13 October 2013

The Hon Barry O'Farrell, MP
Premier
Minister for Western Sydney
GPO Box 5341
SYDNEY NSW 2001

By email: contact_us@dpc.nsw.gov.au

Dear Premier,

PROPOSED SALE OF NSW GOVERNMENT OWNED HERITAGE BUILDINGS IN BRIDGE STREET

Australia ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) is a non-government, not-for-profit organisation of cultural heritage professionals formed in 1976 as a national chapter of ICOMOS International. Australia ICOMOS’ mission is to lead cultural heritage conservation in Australia by raising standards, encouraging debate and generating innovative ideas.

Australia ICOMOS is concerned about the current proposal to sell State owned heritage assets on Bridge Street Sydney. Australia ICOMOS believes that this area of central Sydney (currently represented by Sydney City Council’s Bridge Street/Macquarie Place/Bulletin Place Special Character Area but possibly also including Customs House and the Conservatorium of Music) is of National Heritage value to Australia and that its future conservation should follow international best practice, including a transparent process that is open to community comment. The precinct was the geographic and administrative centre of the early European colony in Australia and it continues to contribute strongly to our National identity and in particular to the community of NSW, through its outstanding and distinctively Australian urban form and continuing historical government use.

The wonderful sandstone Department of Lands Building (22-33 Bridge Street Sydney); the Department of Education Building (35-39 Bridge Street, Sydney) and the Chief Secretary’s Building (121 Macquarie Street, Sydney) are essential components of this outstanding heritage precinct. The Department of Lands Building in particular is of outstanding heritage value because of its design suited to continuing Government agency use; its exceptionally intact interior planning and detailing; its integral roofscape of domes and lanterns; and its wonderful sandstone facades celebrating not only the work of our skilled tradespeople but in its sculptures in niches on the façades, those who have contributed to the development of NSW and the nation.

Australia ICOMOS seeks reassurance that the proper processes have been established by the relevant government agencies to ensure that:

− the NSW Government has fully considered the value of these buildings to this historic urban landscape of National heritage significance, and the sustainable benefits to NSW’s international, national and community identity of being the proud owners and managers of these outstanding heritage assets;
− the feasibility of these significant buildings remaining in government ownership has been fully explored, even if this means a change to a new government use (for example part of the Chief
Secretary's Building has been successfully adapted as law courts and houses a variety of small high profile government agencies; and
− current strategic management documents have been prepared to manage the heritage of these buildings into the future and that these documents are (or will be) available for public comment (this is in accordance with Australian best practice heritage management as outlined in the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter 1999, Article 26).

The community expects that all Government agencies, including the NSW Government, as the custodians of Australia’s rich and diverse heritage estate, to effectively use and maintain its heritage assets.

I quote some pertinent text from the NSW State Agency Heritage Guide: Part 1: State-owned Heritage Management Principles which are based in part on the The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance 1999:

3. Lead by Example
State agencies should lead by example by adopting appropriate heritage management strategies, processes and practices. The public sector should set the standard for the community in the management of heritage assets.

7. Appropriate Uses
Heritage assets should, where feasible, continue to be maintained in their operational role. Where they are surplus to operational requirements, State agencies should aim to ensure that items are adaptively re-used for a purpose sympathetic to their heritage significance.

10. Transfer of Ownership
The transfer of ownership or control of heritage assets that are surplus to the State agency’s requirements needs to be planned and executed so as to conserve the item’s significance.

Part 2 of NSW State Agency Heritage Guide includes the following Heritage Asset Management Guidelines to the NSW Government:

3.52 Actions Prior to the Transfer of State Heritage Register Items
Prior to transferring items listed on the State Heritage Register, a State agency should ensure that there is a conservation management plan endorsed by the Heritage Council of NSW for the heritage asset.

2.3 Interpretation of the role and history of the agency
In addition to containing a range of individual heritage items, many agencies’ heritage asset portfolios provide tangible evidence of the role and history of the State agency itself and the evolution of the community it serves. The State agency should aim to manage its heritage asset portfolio and provide for the conservation of sufficient heritage assets to reveal and interpret this history to present and future generations.

3.37 The Community and Change of Use
When determining uses for heritage assets, agencies should include as part of their overall considerations, the following community concerns:
− the interest of the community in the asset;
− means for harnessing community interest; and
− potential community opposition likely to be created by a change of use.

4.2 Coordination of Heritage Management Activities
State agencies should explore and implement methods to improve the management of heritage assets through better coordination, including:
− coordination with other bodies, for example, other State agencies, peak heritage bodies and community groups;
− consideration of cross agency agreements and resource sharing.
As you may be aware Australia has an outstanding international reputation in the field of heritage asset management. I urge the NSW State Government to build on this reputation by innovative, well-considered, strategic and transparent processes that ensure the positive conservation and enhancement of State owned assets in the Bridge Street/ Macquarie Place/ Bulletin Place Urban Heritage Area into the future.

Yours faithfully

MS ELIZABETH VINES OAM, FRAIA, MICOMOS
President, Australia ICOMOS

cc:
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