



7 December 2023

Professor Philip Goad  
Chair, Heritage Council of Victoria  
2 Lonsdale Street  
Melbourne VIC 3000

Dear Professor Goad

### **Future directions of the Victorian Heritage Register**

The Professional Historians Association (Vic & Tas) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the current Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) and to submit proposals for an updated, accurate and more socially and culturally inclusive heritage database.

The PHA (Vic & Tas) represents a community of over 230 professional historians throughout Victoria and Tasmania. Our members are academically qualified and communicate history in diverse ways contributing significantly to the heritage industry. Indeed, the skills of professional historians are invaluable in documenting, interpreting and presenting history, which is vital to the identification and preservation of heritage sites in Victoria.

Our attached submission highlights our concerns with the VHR as it currently stands, and ways we believe it can be improved, including comments on: the Framework of Historic Themes; the limitations of time and budgetary constraints which undermine good scholarship; the need for qualified historians and heritage professionals to be employed in writing citations and statements; the site management role of the Register and consequent planning or legal disputes which may arise from inadequate or inaccurate historical information.

We would appreciate your consideration of our feedback. We value the role of Heritage Victoria in preserving, protecting and understanding our state's heritage and history and the opportunity to help shape the future of the Victorian Heritage Register.

Your sincerely

Sophie Couchman  
President



A submission by Professional Historians Association (Vic & Tas)

### **Future directions of the Victorian Heritage Register**

Firstly, we raise the point that the VHR is constricted by a framework of themes that does not reflect the diversity of our community nor the abundance of historical sources now available. The Victorian Framework of Historic Themes was an exciting achievement when it was developed in 2010, but in the past 13 years the practice and understanding of history has grown and changed.

Analysis of the VHR by PHA member and heritage specialist, Dr James Lesh, has shown that the Register has a bias towards sites in high socio-economic areas of inner Melbourne and, more often than not, is for a public or commercial building erected in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and designed by a male architect.

An example of recent scholarship which is absent from the VHR is the recently published 'A History of LGBTIQ+ Victoria in 100 places and objects' (2021). This report was recognised as the first of its kind in Australia and used as a way of establishing a new framework for understanding queer heritage in Victoria. The framework established through this report for 'understanding heritage in a way that reveals the histories of LGBTIQ+ people and communities' should be applied to the broader Victorian Framework of Historic Themes, not remain separate from it.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, terms such as 'migrant community' or 'migrant history' in the survey (presumably referring to post World War II migration) ignore the diversity of our settlement history. These terms also negate the complex history of immigration and identity – religious, sectarian, cultural and national - which make up our complex heritage, and are under-represented in the VHR.

We believe the inadequacy of historical thematic frameworks needs to be addressed. We suggest this begin with an audit process and continue via regular reviews by qualified professional historians. Historical narrative, storytelling and interpretation has a major role to play in understanding and communicating cultural heritage significance, in addition to the more technical aspects of architectural and archaeological conservation activities. The frameworks and increasing diversity should

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.heritage.vic.gov.au/our-programs-and-initiatives/a-history-of-lgbtqi-victoria>

not be used as a 'tick-box' exercise. All contributions to the VHR need to be underpinned by well researched scholarship.

Secondly, we believe that time allocated and subsequently paid for professional services to research and write the histories that inform the VHR entries is often insufficient. Indeed, time and monetary constraints significantly undermine the scholarship required to complete this work. Building a useful, accurate and accessible database needs care and attention. We urge the Heritage Council to seek sufficient funding from government for a Register which will be well researched, well written and consequently well-used and valued.

Thirdly, we are concerned that unqualified and/or unaccredited people are writing the histories included on the VHR. With regards to the historical aspects of heritage places, we propose that only accredited members of Professional Historians Australia be employed to review, update and enter historical data in the Register. Moreover, historians with the appropriate area of sub-specialisation should be engaged as appropriate. We are happy to assist with this as we have many heritage and place-based experts, with deep and wide-ranging specialisations within our membership.

We also suggest that a peer review process be undertaken to ensure histories that are accurate, up-to-date, representative and accessible on the VHR.

Fourthly, while the broad purpose of the VHR is to identify and preserve places of cultural significance for all Victorians, the Register also has a management role. The VHR should make it clear that the role of a citation is to highlight a place's significance, but it is not conclusive and should be read alongside other supporting documentation such as a Heritage or Conservation Management Plan or a Thematic Environmental History. Therefore, it is important that incorrect or inaccurate information does not end up 'in the system' via the various documents produced for council planning schemes and the VHR. These important documents form part of the Planning Scheme, and therefore become a planning and legal issue. At a panel hearing a report can be rejected because dates and facts are incorrect, and this can potentially jeopardize a building or site which is being nominated.

Finally, some general comments on areas we believe the VHR is not meeting current standards or its intended purpose.

- Statements of significance which may have been written in the 1970s or 1980s continue to be presented: many of these have major flaws which need to be reviewed and corrected.
- There is an unevenness in many citations with too much information on one aspect of a site's history and scant information on other periods or uses. The details provided in citations should directly relate to a place's cultural significance and its meeting of listing criteria thresholds.

- A gendered bias is evident in many citations.
- Many statements have wording which might now be considered offensive or insensitive.
- Many statements rely on architectural significance and overlook the equally significant social and cultural history.
- The importance of people, movements and events associated with a site is often overlooked.
- VHR entries are not altered or updated to reflect significant changes in a site's condition or value (such as when a property is affected by fire or by later construction work).

Future development of the VHR and the management of heritage sites can be enhanced with the assistance of specialised professional historians and other qualified specialists.

Professional Historians Association (Vic & Tas)

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