

bryce raworth

conservation • urban design

19 victoria street
st kilda vic 3182
phone 03 9525 4299
fax 03 9525 3615
admin@bryceraworth.com.au

16 February 2016

Mr Tim Smith
Executive Director
Heritage Victoria
DELWP

Mr Smith

Re: Former Tram Engine House at 187 & 189 Abbotsford, VHR H0988
Request for permit for proposed works

This letter has been prepared at the request of Metaxas Architects and relates to the *Former Tram Engine House* [VHR H0988]. It is forwarded in relation to a permit application for works involving the construction of an upper level addition to an existing modern infill building on the south side of the Former Engine House at 187-201 Abbotsford Street, North Melbourne. It provides comment in relation to matters to be considered in relation to both the registration of the site and the relevant heritage policy at a local level ie *Clauses 43.01* and *22.05*.

The Former Engine House is located at the intersection of Queensbury and Abbotsford Streets in North Melbourne. This substantial structure adopts a form reminiscent of an Italian church in a broadly Romanesque mode. It is finished externally in polychrome tuck pointed brick above a basalt and masonry plinth. The building has been converted to a residential use. While this has had little impact on the external appearance of the building, the internal space has been partitioned and subdivided.

The proposed development site is not part of the Former Engine House building per se, but is an adjacent portion of land to the south, part of the same site, known as 187 & 189 Abbotsford Street, that originally contained an early associated structure. This site is separated from the Former Engine House by a narrow laneway which is gated and now forms part of the curtilage associated with the residential group. (The combined site slopes uphill by approximately three metres in a southerly direction). The original tram outbuilding has been demolished except for its street façade, which is single-storey and finished in polychrome brickwork matching that of the Engine House. Pilasters in face brick flank a large central entry infilled with modern decorative ironwork, the composition surmounted by a simple string course and plain brick parapet.

A pair of semi-detached townhouses (described on the Metaxas Architects existing conditions drawings as TH16/TH17) was constructed on the land behind the facade in 2005. This infill is contemporary and low key in character. The ground floor is set back behind (and detached from) the retained heritage façade, with the first floor further set back behind narrow balconies. The townhouses are also set back on the west side at first floor level. 189 & 189 Abbotsford Street presents a modern gabled brick garage to Little Lothian Street to the west, with the upper level of the infill townhouses visible behind its roof structure at a distance.

As noted, the subject site is included on the *Victorian Heritage Register* (H0988). It is also identified under an individual Heritage Overlay by the City of Melbourne (HO283) which, in turn, is located within the broader North and West Melbourne Precinct (HO3). The data sheet for the site in Council's *i-Heritage Database* lists the Former Tram Engine House as an 'A' grade building in a Level 3 streetscape.

The *Victorian Heritage Register* citation for the Former Tram Engine House includes the following history, description and statement of significance.

What is significant?

The Former North Melbourne cable tramway engine house, which operated between 1890 and 1935 to power the cars of the North and West Melbourne lines, was one of eleven engine houses built by the Melbourne Tramways Trust for the central cable tramway network. The Melbourne cable tram system became one of the largest and most complex in the world. The entire network (except the local and separately built Northcote line) was constructed by the Trust between 1884 and 1891 and leased to the Melbourne Tramways & Omnibus Company until 1916. The trams were soon an integral and much-appreciated feature of Melbourne.

The building, thought to have been designed by the Trust's architect Robert Gordon, was constructed by J Small. It is a finely detailed and crafted Italianate composition in polychrome brickwork and intricate sandstone dressings. The large circular louvre ventilator, incorporating spokes and central boss, high in the east facade, is a motif reminiscent of the large wheels of the cable-driving machinery previously housed within the building. The engine house originally featured a 45 metre chimney, of which a substantial portion of the base remains. The Abbotsford Street frontage contains the remaining front wall of the original outbuilding which housed reels and winding gear for handling used and replacement cables, and weighbridge equipment to monitor deliveries of fuel for the boilers, remains an important part of the complex.

In 1935 the North Melbourne line was electrified and the West Melbourne line closed with buses replacing trams. During roadworks in 2007 a 200 metre track formation of the West Melbourne line in Abbotsford Street was uncovered. This line travelled into Elizabeth Street in the city, via Abbotsford, Spencer and Lonsdale Streets. The typical track formation comprised a double set of tracks, each track containing a continuous central open slot which allowed the "grip" device of the "dummy" or leading vehicle to access the moving cable in a concrete tunnel below. The cable was carried on pulleys located regularly along the bottom of the tunnel and the road surface was paved with red gum blocks supported on a concrete slab. In 1893 the Melbourne Tramway & Omnibus Company installed separate dummy and car shunts outside the engine house so that West Melbourne line trams could shunt and return to the city without travelling through to the original terminus they shared at Flemington Bridge. This was one of a few changes to the original system made by the company to reduce operating costs during the sharp slump in patronage caused by the 1890s depression. The "dummy shunt" contained the continuous slot to allow passage of the dummy's grip from one track to the other whereas the separate "car shunt" had no slot, as the car was simply a trailer towed by the dummy.

The uncovered tram track formation in Abbotsford Street also revealed the metal access covers for maintenance access to the tunnel pulleys, signal markings set within the road surface to advise the "gripman" of how to operate the grip at the track intersection outside the engine house (where three cables entered and left the building), and a section of stone paving where the vehicles shunted.

How is it significant?

The Former North Melbourne cable tramway engine house and cable tram track formation are of historical, architectural, scientific (technical) and archaeological significance to the State of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

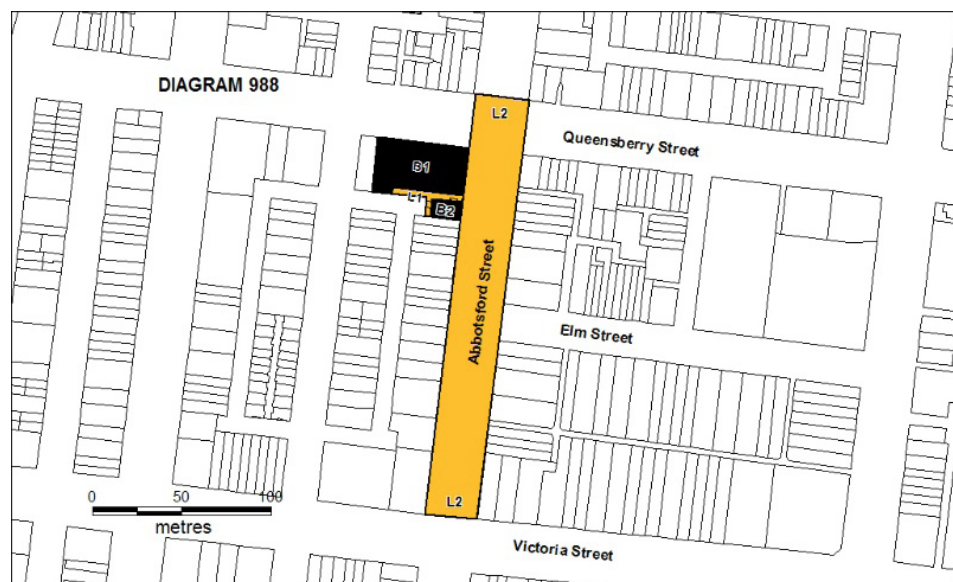
The Former North Melbourne cable tramway engine house is of historical significance as a substantially intact remnant of Melbourne's early tramways infrastructure, and the only engine house with remnants of its chimney and an outbuilding. Engine house chimneys were conspicuous features of Melbourne during the life of the cable tram system. Each tram route possessed its own engine house, usually located near the middle of the line. The substantial external intactness of this engine house provides a valuable symbol of an important phase in Melbourne's transport history and the development of the city, a phase which saw mechanical power supersede horse power on Melbourne's streets and allowed further development of the city's outer reaches.

The Former North Melbourne cable tramway engine house is of architectural significance as an excellent example of a 19th century industrial and transport infrastructure building. The fine architecture provides evidence of the pride with which Melbourne viewed its tramway system and of the importance of the system to the life of the city.

The cable tram track formation is of historical significance for its association with the history of the cable tramway system in Melbourne. The dummy and car shunt is important as an extant example of the few minor alterations made to the original system by the Melbourne Tramway & Omnibus Company to ensure profitable operation of the tramways during changing social circumstances. The cable tram track formation is of scientific (technical) significance for its ability to assist in an understanding of the operation of the cable tramway system. It is typical of the entire Melbourne system designed by George Duncan (1852?-1930), the New Zealand born engineer who was appointed as engineer for the Melbourne Tramways Trust, the constructing authority for Melbourne's cable tram system. Duncan made many innovations and advances on the American cable tramway practice including the ability to construct lines around sharp curves with greater success than achieved elsewhere, and the design of an emergency slot brake. The cable tram track formation is of archaeological significance as the only known cable tram track to survive intact in Melbourne. The archaeological remains of the tram track infrastructure provide information about the operation of cable trams. The section of Abbotsford Street outside the Former engine house has the potential to contain archaeological remains explaining the connection between the engine house and the underground cable tunnels and the track arrangement for the shunting operations.

The subject building is on the site of an early outbuilding situated immediately to the south of the Former Engine House, noted in the citation above as *the remaining front wall of the original outbuilding which housed reels and winding gear for handling used and replacement cables, and weighbridge equipment to monitor deliveries of fuel for the boilers, remains an important part of the complex.* The subject building is identified as B2 in the extent of registration below. Buildings and land registered under H0988 extend to the elements described below.

1. All the buildings marked B1 and B2 on Diagram 988 held by the Executive Director.
2. All the land marked L1 on Diagram 988 held by the Executive Director being all of Lots 3, 18 and 19 on plan of subdivision 542640 and all the land marked L2 being part of the Abbotsford Street road reserve.



The site is included in the North and West Melbourne Heritage Precinct (HO3), where it is graded A in a Level 3 streetscape.

It is proposed to construct a third level addition to the pair of contemporary townhouses at 189 & 189 Abbotsford Street. The eastern elevation of the new level overlooking Abbotsford Street will be set back behind a balcony a distance of 1.38 metres relative to the wall of the first floor below. This will give it a total setback of five metres relative to

the eastern (Abbotsford Street) street boundary. The west elevation will be set back slightly further than the first floor below, and include a balcony to each townhouse, which will project approximately 2 metres over the terrace space below. The side setbacks would match those of the existing first floor. The addition will have a simple, minimalist cubic form. The addition will be externally finished with the same external treatments as the level below. It will have a compact, flat roof to minimise height.

No changes are proposed to the Former Tram Engine House.

The current application for additions will be considered within the broad ambit of considerations under the *Heritage Act*, which are intended to support the sustainability of places and also take into account economic impacts. The *Act* provides the following direction.

73. Matters to be considered in determining applications

(1) In determining an application for a permit, the Executive Director must consider-

- (a) the extent to which the application, if approved, would affect the cultural heritage significance of the registered place or registered object; and*
- (ab) if the application relates to a listed place or to a registered place or registered object in a World Heritage Environs Area, the extent to which the application, if approved, would affect-*
 - (i) the world heritage values of the listed place; or*
 - (ii) any relevant Approved World Heritage Strategy Plan; and*
- (b) the extent to which the application, if refused, would affect the reasonable or economic use of the registered place or registered object, or cause undue financial hardship to the owner in relation to that place or object; and*
- (c) any submissions made under section 69; and*
- (d) any decision of the Heritage Council under section 72 which has been received; and*
- (e) if the applicant is a public authority, the extent to which the application, if refused, would unreasonably detrimentally affect the ability of the public authority to carry out a statutory duty specified in the application; and*
- (f) any matters relating to the protection and conservation of the place or object that the Executive Director considers relevant.*

In assessing the current proposal, key considerations are the impacts of the proposal on the character, significance and legibility of the Former tram complex. Given the extent of change to the site already permitted and the comparatively low value that can ascribed to the subject modern building given it has survived as a facade only, works along the lines currently proposed raise no substantial heritage issues. In particular, it is noted that the remnant fabric of this outbuilding is not further affected, and will remain as legible as it is at present.

The proposal represents a discreet, modest evolution in the scale of the existing infill building, and has been designed in a similarly sensitive manner that responds to the scale, location and character of the significant heritage elements on the site. With the proposed third level addition, the townhouses will still be lower in height than the gable to the adjacent façade to the Former Tram Engine House. The setback to the front eastern elevation will reduce the relative prominence and visibility of this new level as seen from along Abbotsford Street to the east and west. The external treatment will be light and visually recessive relative to the robust face brick character of the Former Engine House and the retained façade of the associated outbuilding. It will not obscure or detract from the integrity of the latter retained façade. The proposed third storey to the contemporary townhouses identified as B2 will not result in this building becoming overly dominant within the Former Tram Engine House complex and is acceptable.

To the extent the addition will be visible from Little Lothian Street it will be at a set back a considerable distance behind the existing garage roof, and read as a relatively distant element above the existing first floor elevation. It will not have an unduly negative impact on the significance of the Former Tram Engine House when viewed from this street.

We understand that in relation to item 71(1)(f) of the *Heritage Act* the Executive Director has sought the views of the City of Melbourne and a response has been received that raises a number of issues. We consider the proposal to be satisfactory both for matters under consideration from the *Heritage Act* and also that might be considered overall. In providing advice to the applicant on the design this office took into account the following policies found at *Clause 22.05*.

Designing New Buildings and Works or Additions to Existing Buildings
Form

The external shape of a new building, and of an addition to an existing building, should be respectful in a Level 1 or 2 streetscape, or interpretive in a Level 3 streetscape.

Facade Pattern and Colours

The facade pattern and colours of a new building, and of an addition or alteration to an existing building, should be respectful where visible in a Level 1 streetscape, and interpretive elsewhere.

Materials

The surface materials of a new building, and of an addition or alteration to an existing building, should always be respectful.

Details

The details (including verandahs, ornaments, windows and doors, fences, shopfronts and advertisements) of a new building, and of an addition or alteration to an existing building, should preferably be interpretive, that is, a simplified modern interpretation of the historic form rather than a direct reproduction.

Concealment Of Higher Rear Parts (Including Additions)

Higher rear parts of a new building, and of an addition to an existing graded building, should be concealed in a Level 1 streetscape, and partly concealed in a Level 2 and 3 streetscape. Also, additions to outstanding buildings ('A' and 'B' graded buildings anywhere in the municipality) should always be concealed. In most instances, setting back a second-storey addition to a single-storey building, at least 8 metres behind the front facade will achieve concealment. These provisions do not apply to land within Schedule 5 to the Capital City Zone (City North).

Facade Height and Setback (New Buildings)

The facade height and position should not dominate an adjoining outstanding building in any streetscape, or an adjoining contributory building in a Level 1 or 2 streetscape. Generally, this means that the building should neither exceed in height, nor be positioned forward of, the specified adjoining building. Conversely, the height of the facade should not be significantly lower than typical heights in the streetscape. The facade should also not be set back significantly behind typical building lines in the streetscape.

These provisions do not apply to land within Schedule 5 to the Capital City Zone (City North).

Building Height

The height of a building should respect the character and scale of adjoining buildings and the streetscape. New buildings or additions within residential areas consisting of predominantly single and two-storey terrace houses should be respectful and interpretive.

[...]

Sites of Historic or Social Significance

An assessment of a planning application should take into account all aspects of the significance of the place. Consideration should be given to the degree to which the existing fabric demonstrates the historic and social significance of the place, and how the proposal will affect this significance. Particular care should be taken in the assessment of cases where the diminished architectural condition of the place is outweighed by its historic or social value.

We believe the proposed addition is acceptable with respect to *Clause 22.05* for the following reasons.

The scale and external character of the addition can reasonably be contemplated given its location in a mixed and somewhat altered section of HO3. Council has identified the local sections of Abbotsford Street as being as a Level 3 streetscape. These streetscapes are described as being of low individual significance or integrity. As noted above, Council's Heritage Policy encourages rear additions to A grade buildings that are concealed from view. However, full concealment is not achieved even with the existing modern fabric to this site. Moreover, given that the primary control for the site itself is that under the *Heritage Act*, Council's concerns should surely be directed more broadly to impacts on the North and West Melbourne Heritage Precinct (HO3) and urban design outcomes.

The subject building is largely buffered from other key early buildings in HO3 by relatively modern built form at 179 and 183-185 Abbotsford Street. Consequently, the relatively modest works for the subject site would have little impact on more highly valued built form to the south of these buildings such as 169-177 Abbotsford Street.

With respect to heritage considerations and urban design more generally, there are various precedents for buildings of up to three storeys in height nearby including those at 166-8 and 170-174 Abbotsford Street, a short distance to the southeast. These buildings present blunt two- to three-storey walls to the street without the benefit of setbacks or other facade articulation to limit their impacts. The massive form of the Engine House itself creates an environment in which new works to three storeys in height of a sympathetic design are not inappropriate. An elevated single-storey dwelling with prominent upper level addition at No 160 Abbotsford Street creates an outcome that is, in terms of its impacts on the streetscape, more intrusive than those proposed on the subject site.

The proposed addition is not to the Former Engine House itself, it is to what is in large part a contemporary infill building, albeit set behind a retained facade. It is of limited relevance to apply the policy guidelines at *Clause 22.05* relating to additions to A and B grade buildings in this instance, given the proposed works are to a modern building and do not have any direct impact upon heritage fabric.

In conclusion, the proposed works to the modern townhouses on the subject site will have little if any impact on the significance of the Former Engine House, the adjacent Abbotsford Street streetscape and the wider heritage overlay, HO3, and should be found acceptable on that basis.

Please contact me if you have any queries in relation to the above.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bryce Raworth', with a period at the end.

BRYCE RAWORTH