

Memorandum of Heritage Advice

GMH, Plants 3, 4 and 5 and the Holden Social Centre, Salmon Street, Port Melbourne

Initial consultant heritage advice regarding the potential for a Heritage Overlay for the site and associated considerations.

Introduction

We have been asked to comment on the heritage values of part of the General Motors Holden (GMH) complex at Salmon Street, Fishermans Bend, comprising Plants 3, 4 & 5 and the associated Social Centre building. These structures were assessed by Biosis as part of the *Southbank and Fishermans Bend Heritage Review* (2016-17). Biosis identified the buildings as places of local and state significance with the recommendation that they be listed on the Heritage Overlay, and also nominated for inclusion on the Victorian Heritage Register. It was further recommended that conservation management plans be prepared for all GMH sites prior to any future redevelopment.

A Heritage Overlay is not formally proposed for the subject site at the time of writing (i.e. a planning scheme amendment process has not commenced). The City of Melbourne has resolved to engage with land owners, the State government and relevant agencies in order to investigate what is significant and worthy of heritage protection or adaptive reuse. We have been instructed to comment on the likelihood of the GMH buildings being included in the Heritage Overlay, and the redevelopment potential of the buildings if this planning control was implemented.

The analysis below draws on a review of the two key documents that have been provided in our brief, including the Biosis citations and a further report on the former GMH complex prepared by Lovell Chen (November 2017). Each building was inspected externally, with internal inspections being restricted to the Social Centre and Plant 5. Reference is also made to early aerial photographs from the State Library of Victoria, along with GMH in-house magazines and other historical documents downloaded from the website of the Holden Retirees Club. It has been prepared having regard for the existing heritage policies at Clause 43.01 and 22.05 of the Planning Scheme, and also the matters that are currently the subject of Amendment C258 to the Melbourne Planning Scheme, including the proposed local heritage policy (Clause 22.05) and the proposed *Inventory of Heritage Places* incorporated document.

Files relating to the GMH at the Public Record Office of Victoria were reviewed but were found to contain little useful information in terms of explaining the evolution of the subject buildings.

It is of note that the GMH Administration Buildings and Social Centre are classified by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) as places of regional significance (File B5230). The National Trust citations also describes the whole of the site as being of historical significance. There are no statutory planning controls as a consequence of the National Trust classification [noting also that the Administration Buildings do not form part of the site that is the subject of this assessment].

Plant buildings 3, 4 and 5

Various historical sources indicate that Plant 3 was first constructed c1940. It can be seen in a c1940 aerial photograph of the site, with Plant 5 yet to be built at that time. The construction date for Plant 5 remains uncertain, but it was in place by 1948 on the evidence of historical aerial photographs. Plant 4 is understood to have been constructed c1950-60 as an extension to Plant 5.

Plants 3, 4 and 5 are generic single-storey industrial buildings with a sawtooth roofs and multi-pane steel framed windows. The lower parts of the external walls are typically of masonry construction. Plant 3 has undergone substantial change with the Salmon Street façade entirely demolished and replaced by a substantial modern multi-storey building. This resulted in the loss of the original architectural identity of this group of buildings relative to Salmon Street, as the façade to Plant 3 appears to have been designed as a response to the handsome design of the earlier GMH buildings fronting Salmon Street (see Figure 1).

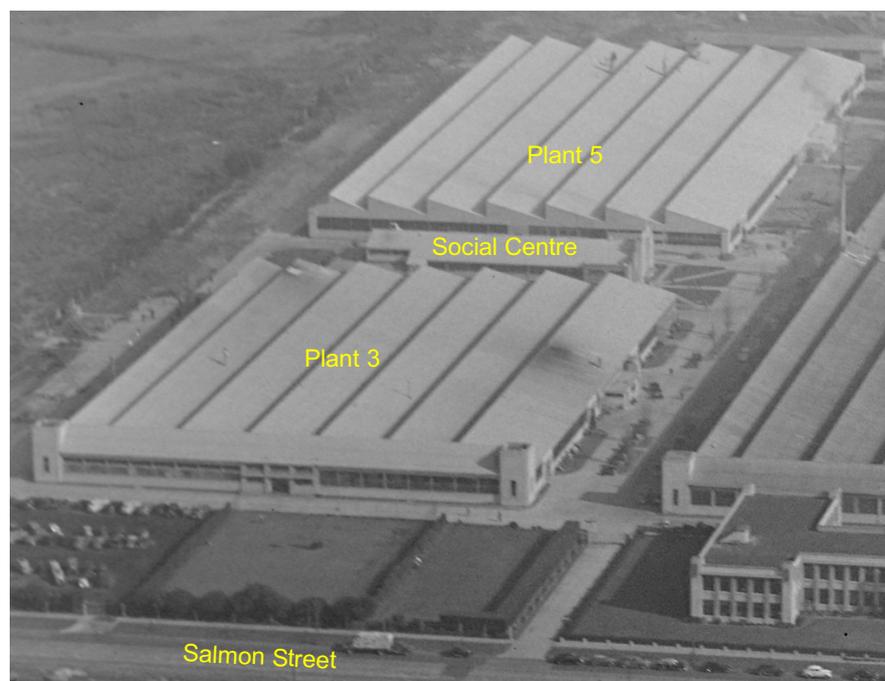


Figure 1: A c1948 aerial photograph of the subject site. Source: State Library of Victoria.

An extension has been made along the full length of the south elevation, and the brick walled medical centre on the north elevation of Plant 3 also appears to be an addition subsequent to what is shown in Figure 1. Original metal and/or fibro cement roof and wall cladding has been replaced on all Plants 3, 4 and 5 with modern metal decking, and there are various modern accretions to the exteriors, including single storey additions to the north side of Plant 5. Demolition works have left Plant 4 as a freestanding element with modern tilt up concrete wall panels at the east elevation where the 'cut' was made.

Biosis prepared a citation for Plants 3 and 5 with the following statement of significance [it is noted that the Biosis citation does not specifically mention Plant 4 but it appears to have identified as part of Building 5 for the purposes of the Biosis assessment].

What is significant?

General Motors Holden Nos. 3 & 5 plants, Salmon Street, Fishermans Bend. Contributory elements include:

- *corrugated iron-clad sawtooth-roof form;*
- *steel-framed windows;*
- *red brick ventilation structures; and*
- *brick masonry office section elevations.*

How is it significant?

General Motors Holden is historically significant to Fishermans Bend, the city of Melbourne and to Victoria in general.

Why is it significant?

This place is historically significant as it is a major surviving component of the original 1936 works of GMH, established in response to government initiatives to ensure Australian manufacturing in preference to imported motor vehicles, in partnership with General Motors Canada and the Holden motor body builders.

The factory is also significant as the place where the first Holden vehicles were manufactured, known as 'Australia's Own Car', a nationally-significant manufacturing endeavour which was promoted as part of the independent economic and political revival of the country after World War II, and later seen as a precursor to the post-war boom. (Criterion A)

The factory is significant in its scale and form, being the largest surviving part of the original pre- and immediate post-war production areas. It is also significant in its association with Sir Laurence John Hartnett CBE, an engineer who made several important contributions to the Australian automotive industry, who is often called 'The Father of the Holden'. (Criterion H)

Social Centre

The Social Centre was opened in December 1945. It was built as a dining hall that seated 580 employees, with capacity to be used for social functions. Kitchens were located on the ground floor at the rear (south end) of the dining hall while the upper floor was set aside as a foreman's room. It is a double-storey brick building with a part rendered Moderne style façade. The side and rear elevations are more plainly designed. The façade appears to be generally intact apart from a modern entry portico and rendered infill to the upper panels of the original glass block windows. The roof remains clad with the original corrugated fibro cement.

The interior is generally intact to an original or early condition and retains its proscenium stage with two murals either side depicting the 'advancement in transport', painted by former employee Eileen Robertson in late 1948.

The Biosis statement of significance for the Social Centre reads as follows:

What is significant?

The General Motors Holden Social Centre, constructed in 1945 off Salmon Street, Fishermans Bend.

Contributory elements include:

- *moderne styling with prominent facade treatment;*
- *attached flagpole and fins, glass brick and steel-framed windows;*
- *upper outdoor terrace and metal railings;*
- *internal fittings and finishes including parquetry floor and stairs;*
- *'History of Transport' murals;*
- *stage and proscenium arch; and*
- *internal panelling, joinery, dumbwaiter and built-in benches to executive dining room.*

How is it significant?

The General Motors Holden Social Centre is historically, socially and aesthetically significant to Fishermans Bend, the city of Melbourne and to Victoria more broadly.

Why is it significant?

The Social Centre is historically significant as it was the focus for workers' amenities and social activities for over 70 years, and has been an integral part of the overall GMH Fishermans Bend plant. Its construction at the end of World War II reflected the optimism for the future commercial success of the company, particularly as the manufacturer of the Australian FJ Holden, highlighted by the site being used in 1948 to launch the 48-215 Holden, known as 'Australia's Own Car'. (Criterion A)

The Social Centre is of aesthetic significance for its finely-detailed and decorative streamlined moderne styling and its intact interior, which includes the 'History of Transport' mural. (Criterion E)

Comment

Of the four GMH buildings under consideration, we are of the view that only the Social Centre is of sufficient significance to warrant a Heritage Overlay. It has historical/social significance as a relatively intact and early component of the GMH complex, and for its ability to illustrate the type of staff amenities once provided by large corporations. Tellingly, it is the only building in the group to be identified as having aesthetic interest.

The internal murals add another layer of aesthetic interest – noting that Biosis have recommended internal alteration controls for the murals, original joinery and parquetry floors. This notwithstanding, we do not think it is a notable or highly accomplished example of the Moderne idiom within a broader metropolitan context.

Plant 4 presents the weakest case for Heritage Overlay listing. It has been truncated by substantial demolition works removing the connection to Plant 5. Plant 4 is also understood to be a c1950s addition, and as such was not directly associated with the roll out of the first Holden in 1948.

Plants 3 and 5 are said to be of significance as 'a major surviving component of the original 1936 works of GMH'. This is incorrect insofar as Plants 3 and 5 did not form part of the first stage of development completed c1938. Plant 3 is the earliest building on the subject site but it is the most heavily altered.

Beyond this, plants 3, 4 and 5 are generic sawtooth roofed factories with no distinguishing external architectural features that might help to demonstrate their role in the manufacture of Holden cars. It is instructive that they were only identified as buildings of historical significance – i.e. they were not considered to be of aesthetic/architectural or technological significance by Biosis. The historical association with early Holden car production could in our view be adequately recognised by means of on-site interpretation, rather than through retention of the physical fabric, of these buildings, which in and of itself does not make a meaningful contribution to the historical narrative.

We would also argue that the Biosis assessment does not demonstrate a proper understanding or acknowledgement of the extent to which the factory buildings have been altered. As noted above, the original Salmon Street façade to Plant 3 has been demolished and replaced with a very large and visually dominant modern building. The original south elevation of Plant 3 was also presumably lost when additions were made to this side of the building. Ad hoc additions have been made to the north side of Plants 3 and 5. None of these changes are described in the Biosis citation.

The Biosis assessment is further undermined by errors in the statement of significance. Specifically, 'Corrugated iron' clad sawtooth roofs are listed as contributory elements and yet the factory roofs have been re-clad in modern metal decking, presumably replacing corrugated fibro cement sheet (as found on the Social Centre roof). Additionally, the 'red-brick ventilation structures' listed as contributory elements do not form part of Plants 3, 4 or 5. They are instead found on the separate engine manufacturing plant to the south.

Looking toward other parts of the GMH complex not assessed for the purposes of this memorandum, the Administration Buildings stand out as the key iconic structures of the complex as a whole. They are emblematic of the very first stage of development of the GMH factory in 1936-38 and display a level of architectural sophistication that is not replicated in other extant parts of the complex.

There is a reasonable basis on which to argue that the Heritage Overlay should only be applied to the Administration Buildings and Social Centre. This would be consistent with the National Trust listing for GMH relating to the Administration Buildings and Social Centre. More generally, this approach follows precedents for other historic industrial sites where the Heritage Overlay has been selectively applied to key buildings within larger complexes, often excluding the more generic (sometimes sawtooth roofed) plant buildings.

Examples include GMH Dandenong (HO58 – Greater Dandenong Planning Scheme), Monsanto Chemicals, Brooklyn (HO30 – Brimbank Planning Scheme), the former Nestle site, Mulgrave (HO86 – Monash Planning Scheme) and former Repco automotive parts factory, Richmond (HO, Yarra Planning Scheme).

Useful comparisons can also be made with the former Rootes Car Factory at 19 Salmon Street, Port Melbourne. The City of Port Phillip recently sought to apply a Heritage Overlay control across most of the very large factory complex – comprising an office wing and factory buildings erected in the 1940s for a wartime experimental tank construction program, and also postwar additions built for car manufacturer Rootes Pty Ltd. The extent of the HO was eventually whittled down through an Amendment and Panel hearing process to the original 1940s office wing/drawing offices fronting Salmon Street (HO472). The much larger 1950s sawtooth roof factory extensions were excluded from the HO on the basis that they were generic industrial buildings that no longer communicated the nature or extent of the former tank and car manufacturing operations on the site. Much the same could be said of GMH Plants 3, 4 and 5.

In summary, it is our view that that the Social Centre is the only building on the subject site of sufficient significance to warrant a Heritage Overlay control. It follows from such an assessment that demolition of all other built form on the site comprising GMH Plants 3, 4 and 5 could reasonably occur subject to an archival recording.

Nonetheless, it is possible that Council will adopt a different view and move forward with a proposal for Heritage Overlays for a greater part of the GMH site, potentially including Plants 3, 4 and 5, or at least some components of this group. Having regard for the proposed new grading system under Amendment C258, it is possible that the plant buildings would be graded ‘contributory’, while the Social Centre might be graded ‘significant’. In terms of statements of significance, it is likely that the Biosis citations and the associated statements of significance would serve as a basis for future Council citations, albeit these might be amended as a result of a Planning Scheme Amendment process or through further information being made available. It is very difficult to predict whether Heritage Overlay listings could be successfully challenged at a Panel hearing if the matter were to proceed to a Planning Scheme Amendment.

We concur with the Lovell Chen report that the GMH buildings are not likely to be found to be of sufficient value to warrant inclusion on the Victorian Heritage Register. However, nomination to the Register by interested parties cannot be ruled out. The current recommendation for registration of Festival Hall, a site of only the most limited architectural interest and integrity, but of greater historical and social significance, might be seen as an exemplar of a VHR listing of this kind.

Our office has been involved in the past year with two large industrial sites where nominations by the community led to registration under the Heritage Act on the basis of historical and associative significance rather than architectural significance.

In terms of the redevelopment potential of the site if Heritage Overlay controls were applied, and having regard for heritage policy as found under both the present and proposed Clauses 22.05, Council would likely seek or encourage retention of the original sawtooth roofed envelopes, as well as the Social Centre.

This said, a reasonable argument might be put forward for redevelopment involving partial demolition of plant buildings but with a representative section of the sawtooth roof factory envelopes retained and incorporated into the new built form. If the buildings were to be graded 'contributory', partial demolition would normally be considered acceptable under both the existing Clause 22.05 and the proposed Clause 22.05, the latter of which seeks the protection of the front or principal part of contributory buildings.

If any of the buildings were to be graded 'significant', as might be the case with the Social Club, partial demolition would be discouraged by heritage policy, although some demolition might still be possible, subject to the nature of the proposal that is put forward.

New development might possibly be multi-storey, although it is difficult to predict at this stage the likelihood of Council support for a scheme of this kind.

Furthermore, any proposal that would see full scale demolition or major changes to the former GMH factory buildings is likely to attract the attention of the wider public with a sentimental attachment to the Holden brand.

Prima facie, there is scope for major internal changes to the buildings comprising Plant 3, 4 and 5. Internal alterations controls are not recommended for these buildings, and our inspection of Plant 5 would suggest that there is no basis for such controls.

The interiors of Plants 3 and 4 could not be accessed and as such we would need to clarify whether they retain any tangible evidence of early car manufacturing processes before definitive advice can be provided on the potential for internal alterations.

The Social Club, on the other hand, seems largely intact internally (at least to the extent of the main hall) and it is likely that Council would seek internal alteration controls as recommended by Biosis. The building nonetheless presents opportunities for adaptive reuse, potentially involving a greater degree of change in rooms other than the main hall.

Accepting that most of the architectural interest lies in the Modern style façade, there could also be scope for alterations/additions to the side and rear elevations. As per the Biosis recommendations, future change would need to be guided by a conservation management plan that sets out the relative levels of significance of the building's component parts in further detail.

In summary, it is our view that a reasonable case can be made against heritage listing (either HO or VHR) of Plant 3, 4 and 5, but that a strong case exists for listing of the Social Centre. There is nonetheless an appreciable risk of a different view being adopted by Council, and/or by a Panel, and/or by Heritage Victoria. If heritage controls are introduced, the site would still present opportunities for adaptation and new works, but these would likely be constrained to at least some extent by a need to retain and reuse heritage fabric.

We look forward to further discussions of these matters.

Bryce Raworth & Martin Turnor

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For Discussion Purposes