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History on Sale

When Hurstbridge Hardware & Stockfeed store owner Sheevaun McGuirk painted her store orange two years ago, she thought it would be a bright, fun colour that would help her business to stand out.

Little did she realise that the decision to update her shopfront, which was allowed under its heritage-protected status, would unleash an 18-month battle between her family and locals who didn't want anything to change about the beloved, historic store.

"Some horrible mongrel has stood in front of the shop and smashed [the windows]," McGuirk said at the time. "I've been told it's the fact that we changed things straight away, and that we didn't wait for people to get used to [it]." Eggs and paint were also thrown at the windows.

The issues of planning and development are red-hot topics across Melbourne, but the battle over the hardware store is perhaps an extreme example of one of the biggest challenges facing shopping strips – how do you protect local history and heritage, and at the same time make room for development and more modern additions?

Walking through Main Road, Hurstbridge, the first thing that visitors are likely to notice are the trees lining the street. Beyond that, what marks the area as distinctive are the shops. Many date from 1912, when the railway line and township were created, with timber buildings roofed in corrugated iron still a dominant feature in the streetscape. There is no supermarket, no petrol station or any other large structure that looks out of place. Despite changes over the years, the strip is a quaint reminder of days gone by.

According to Heritage Victoria, there are 15 sites in the area that have some type of protection from development. But as businesses close and new ones move in, the problem of finding a balance between the old and new continues to gather speed, and as demonstrated in the Hurstbridge Hardware & Stockfeed drama, some people take the issue of development, no matter how minor, very seriously.

Hurstbridge Traders Association president and Nature's Harvest owner Craig Usher, who has worked in the township for 12 years, says councils have a responsibility to ensure neighbourhood character and design are respected when deciding whether to issue planning permits to developers. "I think what's important is to keep an eye on council not to bugger things up. Keeping what you've got is really important," he says. "We do keep an eye on developments, to make sure they are in keeping with the rest of the town. But with private property, people can really do what they like."

Despite the amount of heritage protection in the area, Usher says the strip has already lost valuable buildings.

"There are some absolutely magnificent old buildings that have gone, many years ago. Right where I am used to be a beautiful old guest house. The photos of it are just unbelievable, but unfortunately in 1967 that was torn down. The excuse was termites, but we think the owners probably just wanted to pull it down."

Main Street Australia president Nicole Maslin believes maintaining local character in shopping strips is essential.

"I think it's vital, especially in this consumer-based, high-paced world," Maslin says. "I think most people love to feel connected and have something authentic and real. That's where shopping strips have it over places like Chadstone and Northland, because it's real and it's genuine and that's why it's critical that we protect and preserve our sense of place and history and a sense of community that's around a shopping strip," she says. "I think a lot of shopping strips are trying to hang onto their origins, and that's the challenge when you have these developments coming into new shopping strips. Sometimes it can change the make-up of the shopping strips, so I think many [residents and traders] are fearfully protective in maintaining their character and what made them special in the first place."

Maslin, who also works as a Banyule Council economic development officer, says although councils can place planning controls over certain areas, it doesn't mean the outcome will meet the intended aim. "Some of the time it's beyond the council's realm because often it goes to VCAT, so it's taken out of their hands," she says.

However, according to Charter Keck Cramer executive Blair Warman, who oversees shopping strip developments, progress is sometimes necessary for some of them to survive. "[Local history and landmarks] are great if they're there, but it's not going to keep a centre alive," Warman says. "What you really need is an anchor for a centre, and by that we mean a supermarket or a discount department store like Target."

Where that can become a problem is trying to fit a supermarket, which often need thousands of feet of space, in a shopping strip that was only created for small shops.

"The problem with shopping strips is that they're constrained by their subdivision patterns, the size of the allotments and the size of the shops. They limit what can really go in there, so for example, your typical shop will be 80 square metres and if you want to get a shop in there that needs more space, you'll have to purchase adjoining properties, which can be quite difficult," he says.

The Aldi centre in Luck Street, Eltham, is generally considered a good example of a large development working well with the area's existing style. The centre, which also includes several cafes, a pharmacy and electronics store, was created with timber frames and rendered concrete to look like mudbrick, a quintessential Eltham building material. Despite 20 residents and traders objecting to the Aldi, Nillumbik Council granted a planning permit in 2008.

Some submissions expressed concern that the development was out of keeping with the area: "The development does very little to improve the cohesiveness and continuity of the shopping experience across the shopping areas," the planning report states. One of the conditions of approval was that the design have "strong architectural character and becomes a focal point". Ironically, from a design point of view, this development has more "Eltham" character than almost all previous retail development in the area, the design of which Eltham Bookshop owner Meera Govil describes as "ad-hoc".

Govil, who has managed the busy bookshop for 13 years, says Eltham town centre suffers from a poorly thought-out concept design. "I think the kind of architecture we've got is very mixed up; there isn't a look to it," she says. "It's fragmented because there's no unifying theme."

There are six sites in Main Road, Eltham, that Heritage Victoria has listed, but unlike Hurstbridge, none of these affect any shops. The shopping centre generally does not have a strong link to the past, but its low-rise buildings and public space give it its character. Govil says it is these two features that need protecting from development.

"I think what we have is really good and what we need to do is take care of it and enhance it. But I also don't want to see anything like high rises being built; I think that's not our character here. It's low-key and low-rise."

At a recent Nillumbik Council meeting, the shire's plan to sell council-owned land in Eltham attracted interest. While acknowledging the land is suitable for extending the town centre, residents asked the council to ensure the area, between Dudley and Pryor streets, will not be over-developed. As summarised in a council report: "[Residents want] appropriate planning controls to be implemented as part of any sale process to control the nature of any development on the land, in relation to heights, design, set backs, energy efficiency, finishes, on-site parking, ratio of residential/commercial mix, landscaping and vegetation."

In Were Street, Montmorency, bright green trees line the extra-wide road, with historic and artistic touches a regular sight. There is a park bench acknowledging the era when the area was part of the former Eltham Shire Council, before amalgamating with Nillumbik council in 1994. There are also mosaics and art pieces outside shops, and at least two large park benches, made of concrete, waiting to be covered with mosaic tiles.

Montmorency Traders Association president Jeanette Lane and co-ordinator Linda Carroll agree that getting the right balance is not an easy task.

"When you go back [in time], these areas were very rural originally, and now what we've got are expansions happening everywhere," Carroll says. "It's a very difficult thing to do, particularly for councils, to keep the balance with all the pressures that are on. A lot of the time it does come down to balancing the books in terms of ratepayers and all those things.

"But in terms of Monty, I don't know how many times we've heard [people say] 'I feel like I'm in a little country town or a village'. And that's what it is; Monty is known as a village, and people are passionate about that."

In January 2009, VCAT approved a three-storey building in Were Street, despite Banyule council officers reporting it did not fit in with the local character.

"There was a really big community uproar about that, that it wouldn't fit in with the street," Lane says.

Despite that legal loss, Lane says the art installations will remain and continue to give "Monty" its unique character.

"I think that's what's making Monty more of a focal point, the artwork that's in the street. We get lots of comments about it," Lane says.

Adds Carroll: "We've got great traders who have recognised how individual and lovely this street is, not because they work here and because it's their business, but they genuinely love this village. Monty has soul, and we've worked really hard to keep that."