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25 August 2016

Esha Rahman  
Planning Officer  
City of Melbourne  
GPO BOX 1603  
Melbourne VIC 3001

Dear Ms Rahman,

**Re: 407-415 King Street, West Melbourne 3002**  
**Permit no: TP-2016-398**

I write to you in regards to the partial demolition, alteration and construction of a multi-storey tower atop the heritage building at the above address ('Flagstaff House'). The permit application proposes to demolish *'most of the existing built form on the site, retaining only the facades of the existing modernist office building, and constructing a multi-storey tower above the retained heritage fabric.'*<sup>1</sup> The National Trust submits that this permit application will have significant and irreversible impacts on the significance of Flagstaff House. The gutting of the interior and construction of a 32-storey tower will completely undermine the structure, context and intactness of the heritage place, reducing the compact modernist office building to a mere tokenistic shell. The National Trust does not believe this permit application is an appropriate development for the site and as such should not be approved in its current form.

### **Significance of the Building**

Flagstaff House is recognised as individually significant (HO842). While listed with a B grading in the 1980s, the recent West Melbourne Heritage Review has proposed that this be promoted to an A grading. The West Melbourne Heritage Review was recently adopted by Council, who have proceeded to request Ministerial approval for interim heritage controls and the public exhibition of a permanent Planning Scheme Amendment. As a B-listed building (with an A-listing pending), the potential impact on the heritage significance of the building should be closely scrutinised. The West Melbourne Heritage Review proposes an updated and comprehensive Statement of Significance for the heritage building, clearly articulating the complexity of Yuncken Freeman's original design. In the section detailing 'what is significant', the Statement of Significance describes Flagstaff House as:

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<sup>1</sup> Bryce Raworth Pty Ltd, Report to Council – Assessment of Heritage Impacts, Proposed Development at 407-411 King Street, West Melbourne, June 2016

‘...the most accomplished, early small-scale International Modern office designs in Victoria, surviving as a prototype for the design and development of BHP House as well as an advertisement for the firm’s design direction; perhaps one of the most faithful of the Mies van der Rohe inspired designs in Victoria, following an internationally applauded design theme.’

Based on the above extract from the Statement of Significance, the National Trust rejects the implication made in the Heritage Impact Report prepared by Bryce Raworth Pty Ltd that the significance of Flagstaff House should be devalued as it has ‘been seen to be a somewhat lesser work’ of Yuncken Freeman in relation to ‘more substantial projects and earlier projects’ (such as Myer Music Bowl and BHP House). As noted above, Flagstaff House is significant as a ‘prototype’ for the design and development of BHP House and as a reflection of the re-cast design direction of Yuncken Freeman as the firm progressed into the 1970s. Adding further weight to the significance of Flagstaff House is the close association with German/US modernist master Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Flagstaff House is describes as the most faithful re-creation of the architectural style of Mies von der Rohe in Victoria (‘following an internationally applauded design theme’), setting this particular building apart from other Yuncken Freeman architectural expressions.

The Heritage Impact Report goes on to further undermine the significance of Flagstaff House through a comparison with the Toorak-South Yarra Library. We once again refer to the significance demarcated in the Statement of Significance, explicitly articulating the historical significance of Flagstaff House ‘for the close link with the important architectural firm of Yuncken Freeman Architects’. While the Toorak-South Library may be architecturally superior to Flagstaff House, the close historical association of Flagstaff House with the designed offices of Yuncken Freeman adds its own considerable weight. As a leader in the provision of corporate modernism in Victoria in the 1960s and 1970s, Flagstaff House provided a direct expression of the firm itself, complete with highly sophisticated and cutting edge interior and exterior fittings and features.

### **Melbourne Planning Scheme**

The National Trust submits that the demolition, external alterations, and the proposed tower for Flagstaff House will have an adverse effect on the significance of the heritage place. We believe the proposed re-development is inconsistent with *Clause 43.01 Heritage Overlay* and in particular the following listed purpose of the HO:

*To ensure that development does not adversely affect the significance of heritage places.*

In addition, we do not believe the permit application is consistent with a key objective of *Clause 22.05 Heritage Places Outside the Capital City Zone*:

*To ensure that new development, and the construction or external alteration of buildings, make a positive contribution to the built form and amenity of the area and are respectful to the architectural, social or historic character and appearance of the streetscape and the area.*

*Clause 22.05* sets out clear policy on the demolition (or partial-demolition) of heritage places located outside the Capital City Zone, outlining the following:

*Demolishing or removing original parts of buildings, as well as complete buildings, will not normally be permitted in the case of 'A' and 'B', the front part of 'C' and many 'D' graded buildings. The front part of a building is generally considered to be the front two rooms in depth.*

*Before deciding on an application for demolition of a graded building the responsible authority will consider as appropriate:*

- *The degree of its significance.*
- *The character and appearance of the building or works and its contribution to the architectural, social or historic character and appearance of the streetscape and the area.*
- *Whether the demolition or removal of any part of the building contributes to the longterm conservation of the significant fabric of that building.*
- *Whether the demolition or removal is justified for the development of land or the alteration of, or addition to, a building.*

### **Proposed Demolition and Facadism**

The National Trust does not believe that facadism is an acceptable heritage outcome for such a significant building. While the retention of the two street-facing exterior walls may appear to preserve 'the perception of the three-dimensional form and depth of the building', it does not retain the building itself. The National Trust believes that more of the internal structure and actual depth of the building should be retained, not just the perception of depth. The National Trust would argue that the function of 'internal controls' is to help preserve special interiors with unique decorative features, rather than being required to protect the internal structure in its entirety. In this regard, the National Trust does not believe that a lack of internal controls is a sound basis for complete interior demolition.

Contributory elements listed under 'what is significant' in the newly-adopted Statement of Significance make reference to the interior 'suspended ceilings', suspended upper floors of reinforced concrete, and the 'main open stair' centred on the plan within a generous light well, which are all proposed for demolition. The Statement of Significance clearly articulates a series of contributory interior features that surpass mere decorative elements (such as wallpapers or ornate cornices for example), but refer more specifically to the design configuration and built structure of the interior itself. In this regard, it is not appropriate to completely demolish the entire interior structure citing a lack of internal controls. If the permit application was to be granted in its current state, the National Trust would strongly recommend the retention/reinstatement of the central interior staircase at the very least. Ideally, a tangible remnant of the complex interior structure would allow this contributory significance to remain intact, even if only partially.

To summarise this point, National Trust policy views facadism as an unsatisfactory compromise rather than a valid conservation action. We do not accept that facadism is the only option to provide a 'revitalisation' or 'adaptive reuse' of a heritage place. In the case of a facaded modernist office, it would no longer be a building, just an abstract remnant of one.

### **Contribution to Long-term Conservation of Significant Fabric**

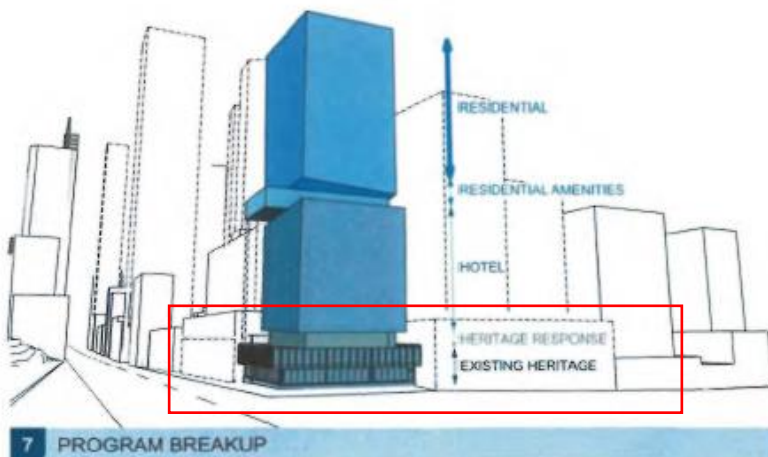
The National Trust would also like to note that no sympathetic conservation/restoration works program has been proposed for the heritage fabric that is to be retained. As noted in the Heritage Impact Statement prepared by Bryce Raworth Pty Ltd, it would be appropriate 'to develop a scheme of external conservation works that enable the restoration of the original black appearance of the building, as opposed to its current brown colour'. The National Trust supports this assertion in the very least, and would encourage Council to consider an appropriate conservation program in determining this permit application.

### **New Work and Relevance to the Burra Charter**

The National Trust believes that the addition of the 23 level tower will distort and obscure what little might remain of Flagstaff House following demolition works, detracting from the buildings interpretation and appreciation. As stipulated in the Burra Charter:

*22.1: New work such as additions or other changes to the place may be acceptable where it respects and does not distort or obscure the cultural significance of the place, or detract from its interpretation and appreciation.*

In instances where new work is proposed to be cantilevered or built atop a listed heritage building, the heritage building should remain its own independent entity, providing a clear separation from the new built structure. The assertion made by Bryce Raworth Pty Ltd in their Heritage Impact Assessment that Flagstaff House will effectively be reduced to a 'low rise podium to the tower' does not correlate with this need for a clear separation. As evident in the diagram below, the glass setback proposed to separate Flagstaff House from the new tower is limited to a single storey. The National Trust submits that this is not an acceptable 'Heritage Response' and does not adequately delineate the old from the new. If the objective to provide a visual break to respect existing heritage is to be achieved, we submit this visual separation would need to be increased or re-designed.



As further outlined in the Burra Charter:

*22.2 New work should be readily identifiable as such, but must respect and have minimal impact on the cultural significance of the place.*

*(As a side note) 'new work should respect the significance of a place through consideration of its sitting, bulk, form, scale, character, colour, texture and material. Imitation should generally be avoided.'*

In regards to new work proposed for the site, the National Trust objects in particular to the projecting floor proposed for Level 12. It is noted that 'this element references the *Yuncken Freeman* design ethos of the original *Flagstaff House* building'. As noted in *Clause 15 Built Environment and Heritage*, 'new development should respect, but not simply copy, historic precedents'. The National Trust submits that this level of imitation is not appropriate, and further undermines the delineation between the old and the new. Overall, there appears to be some conflict between the design elements of the tower that are proposed to 'reference' Flagstaff House as a separate entity, and those elements that are entirely new.

## **Conclusion**

In past few years the National Trust has actively campaigned for the appreciation and conservation of Modernist architecture in the State of Victoria, championing the retention of high profile places such as the Total House Carpark. Despite being a significant period in Melbourne's cultural and architectural history, post-war modernism is scarcely represented on either the City of Melbourne's heritage overlay or on the Victorian Heritage Register. Given Flagstaff House has its own individual HO, and was recently re-assessed as having A-grade significance, should be at the forefront in the decision making process. As noted by the Future Melbourne Planning Committee in their endorsement of the West Melbourne Heritage Review, there has been rapid transformation in West Melbourne towards high density residential uses, with around 2,800 residential dwellings currently either under construction, approved or awaiting planning approval in the suburb. The Future of Melbourne Planning Committee note the need for a new Planning Scheme Amendment to provide the necessary mechanism to ensure 'the protection of important heritage sites and buildings as the area undergoes development and renewal'. Flagstaff House is a clear example of a heritage place with high historic and aesthetic significance that needs to be protected from over-development at the expense of the suburb's unique cultural heritage.

To summarise, the National Trust believes the amount of interior demolition proposed under this permit application significantly and irreversibly affects the significance of Flagstaff House. In addition, the proposed tower further undermines the context and setting of the remaining heritage fabric and an understanding of the building as its own individual entity. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the above permit application. Should you have any questions please contact our Conservation and Advocacy staff on 9656 9837.

Kind Regards,



Caitlin Mitropoulos  
Community Advocate