity to continue their education. Until this period, secondary education was largely considered the preserve of private schools.

The school continued to grow until accommodation became critical in the 1920s and with the building in a poor state of repair, the decision was made to relocate the girls and boys to separate facilities. Forrest Hill in South Yarra was selected as the site for the Melbourne Boy's High School. An impressive new school building was constructed on the hillside to the design Edwin Evan Smith, Chief Architect of the Public Works Department. The new school was opened in October 1927 and accommodated about 700 boys.

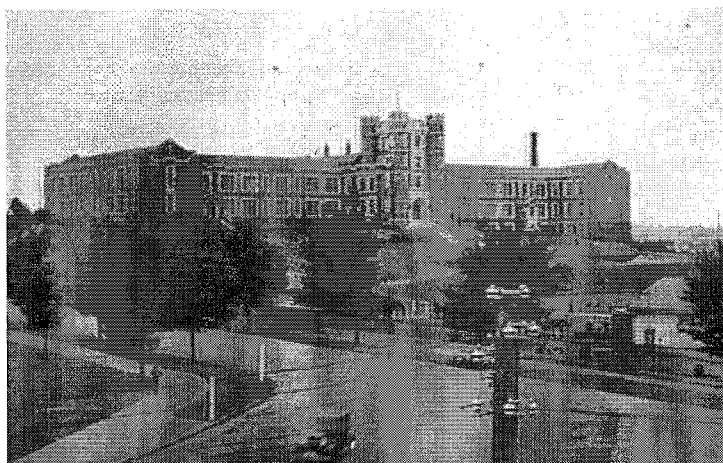


Figure 1 Melbourne High School c.1930.

Source: State Library of Victoria

Melbourne High dominated the local landscape and was affectionately known as the 'Castle on the Hill' due to its crenellated towers and the School's website continues to promote this view of the building. The size and central location of Melbourne High School led to its occupation by military authorities during the Second World War, at which time the students were temporarily relocated to buildings in Malvern and Camberwell.

1960 saw the first physical expansion of the School's facilities since 1927 with the construction of a new Physical Education Centre and pool to the east of the original building. A new library was constructed in 1965 as well as a number of portable classrooms. Works to the Junior Science Block commenced in the late 1960s and was finished by 1970.

#### 4.0 Description

The 1927 Melbourne High School building occupies a prominent site on high ground overlooking the school oval to its west. It is constructed in a collegiate Tudor style with brown brick walls and contrasting light-coloured dressings around the window and door openings. The principal west facing elevation is symmetrical with a central four-storey entry pavilion flanked by octagonal crenellated towers. Two-storey wings extend outwards from either side of the building. The 1927 building remains substantially intact and generally appears to be in good condition.

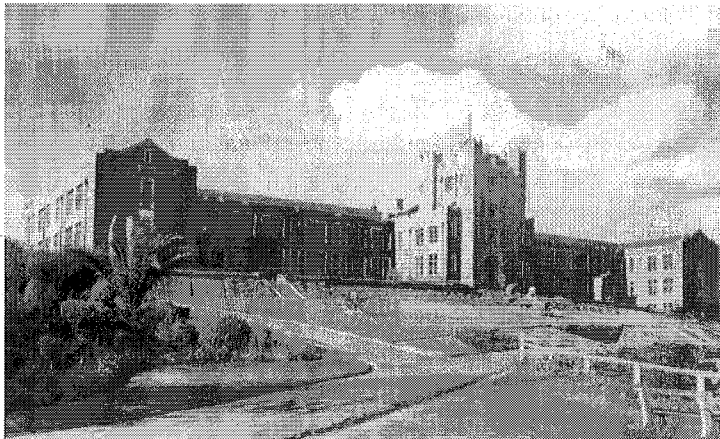


Figure 2 Melbourne High School c.1950

Source: State Library of Victoria

#### 5.0 Statement of Significance

Melbourne High School has been assessed by Heritage Victoria and identified as being significant at a state level. The Heritage Victoria citation notes the following:

##### *What is significant?*

Melbourne High School was erected in Alexandra Avenue, South Yarra in 1928, by GS Gay. The chief architect of the Public Works Department, Edwin Evan Smith,

designed the school to accommodate about seven hundred boys on a twelve and a half acre site, known originally as Forrest Hill. The school was designed in a style known as Collegiate Gothic, a castellated form popular in American schools at the time. It features octagonal towers with battlements.

*How is it significant?*

Melbourne High School is of historical and architectural significance to the State of Victoria.

*Why is it significant?*

Melbourne High School is of historical significance as it represents the efforts of the State education authorities to establish an elite school within the State school system. Entry to the school has always been selective and the emphasis has been on academic and sporting achievement. The building's unique design in terms of Victorian State schools, and its imposing size and character, accentuated by its prominent location, emphasise this elite role. The size and prestige of the building, as well as its key central location, led to its occupation by military authorities for four years from 1942, during which time the students were relocated to buildings in Malvern and Camberwell. Melbourne High School is of architectural significance as a fine example of Collegiate Gothic architecture and as the work of Edwin Evan Smith. Collegiate Gothic architecture was common in educational architecture in the United States at the time of the construction of Melbourne High School. Around the same time, Smith had also employed the style in the Old Geology (1928) and Botany (1926) buildings at the University of Melbourne. The choice of a style with university and overseas associations indicates the importance accorded to the Melbourne High School, in a manifest effort to emphasise the school's elite role.



Figure 3 Contemporary view of Melbourne High School

## 6.0 Analysis

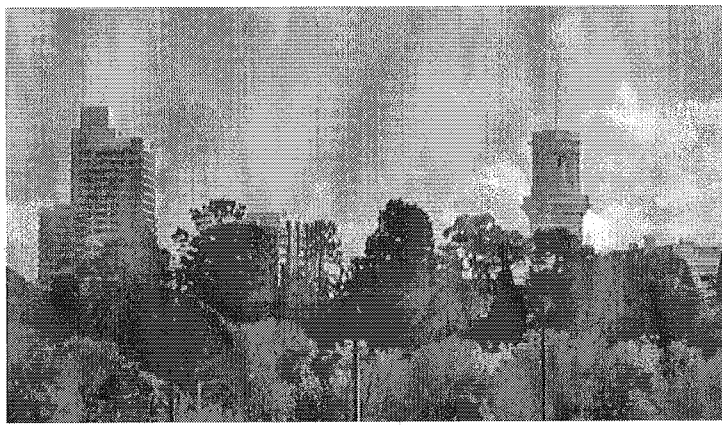
As noted above, The Melbourne High School is unique in terms of Victorian State schools for its historical associations and for its imposing size and architectural character. Its privileged role is emphasised by its prominent hilltop location and castellated expression. So much so, that the building is frequently described as the 'Castle on the Hill'.

Despite various pressures on the capacity of the school, the institution has regulated the form of additions to ensure that the key views to the building have not altered the key expression of the building to the oval and Yarra Street. All additions to the building are of modest height and are situated to the east of the key 1929 building. Remarkably the ridgeline is not broken by any of the additions to the school from the c.1960s or c.1970s and the view to the building from the west remains one of Melbourne's notable vistas. Similarly, existing development along Chapel Street between Daly Street/Malcolm Avenue and Alexandra Avenue have also raised no heritage issues. Relatively tall developments such as the existing SY21 and other developments along the east side of Chapel Street are not visible in key views to the School and have no impacts in real terms on the character or significance of the building.

However, new built form in the northern section of Chapel Street of a height substantially greater than that of SY21 could form a backdrop to the Melbourne High School which would impact detrimentally on its character and significance.

The impact of nearby buildings on heritage places depends to a large extent on the nature of the heritage place in question. Where the heritage place comprises a group of buildings as is the case in a heritage precinct or some institutional sites in which the built fabric forms a designed environment, experienced primarily from within, the impact of large buildings located short distances outside of the area is typically minimal. To use the Chapel Street shopping strip as an example, the presence of the existing Housing Commission towers in Bray Street, South Yarra does not substantially alter an appreciation of the nineteenth century character of Chapel Street despite their high visibility and their location less than one hundred metres from the retail strip. In 2005, a permit was sought for another tower of similar size to the existing Housing Commission buildings on another site in Bray Street. In my view the proposal did not raise any substantial heritage issues. However, where the heritage place is largely perceived externally and from a distance, essentially as an object in a landscape, the impact of new built form can be more problematic. To consider Government House in the Domain, South Yarra

as an example, this was designed to be viewed from multiple vantage points around the city and suburbs and to present an elevated form which would dominate its environment both physically and symbolically. Two tower blocks constructed in South Melbourne c.2000 some distance to the west of Government House now intrude into views to the building from sections of Melbourne, Jolimont and Richmond and are particularly prominent as viewed from the environs of the Melbourne Cricket Ground. The new buildings do not obscure key views to the building but provide a backdrop which undermines the prestige and exclusivity of the Vice Regal residence and ultimately, diminishes significant views to the place.



*Figure 4 Government House from Olympic Park. The apartment buildings to left of the photograph are located over half a kilometre to the east of the vice regal residence.*

The Melbourne High School falls into the latter of these groups. As is the case with Government House, its designers appropriated the elevated setting to underscore the prestige and status of the school. The geographical features of Forrest Hill contribute to the architectural design providing the elevated ground to Evans' 'Castle on the Hill'. The siting of the oval allows distant views to the facade and an appreciation of the architecture which remains largely unaltered from the architect's original conception.

New built form rising above the ridgeline of the School as viewed from Yarra Street would impact on key views to the building. It would undermine the integrity of the architectural vision and the landmark quality of the development diminishing an understanding of the School as an exclusive and prestigious institution. Development of this type would almost inevitably diminish the legibility and significance of the heritage place.

Viewed in this light, the Forrest Hill Structure Plan supports two competing outcomes, namely, Key Outcome 3.1, which seeks to protect the heritage values of the Melbourne High School and Key Outcome 10.4 which suggests that 681-709 Chapel Street is an appropriate site for a landmark development, potentially a great deal taller than the existing building stock in this locale. Any development of landmark stature to the east of the School would impact upon its character and significance in the manner discussed above.

Council's Heritage Policy, Clause 22.04 of the City of Stonnington Planning Scheme, provides direction towards the protection of the Significance of the City's heritage places.

Clause 22.04-2, acknowledges Council's objectives:

- To recognise, conserve and enhance places in the City identified as having architectural, cultural or historic significance.
- To ensure that any additions, alterations and *replacement buildings* are sympathetic to the heritage area and / or surrounds.
- To ensure that the cultural significance of a site, involving the aesthetic, historic, scientific or social value of a place to past, present and future generations, is assessed and used to guide planning decisions.

This policy applies to heritage places included in the Heritage Overlay and *properties immediately abutting* them. However, Council's existing policies in relation to *properties immediately abutting* heritage places are not strong as the abutting buildings are not subject to a heritage overlay. Nonetheless, it is clear that Council's existing policies seek to prevent detrimental impacts on heritage places as a consequence of inappropriate development on adjacent sites. The introduction of an Urban Design Control through the proposed Structure Plan could provide an opportunity to give due consideration to the issue of adjacent buildings in relation to Melbourne High School. The sites at 661-709 Chapel Street and 83 Alexandra Avenue all abut the School grounds and could through inappropriate development impact on the character and significance of the heritage place. An appropriate Urban Design Control should be implemented to limit the potential for inappropriately tall buildings on these sites.

### 6.0 Recommendations

Built outcome in the northern sections of Chapel Street most notably at 661-709 Chapel Street and 83 Alexandra Avenue should be undertaken with due regard for the significance of the Melbourne High School, particularly with respect to key views to its western (and to a lesser degree) northern facades. Generally speaking, it is rarely the case that works have the potential to substantially undermine the significance of a heritage place on an adjacent site. However, in this particular instance, where the building is iconic, of high individual significance and is intact with respect to its key views, an extraordinary situation exists which requires unusually high levels of management of the heritage asset. The following recommendations should inform new works on these key sites.

- Height controls should be implemented that reflect the value of the Melbourne High School and protect the impact of new buildings in the northern sections of Chapel Street on key views from Yarra Street. New buildings in this section of Chapel Street should be limited in height to ensure that no part of the building including roof structure, plant, masts or other rooftop appurtenances is visible from the oval or sections of Yarra Street adjacent to the oval.
- In particular, the impact of new built form at 681-709 Chapel Street should be managed carefully as works on this site could impact on the School building both as a backdrop (as viewed from the west) and as a substantial neighbour (as viewed from the north west). If it is considered that this site is appropriate as a gateway, this should be achieved through the quality of its design or architectural expression rather than by way the more prosaic design response of a multi-storey tower.