Planning issues: development versus construction [abstract]

Development versus conservation of heritage buildings

Much of the argument surrounding the demolition of heritage buildings is focussed on the economic benefits that will arise from new construction and provision of new modern efficient spaces. Many people believe that conservation prospects can be enhanced by showing the relative economic benefits that might flow to the community through retention of our heritage. If this were the case, the prospects for preserving much of the older built fabric of our cities and urban areas might be somewhat better. However, it is a naïve view of economics that places it in such simple cost benefit terms.

It must be remembered that in our society, land and the buildings to be developed on them, are commodities. New buildings are developed in order to produce a return on the capital invested in that development, not necessarily to provide a greater economic good. Within this narrow framework, which unfortunately is the operational framework in which most development occurs, conservation of buildings does not rate as an economic issue.

Introduction of publicly provided incentives to maintain and conserve buildings does introduce a new dimension into the argument. However, to be effective, such incentives need to exceed the likely return that could be realised from the demolition of the building and redevelopment of the site. In most cases this would be prohibitive and very few governments or councils would be in a position to provide such incentives. It may be better to tackle the problem through a more effective tax regime. Such a move is likely to be politically unpopular and probably untenable.

The ideology of development

There is a strong underlying ideology in our society that growth and development are the basis of wealth creation and that only through wealth creation will more jobs be available. It is seen that through this process more people will be able to share in the wealth available in our community.

Whether or not such a view is correct is not the point; it is very pervasive at all levels of government, throughout business and industry and I would suggest throughout the majority of the population. Even many conservation organisations accept that development and growth equals wealth creation. At times of economic uncertainty, conservation is often seen as a luxury and something that does not contribute to job creation and improvement in the general wealth and well-being of the community. In the short term there are certainly jobs involved in the development of new buildings and in the construction of roads and other infrastructure. It is difficult to show that additional employment may be created by the retention of particular buildings. Whether we like it or not the ideology of development and growth is embedded in our society and arguing for the conservation of buildings will only be successful if it is linked to either the self interest of those who are powerful or wealthy or if there can be real benefit shown in terms of job creation.

Tourism and conservation

In recent years Tasmania has been selling its history as part of its tourist product. Much of this history is related to particular buildings and conservation sites: for