

Adaptive re-use of CBD shop-top spaces

RE-USE



By Dr CATRIONA MCLEOD

WALK around any high street with an eye to the space above and you see them: dingy curtains, boarded windows, signs of neglected and forgotten spaces which are hard to visualise as homes.

Recently a colleague, astute and with instinct honed by many observant years managing his own successful business, commented on what he believed to be a grave oversight made by Tasmanian cities (that is, their respective councils and planning departments).

“What irks me”, he said, “is the number of unoccupied spaces above ground floor shops. Why haven’t they been turned into habitable spaces? They sit empty for years. Surely councils and developers could address urban sprawl by using these spaces. It’s just good business sense; so why don’t they?”

Why not? Indeed. I will unpack a few pros and cons related to this concept, particularly in terms of Tasmanian CBD buildings, many of which also have a heritage or character listing.

Last May, the British Government scrapped planing permission for converting long-empty office blocks into flats for the next three years. Planning Minister Nick Bowles declared, “the move would create 130,000 badly needed new homes, using up 5% of vacant office space”. Developers have long eyed these buildings; however, some local authorities have resisted any development, citing the always seemingly imminent return of the ‘good times’. This building stock is going to waste in a city whose population will top 15 million in the next ten years; in fact, London’s population will grow at a faster rate than any other part of the country.

Other London councils have responded to the booming property market by allowing conversion of hundreds of former factories, shops and offices into luxury apartments. These councils also acknowledge shops and

other businesses in town centres will benefit from people living nearby. Conversely, many developers have simply purchased and refurbished drab, rundown office buildings without seeking local authority approval. It is worth considering who might benefit from such development: the prices may not be aimed at those most in need (such as workers who need affordable homes) but at foreigners with money or landlords buying to rent out an extortionate profit.

That scenario applies particularly to the UK’s drab, generic office blocks built in the 1960s and 70s. Of course, the picture is very different for buildings on The National Heritage List for England, and stringent controls exist for these, or indeed any building existing within a heritage precinct, as guided by the respective Local Government Authority.

Here in Tasmania, where the older building stock remains relatively untouched (that is, largely unmaintained), except where it has been degraded through *ad hoc* development or deliberately allowed to fall into disrepair, the issues are not so clear-cut. Tasmania has never had a boom period, except for the success of gold on the west coast in the late 19th century. Towns and cities comprise a range of buildings from each architectural period since settlement. Notably, the CBD’s of these cities still possess the 19th century model of shop below and tenancy above the awning.

Interestingly, in other cities, this model is finding favour in *new* developments. Last month, the *Canberra Times* published a Domain article titled “Living above the shop no longer a negative”, citing “today’s buyers view the set-up as an added convenience”. Peter Mayoh, the architect of Metropolitan Residences in St Leonards, says North Sydney Council has a strategy of widening the footpaths to activate the area, and plans to retain the signature plane trees on the street, and to include small premises on the ground floor.

Yet, as noted, this scenario is not a case of adaptive re-use, as is the potential in cities such as Hobart and Launceston. The Interim Launceston Planning Scheme 2012 notes an interim of (CBD) Zone Purpose Statements as being:

- To encourage new developments including shop-top housing and tourist accommodation that are of a size and scale that is respectful of the heritage character of

the area.

While this is a positive statement on the councils behalf, the buyers’ mindset needs to also change. First, the desire for the outdated model of the urban fringe McMansion (five bedrooms, four bathrooms and double garage to house multiple cars) needs to be urgently suppressed, particularly in light of increasing oil prices. Buyers must also be encouraged to live in medium density, multi-residential CBD developments that are supported by appropriate infrastructure such as light rail and ‘green fuel’ bus networks, shuttle and electric car-sharing systems and in-house facilities such as gyms and food markets (not super-markets)

So why build new buildings when so much CBD shop-top building stock exists for this process of adaptive re-use? Of course, while building codes and heritage guidelines must be observed, the notion is entirely viable. A study for the NSW Heritage Council undertaken over ten years ago revealed “the combination of financial incentives and the commercially oriented nature of the adaptive re-use schemes outweighed any extra heritage related costs and project risks” and “sympathetic adaptive re-use schemes have



“IT’S JUST GOOD BUSINESS SENSE; SO WHY DON’T THEY? WHY NOT? INDEED.

created commercially viable investment assets for the owners”.

As my colleague notes, councils, developers and owners all benefit from re-using these spaces. “It’s just good business sense; so why don’t they? Why not? Indeed.

Dr CATRIONA MCLEOD
 Consultant: Research & Writing Services (Environment, Horticulture & Landscape Heritage)
 Researcher, Writer, Editor & Proof-reader
 PhD (QUT); Bachelor of Arts (Fine Arts) (Hons)(UQ);
 Bachelor of Applied Science (Built Environment) (QIT)
www.catrionamcleod.com



HUTCHINSON

Concrete: Ready to pour

HUTCHINSON are now in the full swing of the MYER redevelopment and it’s hard to see that this project will not be completed on time for MYER to commence moving in late 2015.

mie Silvester, and the site office is running a million miles an hour.

It would be great if they came and did my renovations for me; perhaps things might actually get done!

TBG has the exclusive on-site access to the MYER development and each time we visit, Team Leader: Ja-

For more information you can log onto our website. www.BusinessGazette.com.au

