

Funds worry for historic building

By **GERALDINE O'BRIEN**
Heritage Writer

It's a struggle, says Jenny Munro, to "get recognition that Aboriginal people could have an interest in a building".

"As far as most people are concerned, our only sacred sites are out in the middle of the bush," the chairman of the Metropolitan Aboriginal Land Council said.

But after a five-year campaign, the specially formed Eora Trust now holds title to the 1938 Day of Mourning site in Sydney's Elizabeth Street, and this week renovation of the historic building begins.

The building, formerly owned by the Cyprus-Hellene Club, had been in line for a 25-storey redevelopment when the campaign for its preservation began.

In 1938, as white Australia celebrated the sesquicentenary of the arrival of the First Fleet, Aborigines — who weren't

counted in the Census and weren't allowed to vote — marched in silent protest from the Town Hall to the then-Australian Hall in Elizabeth Street, where they declared a Day of Mourning and held a meeting to demand basic civic rights.

According to Ms Munro, even then "they weren't allowed in by the front door — they had to come in through the back".

After revelations of the site's significance, a permanent

conservation order was placed on the building and the site was eventually bought by the Metropolitan Aboriginal Land Council and the Indigenous Land Corporation for \$4.25 million.

Preliminary investigations have shown the auditorium — which in later years housed the Phillip Street Theatre and the Mandolin cinema — still has original murals on the walls, as well as its original stage and floor.

But, as is the way with old and

long-neglected buildings, the restoration costs have ballooned from about \$4 million to closer to \$7 million.

Applications for funding assistance to the Federal Government's Federation Fund were refused and Ms Munro said the NSW Government had also refused to help.

"Evidently neither government thinks it is important enough to warrant assistance," she said.

The Land Council would probably have to sell some of its holdings in order to finance the work.

The hall will be restored, with its mezzanine balcony, as a multi-purpose hall and "museum of Aboriginal heroes".

The Aboriginal History and Heritage Council will have office space in the building, with archives in the basement and the Metropolitan Aboriginal Land Council will also move in.

The restoration should be completed by early next year.