

Renovating a Representative Building within the Kensington Heritage Area Overlay

A case study.

I had been looking for an opportunity to buy into the Marryatville High School Zone for quite a long time and kept being outbid at auction. When a dilapidated house in Kensington appeared on the market, I had a look through on the first open, secured the contract with a solid offer and started doing my homework. The vendor and real estate agent had responsibly underlined the house's status as a Contributory Item within the Kensington Heritage Area Overlay, bless their decent souls.

Contributory Items are now called Representative Buildings following the reworking of the Planning Code.

I knew the house couldn't be demolished but otherwise information on what was and wasn't allowed was hard to pin down. I contacted the Kensington Residents Association and Secretary Andrew Dyson gave me some good leads.

I rang the Council and spoke to the planner on duty who informed me that as long as the 'front' of the building was left intact, I could construct whatever I wanted at the rear. I remember asking if they meant just the façade had to remain intact to preserve the streetscape – yes was the answer. I didn't get the planner's name and I didn't get this advice in writing (first 2 mistakes).

After speaking to many architects I engaged a local firm with experience in extension of heritage buildings and energy-efficient design. I booked a free onsite consultation with the heritage architect seconded to Council 1 day a week. He was enthusiastic about the design concept and recommended he and I schedule an early meeting with the architect I'd engaged to communicate the heritage framework their design would need to sit within. My employed architect didn't think the meeting was necessary – they'd worked with Councils on heritage renovations before. I can't recall whether they'd worked with NPSP Council previously. Can you see where this is going? We should have had that formal meeting (3rd mistake).

The architect designed a fabulous extension to sit behind the 4-room symmetrical cottage once the aged existing extensions were demolished. I went the Development Application to NPSP Council. Rejected! The demolition of the rear structures was approved, but the designed extension apparently loomed over the original building and negatively affected the streetscape. The architect and I met with the planner assessing our application and the heritage architect. We were upset, they were defensive, saying that I hadn't wanted to hear what the heritage architect was advising. Had I badly misread the situation at the original onsite meeting with the heritage architect?? Hard to say but I clearly remember the shock, disappointment and confusion, and the pain and expense of going back to the drawing board (literally). I found examples of other

heritage buildings in Kensington with extensions like big boxes sitting at their rear, some much higher than the cottage in front. I sent photos to Council and the heritage architect asking questions, seeking understanding. There were various reasons cited for these extensions being permissible which didn't somehow apply to my property.

That's not the end of the story. The extension was redesigned and the Development Application approved but quotes to build were way beyond the spec given to the architect. I couldn't afford to build what had been designed. I had to walk away from the architect and the fees already paid, found a draftsman to draw up a simpler design, had the building certifications done by a private consultant with planning experience (building certifier) so the Council planners could be confident the design met all codes and were happy to approve, lined up the loans, got the builder into gear and got the extension built. Quite a journey.

Despite all this, I absolutely recommend buying and renovating a historic building in Kensington to anyone. I would do it again. I *should* do it again to take advantage of my knowledge of the open-to-interpretation planning rules and my developed network of friendly folk at Council. I have established relationships with good consultants and trades that I can rely on to do the work to hero a piece of Kensington's history and provide a comfortable home in a charming character-rich village environment.

I would just counsel newcomers to renovation of historic buildings to expect some uncertainties along the way as you try to understand heritage overlay, historic places, heritage adjacency and representative buildings and navigate the Planning Code and various players' interpretation of the code (Council planners, Council Assessment Panel, architects, etc). **If you aim to hero the historic component of your property, you should be ok.**