



Road to nowhere? (on the Eastern Freeway heritage listing)

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Melbourne's Eastern Freeway [is likely to be state heritage listed next year](#). Heritage Victoria has identified it as aesthetically and historically important. But should freeways be managed within the heritage system? Or is a freeway the kind of 20th century relic which we should be prepared to let go of?

As a historian, I find much to praise in the Heritage Victoria recommendation. The nominated sections of the 1972-77 Eastern Freeway are incredible examples of

20th century transport infrastructure. As Matt Holden eloquently wrote in *The Age*: [“Freeways, like them or not, have made Melbourne what it is.”](#) The freeway redefined the experience of our city. It allowed for the outward expansion of Melbourne and the creation of suburbs and industries. Driving along state-of-the-art freeways was thrilling and liberating, particularly for the first generation of Melburnians to experience mass car ownership.

The Eastern Freeway is also recognised for its role in the anti-freeway movement. Residents in Fitzroy and Collingwood blockaded its construction, and so it abruptly ends on Alexandra Parade. Anti-freeway protests would not, however, prevent the 1969 Melbourne freeway plan guiding transport infrastructure into the 21st century. Marking its 50th anniversary, [Crystal Legacy explained](#) in *The Age* that the 1969 plan has fed long-term car dependency and associated environmental impacts including carbon emissions.

Our heritage laws owe much to the anti-freeway movement, resident action groups and other conservation activists of the 1960s and '70s. The 1974 Australian government inquiry into the National Estate said: “Freeways are a further and serious threat to inner-city areas. State road construction authorities [should] pay proper respect to our cultural heritage.”

Given heritage laws were created to protect cities from freeways, listing them within the heritage system is not only ironic, it also raises important questions about the role of heritage in our cities and the symbolism of listings.

A freeway is not the same as other state-listed roadways such as the Great Ocean Road, St Kilda Road or Royal Parade. These tree-lined boulevards with tramways enhance our cities and urban life. Freeways, on the other hand, are borne of functional necessity, despite their certain aesthetic and technological brilliance.

No doubt the Eastern Freeway embodies an important moment in Melbourne’s history. Its engineering was spectacular, and its landscaping was innovative.

Coming within the heritage system would, however, place caveats on how this transport corridor works moving forward.

Heritage should recognise diversity, but it cannot be the overriding goal of heritage listings to mirror the multifariousness of the past. Heritage listings are always selective and guided by regulations and best practice as well as external social and political factors. The overriding outcome of the urban and built heritage system is cultural stewardship.

The places that are selected for listings are those that are to be carried forward with us into the future. That the listing of a freeway has proven controversial is a sign of a healthy public debate around urban heritage.

Unlike the MCG or Federation Square, Heritage Victoria has not identified social value for the Eastern Freeway. Still, communities should play a leading role in defining and valuing heritage. Otherwise, the heritage system becomes irrelevant. The lack of universal support for the Eastern Freeway listing does not necessarily preclude its listing but suggests some caution is necessary.

Neither the politics of heritage nor the politics of freeways are relics of the past. It is likely that the state government has made this heritage nomination to prevent unexpected delays in the approval of the massive North-East Link. After Fed Square, where the Apple store was derailed by a heritage nomination, the government will not be caught off-guard again.

In contrast, opposition planning spokesman Tim Smith said: "[It's a dirty great big freeway](#) - how does that warrant heritage protection?" He would rather see "beautiful heritage homes in established suburbs" protected. Alternative visions about what is to be kept for the future will always circulate. Beautiful homes and big freeways can both be conserved. Still, it is the role of authorities to negotiate these competing visions and ask: on behalf of whom is the heritage system adopting freeways?

The places which are selected for heritage listings reveal the priorities of our society. The decision to list the Eastern Freeway at this time cannot be divorced from broader issues or events. As our cities choke in smoke and the bushfires crisis continues (linked to the climate crisis), the transition to sustainable urban transport is clearly necessary.

With an Eastern Freeway listing, the transition away from car dependency becomes a heritage issue. Assuming the listing goes ahead, its classification should therefore leave open the possibility of transforming it into a sustainable transport corridor.

The creators of our heritage system in the 1970s knew that freeways negatively impacted cities. Half a century after the 1969 freeway plan, nearing the third decade of the 21st century, and with climate change worsening, freeways are as controversial as ever. A heritage listing would not only venerate the Eastern Freeway but also generates future obligations to it.

We must reflect on whether the 20th century freeway is the kind of urban heritage which we want to take with us into the future.

The above photograph of the Eastern Freeway is from 1972 and © Herald and Weekly Times. It is held by the [State Library of Victoria](#).