

## President's Piece



During a visit to Arthur Street I was approached by a member of the social club who wanted to know where we were up to with Fellowship House. The member indicated that he and

other social club members were waiting anxiously for news, as the project meant a lot to them and they would like to see it finished. I explained as best I could that it was definitely happening, and that many negotiations were still unresolved and thus remained sensitive. He undertook to disseminate the information I provided among his fellow members, as it would reassure them that the end was in view and that their enduring confidence in our ability to deliver what we said we would deliver was not misplaced.

This discussion brought home to me the dilemma that organisations such as ours face in getting things done quickly and efficiently, and at the same time preserving the democracy and member involvement that has been so much a part of the Fellowship during its formative years. For long-term committed members, this philosophy still runs strong even though it is now a much larger, more complex and very different organisation to that envisaged by the founding members. Very often decisions have to be taken by our governing Executive Board without extensive prior consultation with the wider constituency. After all, the Executive Board members are the people you elected to make the hard decisions in the interests of the Fellowship. If the organisation is to function effectively and achieve the objectives its members expect, many decisions must be made and these may not always be universally popular.

There is a certain element of trust involved in the process and this trust is certainly encouraged by regular and factual information to members.

The discussion I had with the member is symbolic of this dilemma. I realise it has been very difficult to keep a large and diverse membership well informed of ongoing developments with Fellowship House. We have made well intentioned promises at various key stages of the project that real progress was being made, and that we would very soon have a Fellowship headquarters

we could all share in and be justifiably proud of. On a number of occasions I have stated publicly, at Fellowship functions and in this newsletter, that restoration work would soon commence and occupancy was in sight, only to be faced with barriers and disappointments which prevented this occurring.

To put things in perspective, it has been a very difficult challenge. The initial stages of gaining the necessary approvals took a very long time, mainly attributable to the heritage status of the building. Finance remained a major consideration, and it became increasingly difficult to achieve everything we hoped within a budget that was being constantly eroded by cost increases in the building industry and the rapidly deteriorating nature of the building.

During 2009, we were faced with the prospect of having only enough money to complete the ground floor of the project, which would accommodate the office facilities and the new social club premises. Whilst this was adequate and would have allowed us to relieve the desperate situation at Arthur Street, we were prevented from implementing a key element of the refurbishment. This related to our desire to achieve a high-standard, vacant upper floor which could potentially be rented to an appropriate commercial tenant and thus generate an ongoing income stream for the Fellowship. The positive side was that work could commence immediately, and with a relatively short construction phase, it seemed possible to occupy the building prior to Christmas.

This was not to be, as we were faced with unforeseen and very substantial expenses associated with fulfilling the government's heritage requirements which placed the estimated cost well beyond our reach. At that stage, just prior to Christmas 2009, we decided to halt the preliminary work which had been commenced and this naturally caused some tensions in our long-standing and highly amicable relationship with our architects and builders.

Following negotiation with the Brisbane City Council, we have been delighted with the news that the Council has pledged quite significant assistance which will enable the project to proceed to completion. Better still, with the promise of a generous private donation, we are confident there will be sufficient funds to enable the completion of refurbishment of both floors. As I write this

report, we still have some negotiations to complete and some decisions to make, but I am quietly confident Fellowship House will become a reality during the second half of 2010.

I have probably learned by hard experience not to make any promises to members that are impossible to keep. For that reason, the information I have shared during the past months has been limited. In many instances, there was simply nothing to report as the viability of the project was in the balance and subject to the positive outcome of deliberations at an official and a political level. I commend the Brisbane City Council for recognising the inherent worth of this project as one which will benefit the future development of the Mental Illness Fellowship and its valuable work for the mentally ill in Brisbane. The Council also recognises that the successful restoration of a landmark heritage building for the benefit of future generations is a significant contribution to the social and historical fabric of our city.

I must emphasise that this is a visionary project which has been on the agenda of successive Executive Boards for five years. I apologise for the endless delays which have occurred but I believe the wait is almost over. The old cliché "good things come to those who wait" seems appropriate here, and I look forward to providing members with more positive and complete information in the near future.

Members might also be interested in one of the practical issues posed by the refurbishment. Internally, there is virtually nothing that cannot be made presentable by the application of copious quantities of paint to erase the dubious handiwork of legions of graffiti artists.

When inspecting the interior, the extent to which the walls are totally covered by graffiti immediately becomes apparent. This is an interesting dilemma, as there are some graffiti masterpieces which are quite imaginative and display a definite, if misguided, artistic talent. I have a rather strong view on graffiti, probably attributable to experience as a business owner whose premises are regularly subjected to unintelligible and often obscene examples of the work of persons with malicious intent and far too much time on their hands.

*continued on page 3*

*continued from page 2*

My personal view is that all graffiti, wherever it is, should be totally and immediately obliterated as I am highly sceptical of people (however talented) who consider they hold artistic licence to deface public and private property. Nevertheless, on

the advice of our architect, we are currently grappling with the question of whether some sterling examples on the walls of Fellowship House should be retained for posterity and decorative purposes.

I am willing to accept the judgment of those with a greater understanding of the

merits of street art than I possess, but must admit I am not totally convinced.

All the very best until the next time.



***Ken Meissner***  
***President***