

Council bypasses heritage to approve new house in Reid

By **Paul Costigan** - July 27, 2019

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The Heritage Council has approved this design for a house in Dirrawan Gardens, Reid.

*There's a new house in Reid that's got through the Heritage Council that shouldn't have, says Canberra Matters columnist **PAUL COSTIGAN**.*

REID is one of Canberra's oldest suburbs, construction commenced in 1926, most of the houses in the Reid Heritage Housing Precinct are original, and the street plantings were guided by Thomas Weston.

Much of the suburb is covered by the Heritage Act. Residents of the Reid Heritage Housing Precinct understand this and anyone who wants to buy in would quickly work out what the Heritage Act means for them.

The Act provides certainty for the residents who make the effort to conform knowing that their immediate surroundings will be maintained according the same heritage requirements.

That's the theory.

Now to the other side of the story. Mick Gentleman is the ACT government's Heritage Minister. He is also the Planning Minister (no conflict there). There's a heritage unit buried deep within the bureaucracy of the ACT government's Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate – the one with Ben Ponton as its chief (no conflict there).



Paul Costigan.

Then there's the Heritage Council made up of ministerial appointed experts. The ACT Heritage Council is listed as an independent, statutory body responsible for a range of provisions under the *Heritage Act 2004*.

Sounds good, but the reality is that council's status depends on the commitment to heritage by the chief minister, the planning minister and the planning directorate. You can guess how well that goes.

And to add to their woes, the council relies for administration on the limited resources of the few heritage unit staff – part of the Planning Directorate (no conflict there).

In researching this article, everyone spoke highly of the importance of heritage and the leading independent role to be played by the ACT Heritage Council.

The unfortunate perception is that any former independence is no longer the reality. As with so much associated with the planning directorate and the ACT government's attempts at stewardship of this wonderful city, the processes of decision making are seriously flawed.

For anyone with experiences in dealing with the ACT government's planning and its commitment to heritage, none of this would be a surprise.

So back to Reid and the case that sparked the interest in writing this article.

Notices have been circulated within Reid and beyond that the Heritage Council has ticked off a new house to be built – the former being demolished due to Mr Fluffy stuff.

The submitted plans have been stamped by ACT Heritage and with comments that the designs for the new house "reflect and complement the Reid Precinct". The whole of Canberra may have heard the Reid residents fall about the floor laughing (or crying) about this misleading use of words and about how wrong this decision was.

And so an informed judgement was sought from a heritage architect and a former chair of the same Heritage Council.

To quote: The proposed house does affect some features intrinsic to the heritage of Reid and is contrary to some mandatory and other requirements of the conservation guidelines issued to conserve the heritage value of Reid.

"They mainly relate to an inappropriate choice of materials, window design and location, roof pitch and the overall design does not reflect the character of Reid.

"It is acknowledged that it is a new house and will not be a replica of the original, but it does not meet the basic requirements of general form, material and essential design elements that has established Reid as an important conservation area."

One can only ask, is there anyone on the ACT Heritage Council with qualifications and inclination to have studied the Heritage Act and the significance and requirements for the conservation of this precinct? Gauging by the misguided decision on the plans for 23 Dirrawan Gardens, the evidence points to "no they have not".

An architect has commented that it would not take a lot to redesign the main elements of the building's frontage to have it comply with the Heritage Act. This is what should have been the first actions of the Heritage Council – to ask for a redesign that complied. What was presented is pretending to be "heritage" in style. It isn't.

The minister, the planning chief, and the Heritage Council need to revisit this decision in light of what the Heritage Act sets out as requirements for the Reid Heritage Housing Precinct.

Or maybe the owner could work with their neighbours and do a redesign – and then all could be happy again.

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Paul Costigan