

QVM Public Forum, Drill Hall, 26 Therry Street

6pm, Wednesday 20 November 2019

**Notes for Talk by Charles Sowerwine,
Chair, Heritage Committee, RHSV**

The community won a great victory with the decision of Heritage Victoria to refuse a permit for Council to undertake the Doyle Plan. The plan involved dismantling the sheds and building underground parking and various facilities. That would have compromised the historic sheds and inserted appalling lift shafts and staircases. More fundamentally, it would have transformed the market's operation. The aim was twofold. First, to hide the 'back of house' operations of the market and to present to the public a modern, hygienic market, 'a brighter, lighter, cleaner, greener and more pleasant environment that is clearly historic, yet subtly contemporary' (Melbourne City Council, *Precinct Renewal Master Plan*, p. 16). Second, to facilitate a shift to 'value-add', that is prepared food and drink, over fresh fruit and vegetables.

You might think that this plan was now null and void. You would be wrong. This is still the plan. Council resurrected the Doyle Plan, minus the underground facilities which were rejected by Heritage Victoria. The Master Plan hasn't changed.

Under plans which Council passed in September, traders will no longer bring their produce to their stalls and operate from their vans. Instead they will unload at central docks (in two new buildings on Queen Street), transport it to their stalls by electric trolleys, and operate from uniform, fixed counters, disguised by the curious term 'Point of Sale (POS) Storage'. Council visuals show neat rows of identical fixed stalls.

Why does this concern the Royal Historical Society of Victoria. Isn't it enough that we've saved the historic sheds? No, it's not enough. Preservation involves more than the physical remnants of the past. Preservation involves the things that attach people to place, the intangible aspects which preservationists call the 'spirit of place'. ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites), meeting in Quebec in 2008, defined 'spirit of place' as 'the intangible elements ... , ... 'the physical and the spiritual elements that give meaning, value, emotion and mystery to place.'¹

This is part of the 'social value' of the market. Its social value is an important reason that the market is listed on the Victorian Heritage Register, where you will find in the statement of significance: 'The Queen Victoria Market is of social significance for its ongoing role and continued popularity as a fresh meat and vegetable market, shopping and meeting place for Victorians and visitors alike.' We seek to preserve this social value.

In 2017, Council faced a rising tide of popular opposition to the Doyle Plan. To persuade the community that they were being heard, Council commissioned an excellent report, 'Queen Victoria Market: Intangible Values', which highlighted that 'the most common anxiety was around the Market being "cleaned up" or "sanitised," "made to look like a "food hall" rather than a "working site."' That would 'diminish the experience of being there' (pp. 8, 24).

¹ *Québec Declaration on the Preservation of the Spirit of Place*, Adopted at Québec, Canada, October 4th 2008.

The transformation now planned will lead to a ‘cleaned up’, ‘sanitised’ market. The attempt to hide ‘back of house’ operations by central unloading and discreet movement of goods goes against the value of movement, which, the report found, is part of what shoppers and visitors value:

The Market never stops moving. Movement was crucial to how shoppers and visitors perceived the goods, produce, environments and other people at the site, ... This was comprised of many different elements: a mix of adults and children of different physical abilities and habits; cars, trucks and forklifts; trolleys, prams and scooters; bins and boxes; and other aspects.

The plan has always been to get rid of this movement, to create ‘a brighter, lighter, cleaner, greener and more pleasant’ market. But that’s not what people come to the QVM for. They come for the atmosphere generated by the way the market operates, by the gritty reality of unpackaged foodstuffs, by the handling and movement of goods, by the theatre of a working market in which they become participants. They come for its social value.

That ‘intangible social value’, we are arguing, is part of its heritage value. The market operates today as when it began operation in 1878. Stallholders bring goods to their stalls in their vehicles, set up their stalls and operate from their vehicles. The shift to central distribution and, especially, uniform fixed stalls in place of the current beloved hodgepodge goes completely against what is valued in the Market.

These plans are contingent upon new buildings in Queen Street and so Council will have to apply to Heritage Victoria for a permit to construct them. It will be important for all those who wish to preserve the market to make submissions at that time.

We cannot, however, depend on Heritage Victoria. Only another wave of popular opposition will stop Council now. Go on social media, tell your friends, write to Councillors, tell everyone that the market is once again in danger.

Charles Sowerwine
Wednesday, 19 September 2019