

Heritage Places Alive and Useful

The Warehouse Group has agreed to retain three important historic buildings in a major new development in Invercargill.

By Guy Williams

Invercargill's historic tram barn complex is to be retained and adapted for new retail development by The Warehouse Group Ltd. The Historic Places Trust is delighted with The Warehouse's commitment to retaining this important complex of buildings. In the words of the Trust's Chief Executive Officer, Dr Bill Tramosch, "The Trust is focused on keeping the country's heritage places alive and useful, and here we have, with the creative help of The Warehouse Group, an excellent example of this aspiration"

This group of three buildings, erected in 1912 for Invercargill's tramway system, consists of a power house with separate boiler and engine rooms, a tram barn, and an adjoining office block, the Municipal Electricity Department (M.E.D.) building. Special features of the power house are its imposing twin gables, elegant steel roof trusses with diagonal sarking, and the tall, round-topped steel frame windows in the south gables and east side walls. Around this building a number of architecturally unsympathetic additions have been built over the years. These are to be removed. The interior of the power house has a cathedral-like quality arising from the very high ceiling and tall windows. All very elegant and befitting for the new age of electric power generation for the town of Invercargill.

The tram barn is a simpler, more utilitarian building. It is a large, single-gabled structure with brick and plaster side walls, timber frame and corrugated end walls fitted with wide doors. The timber roof has exposed trusses with rough sarking. In recent years this building has been used to service buses, but a small section of original tram line remains at one end.

The M.E.D. building is next door and shares a wall with the tram barn. It consists of the original 1912 brick, single storey administration building, around which a major two-storied addition was built in the early 1920s to architect E.R. Wilson's design. Much of the earlier 1912 building is intact within the larger building. The original strong rooms, the conductor's room and administration offices are still visible. All of these could be matched to the original 1912 drawings in the Southland Museum archives.

When demolition of all three buildings was first proposed by The Warehouse, only the tram barn was registered by the Trust, although the street facade of the M.E.D. building was listed as a heritage item in the Invercargill City Council's district plan. There was no protection at all on the power house.

The Warehouse lodged a resource consent application to demolish the buildings in April 2001. When the application was publicly notified, the Trust lodged a submission opposing the proposed demolitions, as did some members of the community. Prior to this Trust staff had held discussions with The Warehouse and continued negotiations throughout. As discussions progressed, Trust staff investigated the historical significance of the buildings.

Research established that all three were an inter-related complex, were part of an important chapter of Invercargill's heritage, and were worthy of retention. This information was conveyed to The Warehouse Group. Initially reluctant, The Group eventually agreed to discuss options for retaining and reusing the buildings.

At this meeting Trust staff member Guy Williams tabled concept drawings showing that it would be possible to achieve essentially the same functional outcome by retaining the original buildings (minus the more recent additions) rather than demolishing them and erecting new retail space. Having been made aware of the historical significance of the buildings, The Warehouse agreed to give more serious consideration to options for adaptive re-use. Concurrently, Trust staff prepared registration proposals for the M.E.D. building and the power house as category 2 historic places. These registrations were approved by the Trust's Board on 7 September 2001.

Guy Williams also identified historically significant features of the buildings for retention, and this information was passed on to The Warehouse.

The Warehouse staff then developed their own concept drawings for the adaptation of the power house and tram barn, and retention of the M.E.D. building, which were submitted to the Trust. The

power house was to be redeveloped for a Warehouse Stationery; the tram barn for another retail tenancy; and the M.E.D. building retained for a future tenancy to be determined. The plans were acceptable to the Trust, and agreement was reached on a process for fine tuning the details. A letter of agreement was then signed between The Warehouse and the Trust, approving the new proposal and allowing for on-going consultation with the Trust as detailed drawings were developed.

As a result, Trust staff had the great pleasure of attending the Invercargill City Council hearing in support of The Warehouse Group's revised resource consent application to retain and adapt the buildings for re-use. The Trust's Dunedin staff are looking forward to working constructively with the Warehouse team as work commences to retain and adapt these important Invercargill buildings.

Guy Williams is an Historic Places Trust's heritage advisor based in the Dunedin office. - **Sourced from *New Zealand Historic Places* magazine, February 2002.**



The Invercargill M.E.D. building and tram barn which are to be preserved.