

Views differ on old woolstores

DEMOLITION v HOUSING

Errol Simper in *Canberra Times*, 11 April 1978

A FIRE which destroyed an old woolstore in the inner-Sydney suburb of Ultimo on March 19 reactivated one of Sydney's oldest town-planning topics, that of inner-city redevelopment. Ultimo-Pyrmont's 15 or so remaining woolstores are variously described as fire-traps; historically, architecturally and socially important; as well as occupiers of land ideal for residential development.

The fire resulted in 300 people being evacuated. A witness was "shocked and frightened" at a "heavy mass of rats" trying to escape, and "sickened by a dreadful smell of burning flesh". But it's an ill wind which blows no one good.

Some former woolstores are huge and up to 10 storeys high (the Ultimo fire destroyed more than 150,000 square metres of floorspace). Drab, hideous, majestic - depending on your viewpoint - they are landmarks in a run-down, depressing, uncared-for, but strategic, part of inner Sydney.

As they are, the woolstores are virtually useless.

"These old woolstores must be pulled down", is the solution of Alderman Peter La Fontaine (Labor), whose ward, Phillip, encompasses much of the zone in question. "If a fire took hold in one of them it would be impossible to stop. The Ultimo fire could have spread and left residents and houses incinerated. It jumped a street and how nobody was killed defies explanation."

Should Mr La Fontaine's solution gain acceptance, then a row with the NSW division of the National Trust appears inevitable. Its director, Mr John Morris, says the buildings are "a very significant part of the townscape" and include "architecturally important buildings".

"Just because of one unfortunate case, it is not satisfactory to say that all the stores should simply be pulled down", Mr Morris says. "Similar buildings in the United Kingdom have been very satisfactorily converted into residences. The woolstores are within walking distance to the city and residences there would also have nice outlooks over Darling Harbour and the city itself".

Sydney City Council is trying to replan the Ultimo-Pyrmont region. Mr La Fontaine says the area should be made attractive to private enterprise, but does not rule out projects involving the Housing Commission.

Working with the council is Mr Chris Taylor, an advocate for local residents, elected at a noisy meeting a few days after the Ultimo fire: "If a positive plan for the old woolstores emerges from the morass of planning and debate, then their owners will probably be as pleased as anyone else."

A spokesman for one large company came down firmly in Mr Morris's corner. "Talk to all thinking people, architects, planners and the like, and they believe the stores can and should be redeveloped."