

## CITY OF MELBOURNE AMENDMENT C387

### FORMER AJAX HOUSE, 103 QUEEN STREET, MELBOURNE

#### Preamble

On 13 August 2021, I was provided with a copy of a letter (dated that same day) from Rigby Cooke Lawyers, acting on behalf of the owners of the former Ajax House at 103 Queen Street. In accordance with Direction 14 of the Panel's Directions of 17 June 2021, the letter submitted a number of questions for my consideration. I have been briefed to provide written responses to these questions, as follows:

#### Responses

*1. Pages 1044 and 1045 of the Citations with Submissions – Submission 66 includes Figure 2 Newspaper illustration and Figure 3 Original Plans from 1955. You would agree that the elaborate ground level entrance door, the framing to the door, the street number plates and the arrangement of fenestration at the ground level were important and significant elements of the original design?*

I would not agree. While the elements mentioned would have been key parts of the original design, I would not consider them to be so crucial that their removal has negated the overall significance of the place. Virtually all of the post-WW2 office buildings under consideration for this amendment have been at least partially, if not substantially, altered at street level. This is an entirely typical pattern for commercially-oriented buildings in the Hoddle Grid. A lack of physical integrity at street level is not adequate basis, in and of itself, for an entire building to be rejected as a candidate for potential heritage listing. This is underscored by the fact that there are several such city buildings that, despite extensive alterations at street level, have still been added to the *Victorian Heritage Register*.

*2. You would agree that the ceramic tiling of the external façade at all levels above ground floor was an integral and significant element of the design contributing to its architectural quality?*

I would not agree. While I consider the ceramic tiling to have been part of the original fabric, I do not consider it have been integral and/or significant to the degree that its removal (or concealment) has defaced the building to the point that its original form and appearance can no longer be readily interpreted.

*3. You would agree that the name of the building "AJAX Building" on the Queen Street façade was an important element of the original design indicating who the building was built for?*

I would not agree. While the survival of a building's original name signage can obviously contribute to the interpretation of its original occupant, I do not consider that the removal of such signage will necessarily diminish the overall significance ascribed to the building itself. There are many such 'name' buildings in central Melbourne where the original signage has been removed (eg the former TAA building in Franklin Street, HO1152, where the original illuminated TAA signage at roof level was replaced by QANTAS signage, which has itself since been removed). In the case of this particular building, the citation has ascribed no significance to the building's historical association with the Ajax Insurance Company, so the fact that the identifying signage has been removed is of little consequence for interpretation.

4. *As it stands today, it is evident that the following changes have been made to the building:*

*(a) The ground level has been completely altered including the removal of the entrance door, all framing elements, the street number plates and all windows;*

*(b) The name of the building has been removed from the facade; and*

*(c) All tiles on the entire exterior of the building have been removed from all external surfaces of the building to both the Queen Street and Little Collins Street facades.*

*Given the importance of these architectural features in the original design, you would agree that these changes have detrimentally affected the intactness, integrity and heritage significance of the building?*

I would not agree. I concede that these changes have somewhat diminished the intactness and physical integrity of the building, which means that the building would be considered less significant than it might if the original tiling, signage and ground floor treatment remained intact. However, I do not agree that these changes have had a “detrimental” effect on its overall heritage significance: that is, that it might be deemed downgraded from local significance to no significance at all. I consider the building, in its altered state, to reach the threshold for local significance. Had the original façade tiling, signage and ground level treatment remained entirely intact and unaltered in the year 2021, I would consider this an exceptionally rare survival, almost certainly of significance at the state level.

5. *A visible and intrusive mobile phone apparatus has been erected on the upper element of the Queen Street façade, you would agree that this detracts from the heritage significance of the place?*

I would not agree. As a consultant who has worked as a heritage advisor for several municipal councils, I am aware that the installation of mobile phone infrastructure on heritage buildings is an issue to be given careful consideration. In this case, I accept that the mobile phone infrastructure (evidently installed prior to the building’s identification in the heritage review) might be perceived by some as a slight visual distraction, but I certainly do not agree that it diminishes the heritage significance of the entire building. Barely visible from the street, it is a minor and ultimately reversible alteration.

6. *In terms of the window framing and vertical fins on the façade, what investigations have you made to determine what they are constructed with and whether they are original materials?*

In undertaking my peer review of the citation, I did not consider that the written description of the building was in any way inadequate or misleading. As such, I did not identify the need to undertake my own investigation into the materiality of the building.

Simon Reeves  
Built Heritage Pty Ltd

19 August 2021