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Permanent heritage protections stop demolition of Festival Hall

By [Clay Lucas](#)

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A plan to demolish Festival Hall and build apartments on the site of the West Melbourne music and sports venue may have been foiled by permanent protections being granted by heritage authorities.

The Victorian Heritage Council has issued a decision that the building – which covers a

sprawling 4100-square-metre site within easy walking distance of the CBD, Docklands and North Melbourne – cannot be easily demolished.

In its decision, the Heritage Council found the building was a place of cultural heritage to Victoria because of its role as the only major “purpose-built boxing and wrestling venue to physically demonstrate the long-term history of these sports in the state”.



The Heritage Council has deemed Festival Hall a place of cultural heritage to Victoria. SIMON SCHLUTER

The venue hosted boxing and gymnastics at the 1956 Olympic Games as well as bouts featuring revered Australian boxers including Johnny Famechon and Lionel Rose, whose funeral was held there in 2011.

Heritage protections were also granted because of the venue's special association with live music.

For years Melbourne's only large concert hall, Judy Garland and the Beatles played Festival Hall in the 1960s, Frank Sinatra and Joe Cocker in the 1970s, and Radiohead, Kanye West and Patti Smith more recently.

The decision does not mean the 2017 application to Melbourne City Council to demolish the building can never be approved – but it does place a sizeable roadblock in its path.

Any future application to remove the building now needs to prove it cannot be made profitable. The venue has a steady flow of acts booked to appear in coming weeks, including 1980s hit band Toto, best known for their tracks Africa and Rosanna.

Under Victorian laws, Heritage Victoria – an office within the state planning bureaucracy – makes a recommendation to protect an historic building. The Heritage Council, appointed by the planning minister but independent of them, then reviews this recommendation.

In Festival Hall's case, the Heritage Council supported only some of the claims made for the building. It struck out claims by Heritage Victoria that specific features – among them the venue's sprung floor, bleachers, stage and balcony – should be protected.

"If you go in there and look at the urinals they said must be saved, you would just scratch your head," said Chris Wren QC, a prominent planning barrister, and a one of the major shareholders of Stadiums Pty Ltd, the company that owns Festival Hall.

The company wants approval from Melbourne City Council for 179 apartments across two towers, one nine level and the other 16. The firm has previously flagged it would sell the site if it got approval for the project.

A majority of the shares in Stadiums Pty Ltd are owned by members of the Wren family; the original structure, built in 1913, was known as the West Melbourne Stadium but was taken over by Chris Wren's grandfather John, a well-known bookmaker, in 1915.

John Wren has become a part of Melbourne folklore, largely due to the fictionalised account of his life in Frank Hardy's novel *Power Without Glory*.



Chris Wren, right, with brother John Wren II, said Chris Wren said he and the other owners of Stadiums Pty Ltd were unhappy with the Heritage Council decision. JUSTIN MCMANUS

The building burnt down in 1955 but by 1956 John Wren had built a new Festival Hall on the site in time for the 1956 Olympics.

Chris Wren said that he and the other owners of Stadiums Pty Ltd were not happy about the Heritage Council's decision.

But he also said that he and others in the company were experienced enough in property and planning to know it was likely heritage bodies wouldn't react happily to their plans to knock

over the venue.

“We’re well informed enough to know that you don’t go into the star chamber and tell them that Christ is a figment of their imagination.”

Asked what the next step for the venue was, Mr Wren said: “I’m buggered if I know.”

He said the building could not make a profit in the long term. “The red line is catching up to the black line, and will [overtake] it very shortly.”

Melbourne's other major venues, including Margaret Court and Rod Laver arenas, were getting massive injections of public funding. “Private enterprise cannot compete,” Mr Wren said.

Planning Minister Richard Wynne, who backed the heritage listing of the site in May, said the new protections would give the venue a safe and secure future.

“This is about making sure that a renowned heartbeat of Melbourne will live on, and memories that span from the Beatles and Frank Sinatra to Lester Ellis and Lionel Rose will be protected,” he said.



Clay Lucas



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