



Fitzroy History Society Oral History Project 2015-2017

Transcript of interview with Laurie O'Brien

(Interviewed by Meg Lee & June Senyard on 14 September, 2015. The text includes additional information and amended dates from Tom O'Brien, April 2017).

Laurie O'Brien lived at 35 Hanover Street from 1957 to 2002. Laurie is a foundation member of the Fitzroy History Society. The architecturally significant House at 35 Hanover Street with a National Trust Heritage Register State Classification BO 167, came under Housing Commission demolition orders yet it was saved. This is that story.

Reference to the book, *Fitzroy: Melbourne's First Suburb*, throughout the transcript is a publication of the Cutten History Committee of the Fitzroy History Society. The first edition was published in 1989 by Hyland House Publishing Pty Limited.



Facilitator 1: So Laurie, initially how did you come to be in Fitzroy?

Laurie O'Brien: Well moving into the particular house in Fitzroy was somewhat accidental. During the 1950's there was a growing interest in Melbourne's 19th Century domestic architecture. One early publication was *Early Melbourne Architecture* by Maie and Dermot Casey and others. It was published in 1953. Robin Boyd's *Australia's Home* was the book read by most people interested in changing house designs. Also at that time the Town and Country Planning Association became interested in examining changing styles of domestic architecture.

Facilitator 1: And who was the 'Town and Country'?

Laurie O'Brien: I don't know who their office bearers were, but as an organisation it expressed an interest in locating houses held to be worth conserving. Then in 1956 the then National Trust was founded and it became the major organisation concerned with identifying and conserving Victoria's architectural heritage. It was launched at the Wilson Hall by the Governor, Sir Dallas Brooks. At the outset, the major figure in the National Trust was Daryl Lindsay. He was then the director of the National Gallery. I know this is a bit long-winded, but I think you need some context. There was a limited amount of academic support for the Trust at the University of Melbourne (then the only University in Victoria) At the Professorial level Professor Lewis, from Architecture, Professor Burke from Fine Arts, and Professor Turner from Botany. Now that was 1956 and the following year, the National Trust established what it called 'A Survey and Identification' committee as of course The Trust had to find out what needed to be preserved. Now John (O'Brien) was on that committee. I think the other members were architects. I'm not quite sure why he was on it, but perhaps they wanted a historian. In 1959 John had sabbatical leave from the University's history department. He became particularly interested in bluestone buildings He used to drive around the inner suburbs finding and photographing bluestone houses, sometimes also in the country.

The Trust's Survey and Identification Committee – had four categories of houses it knew about or was told about and which they investigated; A, B, C and D. A was to be preserved at all costs, that were buildings of national importance, like St Pat's cathedral. B was highly significant; to be preserved C was worthy of preservation. D was interesting, preservation desirable. Later John managed to get our house bumped up from C to B presumably with the agreement of the other members. (laughs!)

Now, the National Trust history that was published in 1996 claims that although many of the early members of the Trust came from Toorak and South Yarra, it attracted, from the beginning, a number of academics from the 'other side of



town' – [laughs] a wonderful phrase like 'from the other side of the tracks', such as architects – David Saunders, Miles Lewis and George Tibbit as well as Frank Strahan, who was the University's chief archivist, all of whom lived either in Carlton or Parkville.

Facilitator 1: So how did you find your house?

Laurie O'Brien: Well in 1956-57 John and I were house hunting, looking for somewhere to live that wasn't too far from the university where we both worked. We thought Carlton would probably be too expensive. Anyway, we drove around the inner suburbs where houses were for sale, and of course this could take forever. I don't know how long it took before we drove down Hanover Street, in Fitzroy and John stopped the car in front of number 35, a square 2- storey bluestone house that we thought we'd not seen before, but in fact the Caseys had included a photograph of it in their 1953 book, so we should have remembered it. We were particularly stuck by what was carved on the parapet 'E Wills- AD 1854' Years later a friend who saw the house for the first time looked up at the parapet and said, 'How vulgar!' And I remember thinking that I suppose it is very pretentious, but that is not how it seemed to us at the time. A week or so later when we knocked on the front door of the house (which was pretty intrusive) a dignified elderly man told us that the owners lived next door.

Now we found that the owners were a brother and sister –Cliff and Edie Salmon. Cliff was exceedingly short sighted and had little to say but Edie had plenty to say. She was a teacher of laundry at the J.H. Boyd school of Domestic Economy, in South Melbourne which is not there anymore, though the building is. I know someone who'd been a student at the school who says that she was a very good teacher. I think that she didn't stick to laundry but taught in the full range of what was available there. Now they'd been left – the brother and sister – they'd been left the property they were living in, which was a fine house called *Montefiore Villa*. There is a photo of it in the *Fitzroy- Melbourne's First* 1989 on page 141.

Facilitator 1: And this is the house on the east side of No 35?

Laurie O'Brien: Yes it doesn't look as good in the photograph as it was. It was a double fronted elaborately, decorated 1880's house. Now they'd been left this property by their aunt Sarah Nelis, and she had also left them No 35 next door. Edie always referred to it simply as '35'. They'd grown up with their aunt in Fitzroy. Well, presumably for some years in Hanover Street. We later found out that Sarah Nelis, had bought No 35 in 1931 from Joseph Gray, a cooper, who had owned the house for 60 years having bought it in 1870 from Edward Wills who had built it in 1854 and had lived



in it with his family for only 16 years before selling it to Joseph Gray and moving to the goldfields.

Off he went to Kangaroo Flat, near Bendigo. He'd made a lot of money by then, because he had stone quarries. He supplied stone for major public buildings, bridges and so forth. So, he took plenty of money with him to Bendigo. But he soon lost most of it a typical goldfields story. So that when we first saw the house had had four owners; Edward Wills, who built it, Joseph Gray who he owned it from 1870-1931, Sarah Nelis who had bought it in 1931 and left it to her niece and nephew. Gray's rented the house out to a succession of tenants, one being the Victorian Infant Asylum, which occupied it from 1877 to 1881.

When we first walked around the house, the words, 'Victorian Infant Asylum' were still visible on the east wall. After seventy years the white paint had faded. We later learnt that the house was the first location of the charity now known as Berry Street Child and Family Care. Well by the 1950's, if not before, 35 Hanover Street had become a rooming house, Edie and Cliff Salmon had *Montefiore Villa* to live in and they didn't need or want the house they had been left next door. Later when we asked Edie if she had thought of selling '35' she seemed vaguely interested but initially she only wanted to talk about teaching and schools. Almost the first thing she asked me was 'what school did you go to?' She wasn't interested to talk about in Fitzroy as a place to live. Well it's hard to say probably she just took it for granted

Facilitator 1: How old were they by then?

Laurie O'Brien: Early sixties ready to retire yes. So when we were she was interested in selling? It wasn't long before they consulted their lawyers. Their Aunt Nelis had left them other properties, so money wasn't their main concern. When their lawyers said 'yes', that it would be alright to sell it, I think Edie was somewhat relieved as she would no longer be responsible for the tenants.

Facilitator 1: You had a look through the house at this stage? What was your reaction when you looked into the house- a lot of work or not?

Laurie O'Brien: Yes, but we did not see much of the interior of the house initially because the tenants were there.

At the rear of the house there was a detached bluestone kitchen with a large range. It's only source of water was from a tap over the gully trap outside. It was like an old country property with its kitchen detached from the house for fear of fire. There was no water in the house itself, but the property was sewered: there was a male and female toilet beside a derelict stable further down the backyard. It



had a stall for a horse and plenty of space above for grain and so forth. Part of the slate roof of the stable had collapsed. There was a funny little lean-to structure between the house and the kitchen in lieu of a bathroom and which was for everyone to use, as was the kitchen.

Facilitator 1: In 1970 there was no sewerage supply to the houses at Royal Terrace [opposite the Exhibition buildings] when everybody renovated they had to install the water inside each house.

Laurie O'Brien: 1970 ... That's interesting, I didn't know about that. Well the price we paid for '35' was £4,750, which was, we were told, about average for the time and location was not expensive. We negotiated a mortgage through a bank at Melbourne University. Of course, they arranged for builders and valuers to have a really good look at the house and they reported that 'considering its age' it was in remarkably good condition. (100 years old was regarded as exceedingly old) The Housing Commission assured us they had no plans as governments like to say – they had no plans to acquire any more property in Hanover Street. They'd already demolished and developed half the street. So, how naïve we were. If we had been a bit more experienced, perhaps, we wouldn't have proceeded. But perhaps we still would have gone ahead regardless, I don't know.

Facilitator 1: But the fact is you did go to the Housing Commission, did your solicitors think it worthwhile you're going ahead?

Laurie O'Brien: Well our lawyer who was a personal friend didn't raise any objections. I suppose it was a situation they were not particularly used to.

Now the next thing we did was consult John and Phyllis Murphy. John and Phyllis Murphy were the National Trust's honorary architects which meant that they were consulted and exploited by just about everybody who had bought an old house in need of restoration. We asked the Murphys "what do we do first?" They drew us a plan for rewiring the house and advise putting a damp course along the front. They recommended builders, Mr English and Mr Pearse. I remember them well, they were ardent Billy Graham fans – I think that was the year that Billy Graham first visited Australia.

Facilitator 1: Yes I can remember it may have been 1959.

Laurie O'Brien: Well Mr Pearse was a delight to watch at work, he was such a skilled carpenter. He'd done a lot of work on old places in England, I think he was English. He rehung some of our doors and did all the carpentry that had to be done.

Facilitator 2: So you got them for the renovations, and you brought the kitchen inside?



- Laurie O'Brien: Well we left the kitchen as it was. I had a huge range and a room on top for the poor servants; it would have been so hot in summer. It did have a slate roof but even so ... and we put a kitchen inside at the back of the house.
- Facilitator 2: What about a toilet?
- Laurie O'Brien: Oh yes and we put a toilet in the bathroom upstairs.
- Facilitator 2: So what was it like moving in? When did you actually move in?
- Laurie O'Brien: We spent most of the time, when at home in an upstairs room that was in quite good condition. Anyway John got to work, and he became increasingly interested in the history of Fitzroy. When he was photographing houses, he was often asked "are you from the Housing Commission?" So, you know, people were anxious, a lot of them were very anxious.
- Kids would come up to him and say "Oh, take a picture of me ... and me", and I think he gave them some prints.
- Facilitator 1: So what was Hanover Street like as a neighbourhood?
- Laurie O'Brien: Well, the photographs on pages 140 and 141 in the *Fitzroy- Melbourne's First Suburb* 1989 show how the 19th century house on the north side of Hanover Street looked in the late 1950's and early 1960's (see Figure 1 below)
- Not long before we moved to Fitzroy the Housing Commission had demolished the 19th century houses on the south side of the street and replaced them with walk-up flats and eight two story row houses then called maisonettes, except right on the corner of Hanover and Nicholson Street where as early as 1936 a block of more than 30 flats, named 'Cairo' had been built around a large lawn and garden. They were owned by the family who built them for over 60 years. The Housing Commission sold the eight maisonettes at auction and most, if not all, the people who purchased were people who were then commonly referred to as "New Australians". They liked to be close to the city and had not been brought up to regard Fitzroy as a rundown impoverished suburb and a house in Fitzroy was as likely to be a dump to live in-as indeed some were.
- Facilitator 1: Can I just ask you – you said 'a dump to live in' – was the word 'slum' used?
- Laurie O'Brien: Oh yes, oh yes, slum – the Brotherhood of St Laurence produced a newsletter in the early 1950's that they called 'Slum News'.



Figure 1. North side of Hanover Street, no. 35 is the bluestone house on the right (about 1958).

Facilitator 1: And he was a local Fitzroy identity?

Laurie O'Brien: Yes - it was Father Tucker who organised the Brotherhood's anti-slum campaign. This is a page from Slum News, October 1952 (see Figure 2 below). This is Fitzroy Street. The Housing Commission, urged on by the Brotherhood undertook Fitzroy's first Slum clearance project: between 1953 and 1956 the Commission compulsorily acquired and demolished about 70 houses and several shops in Palmer and Fitzroy Streets and along the south side of Hanover Street and replaced them with walk up flats and row houses. The Commission called the completed project the St Laurence Estate. One of the buildings demolished was an antique shop on the corner of Palmer and Fitzroy Streets.



Figure 2. 'Slum News', October 1952. (from Brotherhood of St Lawrence archives).

- Facilitator 1 That's the shop that Barry Humphries used to visit as a schoolboy at Melbourne Grammar and in his school uniform. He found Charles Conder prints there.
- Laurie O'Brien He found quite a number of valuable items and thought the proprietor most knowledgeable ('Slum News' called it a second hand dealer's shop)
- Facilitator 1: So the maisonettes Laurie, they were on the south side of Hanover Street.
- Laurie O'Brien: Yes, they had just been finished when we moved into Hanover Street.
- Facilitator 1: The bluestone Christian Israelite's church here on the corner of Fitzroy Street and Little Hanover Street wasn't demolished?



#Laurie O'Brien: No churches were demolished on that project. It was in 1957 -8 that the Housing Commission told us they had no plans to acquire any more property in Hanover Street.

You can get some idea of what the 19th century houses on the north side of Hanover street looked like in the late 1950's and early 1960's from the photos that John took at that time some of which are reproduced in *Fitzroy- Melbourne's First Suburb*, 1989, pp140 &141. About three of the houses on the north side of Hanover Street had been built prior to 1854 so were older than No. '35'.

A postman lived in one of these single-story houses. A family called Lee (or Leishman) lived in this large white painted bluestone house. They were closely involved in the theatre in the city and I think they had a lot of theatre people living there. However all but one of these 19th century houses between Nicholson Street and Fitzroy street were demolished by the Commission in the 1960's. Now next door to No. 35, on the west of Nicholson street side, was a two storey triple arched house where Peter Cher and his family lived. He was from northern Italy. Now he had earlier had a wine saloon in Brunswick Street.

Facilitator 2: And how long was it since he'd arrived?

Laurie O'Brien: I don't know how long he'd lived in that house, but he came to Australia from, I think it was Turin, up in the north of Italy, before the Second World War.

Facilitator 1: Where was his wine saloon?

Laurie O'Brien: In Brunswick Street, opposite the Brotherhood of St Laurence, and it featured in a film shot in 1946 or 1947 which was called *Gaol Does Not Cure*. The Brotherhood was concerned about the extent of alcoholism in Fitzroy because there was so much drunkenness on the streets. The film was made for the Brotherhood by Jack Fitzsimmons who was connected with the radical Realist Film Unit Father Tucker seemed to know where and who to turn to get to anything he wanted done. The film showed a very drunk man being thrown out the door of the wine saloon onto Brunswick Street.

Facilitator 1: Did you get to meet Father Tucker very often?

Laurie O'Brien: No I didn't. By the time we moved To Fitzroy Father Tucker was spending most of his time at the Brotherhood's settlement at Carrum Downs

Facilitator 1: Were there any shops near the corner of Nicholson Street and the Cairo Flats?

Laurie O'Brien: No, when the Cairo flats were built in the 1930's a cafe was incorporated in the complex that was chiefly for the Cairo tenants, though other people could eat there. But by 1950's it had become a milk bar. Many of the people in Hanover



Street (especially the Cairo tenants) were city centred. And the demolition of so many houses had cut the street in half socially. There was little sense of community.

Facilitator 1 So what was the area of Fitzroy close to Hanover Street like as a neighbourhood in the late 1950s and early 1960's?

Well, Brunswick Street between Victoria Parade and Gertrude Street, with its large houses and businesses looked prosperous. But further north near to us, on both sides of Brunswick Street most of the shops were much shabbier, some even appeared to be permanently closed. There was a couple of fruit and vegetable shops, one right on the corner of Hanover Street that displayed tired looking vegetables in its window and which we avoided until we found out that what you had to ask for was stuff that was 'out the back'; all the good stuff was out the back. On the corner of Victoria Street and Brunswick Street there was a wonderful shop called Chandler's Hardware, it seemed to keep just about everything and some of their goods spilled out onto the pavement. Not far from us on the west side of Brunswick Street was the headquarters of the Brotherhood of St Lawrence where it had been since it moved to Fitzroy in the 1930's. What they called their 'new building' went up in 1959 and with many extensions is still there, though now it has a roof garden.

There were several second-hand furniture shops – or junk shops as they were called. And sometimes you could get very cheap stuff from them like these kitchen chairs. Then in Fitzroy Street, parallel to Brunswick Street, there was a gospel hall, and its members used to conduct open air services in nearby streets.

Facilitator: And where was the gospel hall?

Laurie O'Brien: Well, it later became a Moslem prayer room.

Facilitator: Oh yes, up by Palmer Street?

Laurie O'Brien: Yes. Anyway we found their style of worship very irritating especially early on Sunday mornings when they would wheel their piano accordion to a chosen spot on the pavement which was often in Hanover Street, near us. Then with six voices they'd perform as loudly as they could but without the vigour and gusto of the Salvation Army. They never seemed to attract an audience.

On the east side of Brunswick Street there was Budgeon's office furniture shop and next to it was the large bluestone Methodist Church with twin spires. In 1969 the church was sold to the Housing Commission and it was one of the many buildings that the Commission demolished to make way for the 20 story tower blocks of the Atherton Gardens Estate. On the north-east corner of King William



and Brunswick Street there was a fine 3 storey bluestone building that had originally been the National Hotel and had been built in 1858 by Edward Wills the stonemason and stone quarry owner who had built 35 Hanover Street for his family in 1854. Early in the 1950's the building became the presbytery of All Saints Catholic church which it still is. Several blocks further south there was Gertrude Street, now such a smart shopping precinct it was then regarded as Fitzroy's worst major street in that it had the most visible drunkenness. Joy Demousi's article gives a graphic account of growing up in a Greek family who lived near the corner of Napier Street and Gertrude Street. However, before our kitchen in Hanover Street was useable, we often used to go and eat in Gertrude Street, at a restaurant called 'Balkan'. It was a cheap and inviting place to eat, huge meals for very hungry people most of whom seemed to be single men who probably lived in nearby rooming houses. It was owned by, or run by, a Miss Duchon who lived near the corner of Gertrude and George Street

Facilitator: So where was the restaurant – the Balkan? It's interesting it's called 'Balkan'?

Laurie O'Brien: In Gertrude Street, near Brunswick Street, though by the late 1960's it would have been demolished by the Housing Commission before they built the high-rise flats. Yes, John took a photograph of it and the word 'Balkan' is written on the window. That was a great place to eat.

Facilitator: There was a Russian component at that section of Gertrude Street?

Laurie O'Brien: Look, there were so many groups including many people from Macedonia. It was a very multicultural area. But to move further afield, close to the Fitzroy Town Hall Stone's Timber Yard occupied a very large tract of land bounded by Condell, Young, Napier and Little Charles Streets. The elaborately decorated and rather grand Fitzroy Town Hall appeared to sprout unexpectedly alongside the modest houses of Napier Street. In the late 1960's Stones Timber Yard moved to Clifton Hill. The section of Stone's that used to be very close to the south side of the Town Hall is now the adventure playground and a childcare centre.

John used to get timber from Stone's because he liked carpentry and made various things for the house. Though most of the good stuff he found was at Whelan the Wrecker's out at Sunshine, not in Fitzroy.

Then of course there was the Police Station, alongside the Town Hall, where it still is. Now we'd heard of course that the Fitzroy Police were pretty rough with their clients. Mr Cher, our next-door neighbour who'd had the wine saloon, we got to know him quite well, advised us to always ring the police if any drunks in the street were creating a racket, though we never did. We witnessed one of these en



counters one night. A very drunk man was yelling and singing loudly as he staggered up and down Hanover Street and obviously, Mr Cher had rung the police and as they came round with the divvy van and told him to "get in the van" But he objected, insisting that he finish his song and the two police officers stood there till he'd finished and then they shoved him in the van. Anyway they appeared to treat him quite well.

Fitzroy was such a small municipality that councillors seemed to know many if not most residents, as did the council staff who worked at the Town Hall. Politically to cite the historian Graeme Davison, Fitzroy like Richmond and Collingwood was a fiefdom in the old ALP machine But aside from politics council staff could be helpful and accommodating to residents. John got to know a Mr O'Halloran who was the Deputy Town Clerk. He let John take rate books home to peruse which he should not have done. But that's the sort of place it was, it was very casual. In terms of services it was a a roads, rates and garbage council/ Rubbish was collected in those metal bins that everybody had in those days and I think the collectors made the job as noisy as possible. There were quite a lot of strikes too – pretty frequent strikes. The head garbo, Billy Wormsley lived in Fitzroy. He and his mate Snowy used to cut some of the branches of our pepper tree every year, because they grew so fast. It was a huge pepper tree that grew in the back yard.

Facilitator: Is it still there Laurie?

Laurie O'Brien: No, no, when it was cut down a large termite nest was found in the base of it. (No, there's a cut-leaf birch there now) But this pepper tree, it grew so fast that every year some of its branches would hit the windows at the back of the house. After Snowy and Mr Wormsley had cut back the branches they carted them to the council tip of course in the council truck. Now I suppose we gave them money for cutting the branches, but not for disposing of them, as that was treated as council business. It was a very social occasion, lots of beer. Most people would give the garbos beer at Christmas. The street trees in the photographs of Hanover Street taken in the late 1950's are clearly growing in the gutters. But early in the 1960's they were removed and new trees planted in the footpaths, perhaps because the Council's new street sweeper was too wide for trees growing in the road.

Facilitator 1 They were actually growing in the roadway?

Laurie O'Brien: Yes. Well I think main the thing left to talk about is the saga of the Housing Commission's return to Fitzroy, or rather to our area of Fitzroy in 1960. I've already described how in the early 1950's the Commission had demolished about 70 houses in and around Fitzroy Street and along the south side of Hanover Street and replaced them with walk-up flats and row housing. Also, that in 1957-8 the



Commission had assured us that they had no plans to acquire any further property in Hanover Street. However, by the 1960's the Housing Commission was able to embark on more extensive slum reclamation in the inner suburbs and to rehouse 'slum dwellers' in the 20 story tower blocks that were to become the Commission's legacy in Melbourne inner suburbs. Initially in order to gauge the extent of slum property, two very senior Housing Commission officers, Graeme Shaw and J.H Davey, conducted what became known as a 'windscreen survey'. On the basis of only house facades as seen through their car windows they estimated the location and extent of properties that were beyond repair, likely to be verminous and needing to be demolished. (There's a pub in Carlton on the corner of Elgin and Drummond streets called the 'Shaw Davey Slum', a name which must puzzle a number of its customers.

The Commission also studied recent examples of high rise public housing in Western Europe. In Fitzroy the Commission worked in a large tract of land on the east side of Brunswick Street where it demolished more than 200 properties and replaced them with 800 flats in the four 20 storey tower blocks of the Atherton Gardens Estate. At the same time the Commission also returned to the 'slum pocket' on the west side of Brunswick Street where it had worked in the early 1950's. It seemed to regard this area of slum reclamation as unfinished business. Hence their decision to demolish the 19th century houses on the north side of Hanover Street together with the adjacent houses on the south side of King William Street and replace them with walk-up flats. The Commission was obliged first to 'proclaim' a selected area and, sometime later, to serve householders in that area with a 'notice to treat', meaning that they were required to negotiate the sale of their property to the Commission. It was 1964 when the Commission descended on the north side of Hanover Street and when No 27 to 47 received a 'Notice to treat' (which of course included our house) it was pretty frightening. Naturally we objected. You had the right to object. We managed to get three letters in support of our objection. One was from the Fitzroy Council. The Mayor at that time was Florence Peel. We didn't know her, but we did know Councillors Bert Wood and Tom Brodie, two of the three councillors in our ward., Councillor Wood had some remarkable opinions. He thought a service station on every corner would act as traffic calmers. He thought there was too much traffic in and out of Fitzroy. Now I don't know if it was because of Councillors Wood and Brodie, but anyway the Fitzroy Council supported us with a letter saying our house should be preserved. The Royal Historical Society also gave us a letter in support of our objections, as did the National Trust. I suppose John approached them. So we had three letters from these three organisations. And I think we must have requested



a visit from the Minister for Housing, we must have, otherwise he wouldn't have come.

Now the Minister then was Lindsay Thompson and with him in a long black car were two Housing Commission heavy weights. Now this was 1964 and some parts of our house were in reasonable shape but other parts looked pretty raw. I remember that just before the ministerial visit rushing out and buying a cyclamen, God knows why a cyclamen, and putting it in a pot on the staircase windowsill, anything to distract the minister from gazing at walls and floors. At the Murphy's suggestion a small flat was being constructed in the back yard beside the derelict stable which was to help pay for the house. Its floor had just been laid and the new wood looked fresh and modern and seemed to please the minister. But I think he thought the house itself was pretty ordinary. I don't think we got a formal letter from him or from the Commission at that stage. I really don't think we did. It makes you so cross and embarrassed doesn't it, the things you should have kept and haven't. But the following year, 1965, not long before John died we got a letter from the Commission saying that we'd been exempt from selling our house to them. In 1966, after John died, I spent a year in England with our son, Tom who had just turned six. . Not long after we returned to Fitzroy, it would have been only a couple of months or less, a letter arrived from the Housing Commission saying that they wanted to renegotiate the sale of No 35 and one of the key sentences was "we are your only buyers". They were certainly practised at exerting pressure on householders if not at intimidating them. Of course I was furious because we had had received an exemption. Now this was, I think, ten years before the Hamer government introduced the Historical Buildings Preservation Act that protected at least those houses on a Register of Historic Buildings. At that time we had one of those gas stoves, that has its oven at the sidewith a flat top and I remember standing beside the stove writing an angry letter to the Housing Commission on the top of the oven saying that we'd had an exemption and that we still want to stay here. Anyway a letter came back saying that I could stay as long as I liked. Well that was alright for me, but what about the house! Oh they were really wily. Fortunately, that was the end of their harassment; perhaps by then the Commission had much bigger fish to fry in Fitzroy – the completion of the four 20 storey tower blocks on the Atherton Gardens Estate in Brunswick Street. Other householders on the north side of Hanover Street who resented selling their houses to the Commission (as most did) were not so lucky. Among the few who did not object was our next door neighbour, Cliff Salmon. His sister Edie had died and I think he was quite pleased to move. The Commission demolished his fine *Montefiore Villa* in 1966.

Our other next door neighbour, Mr Cher, fiercely objected to selling his two houses to the Commission. They were obviously in good repair; I mean they couldn't have been in better repair. We heard that he wore out the carpet at the headquarters of the Housing Commission; he was so determined not to move. However, to no avail.

Eventually, as a great concession, he was told that after his house was demolished he could retain the land if he was prepared to build walk- up flats on it. So he laid concrete all over his properties. In place of the elegant triple arched house where he had lived he built 5 walk-up flats with a car park underneath at ground level., Under his supervision they would have been very well built, but few people would prefer them to the 19th century houses that they replaced.

Facilitator: Did Mr Cher live in one of his flats?

Laurie O'Brien: No, he moved with his family to the leafy and desirable suburb of Kew!

Facilitator 1: you would have been there Laurie when the Cher's house next door to you was demolished?

Laurie O'Brien: Yes. In 1969, it was the last house on the north side of Hanover Street to be demolished. Only No 35 was left standing.



Figure 3. Rear of no. 35 Hanover Street 1973 (photo Norman Wodetsky).