

Public Exhibition - Planning Proposal - Oxford Street LGBTIQA+ Heritage Items Stage 2

File No: X091578

Summary

In 2022, a review of the planning controls applying to Oxford Street was implemented to facilitate the growth of the cultural and creative sectors, protect heritage and character and support the day and night-time economies for the local community and visitors.

Community consultation indicated that people value the strong connection between Oxford Street and LGBTIQA+ communities and wanted to see its social and cultural heritage recognised and maintained. This led to the development of the Oxford Street LGBTIQA+ Social and Cultural Place Strategy with five priority areas. Priority 1 of this strategy focused on recognising historic LGBTIQA+ places and spaces.

The City of Sydney (the City) engaged TKD Architects in 2022 to complete a heritage study investigating sites within the Oxford Street precinct. Their study focussed on places with historic and contemporary connections to the LGBTIQA+ community.

Based on the Study, a planning proposal reported to Council in December 2024 proposed heritage listing 85-91 Oxford Street (Universal), 124 Oxford Street (Palms) and 134 Oxford Street (the Oxford Hotel), Darlinghurst for their significance to the LGBTIQA+ community. The Planning Proposal was exhibited between 1 August and 29 August 2025 and submissions are being reviewed.

At its meeting in December 2024, Council resolved that the Chief Executive Officer investigate the local heritage listing of 3 additional sites of LGBTIQA+ historical significance: 273 Crown Street, Surry Hills (Former Ruby Reds), 40-42 Flinders Street, Darlinghurst (Former Taxi Club) and 207 Oxford Street, Darlinghurst (The Bookshop).

Heritage assessments of the 3 additional sites have concluded that each meet the threshold for local heritage significance and warrant potential listing as heritage items in Sydney Local Environmental Plan 2012 (LEP). The assessments are shown at Attachments B through E.

The property at 273 Crown Street, Surry Hills (Former Ruby Reds) is significant as the location of Sydney's first recreational venue dedicated to the lesbian community and for its associations with prominent entrepreneur Dawn O'Donnell, who gave much support to Sydney's lesbian and gay communities and was responsible for opening several recreational venues to serve these communities.

The building at 40-42 Flinders Street, Darlinghurst (former Taxi Club) is significant as the home of the Grosvenor Club, a recreational facility for taxi drivers from 1956 and its use after 1963 by drag queens following the opening of Les Girls because of its 24-hour licence. Until its closure in 2012, it was recognised as a very early and enduring LGBTIQ+ recreational venue.

The Bookshop at 207 Oxford Street, Darlinghurst has significance as the site of a long-running bookshop devoted to the sale of gay and lesbian books, journals and publications and for providing an important hub of community interaction relating to events such as the gay and lesbian Mardi Gras and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s.

This report recommends that Council approve the public exhibition of a planning proposal to list the 3 sites as heritage items.

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) Council approve the Planning Proposal - Oxford Street LGBTIQA+ Heritage Items Stage 2, shown at Attachment A to the subject report, for submission to the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure with a request for a gateway determination;
- (B) Council approve the Planning Proposal - Oxford Street LGBTIQA+ Heritage Items Stage 2 as shown at Attachment A to the subject report, for public authority consultation and public exhibition in accordance with any conditions imposed under the gateway determination;
- (C) Council seek authority from the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure to exercise the delegation of all the functions under section 3.36 of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 to make the local environmental plan and to put into effect the Planning Proposal - Oxford Street LGBTIQA+ Heritage Items Stage 2; and
- (D) authority be delegated to the Chief Executive Officer to make any minor variations to the Planning Proposal - Oxford Street LGBTIQA+ Heritage Items Stage 2, to correct any drafting errors or to ensure consistency with the gateway determination.

Attachments

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| Attachment A. | Planning Proposal - Oxford Street LGBTIQA+ Heritage Items Stage 2 |
| Attachment B. | Oxford Street LGBTIQA+ Heritage Assessment Report - TKD Architects |
| Attachment C. | Former Ruby Reds - 273 Crown Street, Surry Hills - Heritage Assessment |
| Attachment D. | Former Taxi Club - 40-42 Flinders Street, Darlinghurst - Heritage Assessment |
| Attachment E. | The Bookshop - 207 Oxford Street, Darlinghurst - Heritage Assessment |

Background

1. In 2022, a review of the planning controls applying to Oxford Street was implemented to facilitate the growth of the cultural and creative sectors, protect heritage and character and support the day and night-time economies for the local community and visitors.
2. Community consultation indicated that people value the strong connection between Oxford Street and LGBTIQ+ communities and wanted to see its social and cultural heritage recognised and maintained.
3. This led to the development of the Oxford Street LGBTIQ+ Social and Cultural Place Strategy with five priority areas. The first priority focused on recognising historic LGBTIQ+ places and spaces.
4. The City of Sydney engaged TKD Architects in 2022 to complete a heritage study investigating sites within the Oxford Street precinct. Their study focussed on places with historic and contemporary connections to the LGBTIQ+ community.
5. TKD Architects recommended revising heritage inventory sheets for 14 existing heritage items and the Oxford Street Heritage Conservation Area to include relevant information about this community. The inventory sheets have been updated. TKD Architects also recommended listing 6 additional sites as heritage items on the Sydney Local Environmental Plan 2012 (LEP).
6. Planning Proposal - Oxford Street LGBTIQ+ Heritage Items, reported to Council in December 2024, sought approval to publicly exhibit the heritage listing of 3 of the 6 sites: 85-91 Oxford Street (Universal), 124 Oxford Street (Palms) and 134 Oxford Street (the Oxford Hotel), Darlinghurst. The other 3 sites were not recommended for listing at the time as they were outside of the study area.
7. At its meeting in December 2024, Council resolved that the Chief Executive Officer investigate the heritage listing of the 3 additional sites: 273 Crown Street, Surry Hills (Former Ruby Reds), 40-42 Flinders Street, Darlinghurst (Former Taxi Club) and 207 Oxford Street, Darlinghurst (The Bookshop).
8. The City engaged TKD Architects to complete heritage assessments of the 3 additional sites. The assessments conclude that each of the 3 sites meet the threshold for local heritage significance and warrant potential listing as heritage items. The TKD Architect assessments were prepared in accordance with the NSW Heritage Assessment Criteria (2023). A summary of the assessments is presented below.

273 Crown Street, Surry Hills - Former Ruby Reds

9. The heritage assessment concluded that Former Ruby Reds meets the threshold for local significance in terms of:
 - Criterion (a) Historic significance: The site is significant as the location of Sydney's first recreational venue dedicated to the lesbian community. It has been, in various iterations, associated with Sydney's lesbian and gay communities since the second half of the 1970s up to the present time.

- Criterion (b) Historical association: The building has associations with prominent entrepreneur Dawn O'Donnell, who gave much support to Sydney's lesbian and gay communities and was responsible for opening several recreational venues to serve these communities.
 - Criterion (d) Social: Documentary evidence suggests that the site would have significance to members of Sydney's lesbian community, who would have frequented the place while it was serving as an exclusive lesbian venue. It may also have significance to members of the LGBTIQ+ community who frequented it in its subsequent iterations.
 - Criterion (g) Representative: The building is representative of Victorian dwellings that were adapted to retailing during the 1920s. Its facade is representative of the Inter War Free Classical style.
10. The heritage assessment concludes that the building at 273 Crown Street, Surry Hills meets the threshold for local heritage significance for its historic, historical association and social significance at a local level and warrants potential listing as a heritage item on the LEP.

40-42 Flinders Street, Darlinghurst - Former Taxi Club

11. The heritage assessment concluded that the Former Taxi Club meets the threshold for local significance in terms of:
- Criterion (a) Historic significance: 40 Flinders Street became the home of the Grosvenor Club, a recreational facility for taxi drivers, and mirrors the growth and consolidation of licensed clubs in NSW following amendments to legislation in 1954. Its patronage by drag queens following the opening of Les Girls in 1963 because of its 24-hour licence and final closure in 2012 make it a very early and enduring LGBTIQ+ recreational venue. The site also has some historical significance as a surviving purpose-built piano warehouse in the locality.
 - Criterion (b) Historical association: 40-42 Flinders Street is not associated with any individual of importance to the cultural history of Sydney or NSW. However, it has associations with Sydney's gay, drag and transgender communities, who are of importance to the cultural history of Sydney.
 - Criterion (d) Social: 40-42 Flinders Street likely to have significance for Sydney's LGBTIQ+ community as an early and enduring LGBTIQ+ recreational venue.
12. The heritage assessment concludes that the building at 40-42 Flinders Street, Darlinghurst meets the threshold for local heritage significance for its historic, historical association and social significance at a local level and warrants potential listing as a heritage item on the LEP.

207 Oxford Street, Darlinghurst - The Bookshop

13. The heritage assessment concludes that The Bookshop meets the threshold for local significance in terms of:
- Criterion (a) Historic significance: 207 Oxford Street has significance as the site of a long-running bookshop devoted to the sales of gay and lesbian books, journals and publications. Although not the first to do so, the bookshop has proved remarkably enduring and has been an important hub of community interaction for significant interaction relating to events such as the gay and lesbian Mardi Gras and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s.
 - Criterion (b) Historical association: 207 Oxford Street has strong associations with Les McDonald, who with his then partner Wayne Harrison co-founded The Bookshop in the early 1980s and then owned and operated the business until retiring in 2024.
 - Criterion (c): Aesthetic: The facade of 203-207 Oxford Street, notwithstanding unsympathetic modifications and accretions, is a fine and distinctively detailed example of the Federation Free Classical style that makes an important to the streetscape of Oxford Street between Flinders and South Dowling Street.
 - Criterion (d) Social: Documentary evidence and quotes from interviews provide evidence that 207 Oxford Street has strong and special associations with members of Sydney's LGBTIQ+ community resulting from its forty plus year occupation by The Bookshop. Over the years The Bookshop has been a strong community hub and a valuable source of published material not otherwise generally available to the public.
 - Criterion (g) Representative: 203-209 Oxford Street is representative of the mixed retail and residential buildings constructed along major thoroughfares in the Sydney local government area such as Oxford Street and King Street, Newtown, during the Federation era. The facade of 203-209 Oxford Street is representative of Federation Free Classical style architecture.
14. The heritage study concluded that the building at 207 Oxford Street, Darlinghurst meets the threshold for local heritage significance for its historic, associative, aesthetic, social and representative values and warrants potential listing as a heritage item on the LEP.

Key Implications**Strategic Alignment - Sustainable Sydney 2030-2050 Continuing the Vision**

15. Sustainable Sydney 2030-2050 Continuing the Vision renews the communities' vision for the sustainable development of the city to 2050. It includes 10 strategic directions to guide the future of the city, as well as 10 targets against which to measure progress. This report is aligned with the following strategic directions and objectives:
- (a) Direction 8 - A thriving cultural and creative life - the acknowledgement of the importance of the 3 additional LBQTIQA+ buildings will contributes to the City's culture and creative life, with the protection of the heritage fabric and promoting the history of each site and their value to the community.

Risks

16. Proceeding with changes to Schedule 5 of the LEP is within the City's risk appetite for reputation and image. There is a risk some stakeholders may disagree with the proposed heritage listings. However, we aim to strike a balance between achieving our strategic objectives, conserving and promoting culture and heritage, and protecting our reputation. The project aligns with our appetite to tolerate complaints when implementing agreed actions within the Community Strategic Plan and minor complaints relating to action which has long-term community benefit. Any changes to Schedule 5 of the LEP will be capable of complying with relevant environmental and planning laws, regulations and standards and is within the City's minimal appetite for non-compliance.

Relevant Legislation

17. Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979
18. Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation 2021

Public Consultation

19. Should the planning proposal at Attachment A be approved, it will be forwarded to the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure with a request for a gateway determination to allow public exhibition.
20. The public consultation processes for the planning proposals will be subject to the conditions of the gateway determination issued by the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure. Exhibition documents will be made available for viewing and comment on the City's Have Your Say website.

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