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OPINION

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## Customs House and Queens Wharf

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The furore around the recent approval by Brisbane City Council for a tower adjacent to Customs House at 443 Queen Street shows the public is deeply concerned about the impact of new developments adjacent to our most important heritage buildings. It raises the questions:

- What has happened to our legislation for protecting these significant spaces?
- Where are the checks and balances that were previously undertaken by an independent and expert agency on behalf of the community?

The public should be concerned about the efficacy of heritage legislation in Queensland, which is now one of the weakest in the country after some very quiet changes. Over the last decade the authority of the legislation, which was introduced in 1992 under the Goss Government, has diminished from one that could approve, amend, or reject proposals to one that merely reviews or provides 'advice'. Although the legislation has never been perfect, at least in its early years, it provided clear authority for decision making.

Queensland has a mere 1700 heritage spaces, most of which are located beyond Brisbane's city centre. When other sophisticated cities around the world tenaciously protect and celebrate their heritage buildings, Brisbane has new buildings jammed right up against its historical landmarks. This shows a complete lack of understanding of their role in place making and of the ongoing contribution their low scale and intricate detail provides to the richness of the city. We have a choice for the future of Queensland's capital city. It could be a place that has a monoculture of buildings, of sameness and monotony; or our history could be marked and celebrated by retaining and enhancing some of the most superb, historic buildings in the country, in a contemporary setting that is respectful and responsible while also harnessing the best of contemporary architecture and urban place making.

If we continue to erode and devalue what was a city of fine 19th century streetscapes, which only remain in a few quarters of the city, it shows we have learnt nothing from the Bellevue and Cloudland experiences, that Brisbane has wound back the clock. Don't mistake this view for being against development we are simply worried about the problems that arise when development approval processes no longer apply rigor, transparency and independence.

As the Heritage Council was not consulted during the approval process for the Queens Wharf development, whose expertise and authority was relied upon to make such an important recommendation?



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Why was the Heritage Council, our city's experts in this field, left to express its concern after the fact? Where is the evidence that the public interest in our cultural heritage has been considered in the planning process by someone or some entity with the capacity and the authority to do so?

Regrettably, the approval process for the site next to Customs House could well be the new norm when it comes to heritage protection. If you are concerned about what this might mean for Brisbane then it is only a foretaste of what will occur on a much larger scale and to a much greater intensity with the proposal for Queens Wharf in the Queensland Government Precinct.

The Government Precinct contains some of the finest 19th century buildings in the country and the Queens Wharf proposal, from what we can tell, will see all of the sandstone heritage buildings crowded in and dominated by a range of overly large and inappropriately scaled buildings, including one that will hover over William Street for the same length as a football field!

This important issue of what happens to our heritage has been downplayed in the community consultation process for Queens Wharf one wonders what those responsible for Queens Wharf are thinking when they see the level of concern and indignation for just one building on the fringe of the city.

As a city we know the mistakes of our past which come from projects where there were no checks and balances and where the independent professional advice was ignored or set aside. Projects that exclude the public interest will always fail, so if we want our city to have more sub-standard outcomes like the Roma Street Transit Centre and the Myer Centre we might as well just continue with the published approach to Queens Wharf and disregard the heritage significance of Customs House and we will be well on our way.

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