

The MLC Building Vs Alternatives

A decision to list a place on the State Heritage Register is essentially independent of what might be the alternative developments of the site. In marginal cases, an alternative use of the site that is exceptional or imperative may be a material consideration in the decision whether or not to list the place. Perhaps for these reasons it has been (or was) the practice of the North Sydney Council to require a development application for future use when considering an application to demolish a building on the local heritage list.

In this note the Committee for North Sydney examines alternative futures for the site occupied by the (former) MLC Building.

1 Impact of later rules

Well after the MLC Building was constructed, the North Sydney Council adopted strict building envelopes to regulate overshadowing, not anticipating that the rules would ever apply to a site on the local heritage list. The present building, of course, is 'grandfathered'. Any replacement building will be severely constrained by the current rules, with unintended and very negative consequences for this core area of the city.

2 An unintended, inappropriate and unfortunate building envelope

In our view, this is a case where the IPC cannot ignore the impact of rules enacted since the MLC Building was constructed. The building proposed by the owner takes the weird, weak form that makes the regulations visible in physical form but could not have emerged from a design process that respected the urban design and urban planning requirements for this key site.

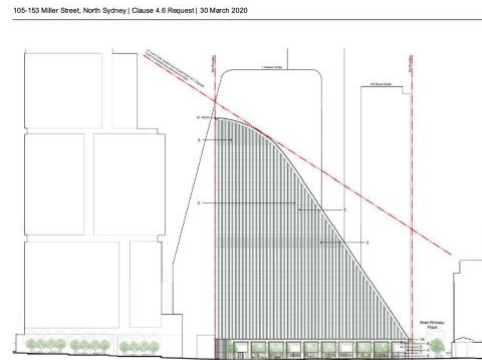


Figure 2: Height Plane Diagram
Source: Bates Smart

3 The context was understood

Before acquiring this site as a long-term investment, the new owner undertook due diligence and understood the context. First, the building's heritage significance was well documented and listed locally, and did not change the purchaser's assessment of its investment value even if refurbishment was the only option. Second, the implications of the rules governing the form of the building if the site were to be cleared were well understood. Third, any superficial examination of the site would have arrived at numerous options for adaptive reuse, ranging from conservation with adaptation to major interventions with partial redevelopment.

4 Sustainability

Any of these alternative approaches would allow for the conservation, in whole or in part, of the enormous material and energy resources already embodied in the building. Even with major interventions, the difference between total demolition and adaptive reuse is a very significant saving in materials (even sand), land fill, and energy. We have reached the stage when these resources can no longer remain unaccounted for, as if they don't exist.

5 Advantages in adaptive reuse

In addition to significant environmental savings and the possibility of various forms of cost savings, working with the existing building allows the owner to maintain the grandfathering of the rules, maintains a sense of place and a continuity of presence in the city, and allows a complexity and intriguing depth to the new building complex that is impossible to achieve straight off the drawing board. Creative and imaginative designers would see these possibilities as outstanding assets not to be wasted.

6...Social capital

The most valuable benefit from adaptive reuse, in the case of an icon such as the MLC Building at the very heart of the city centre, may well be the attraction of working in, doing business in, attending events in and otherwise using the building. This would be a new, contemporary complex of new and old, with the charm and standing of a national landmark building. Any owner would be expected to appreciate and make the most of this asset.