

Lots of heat over Coober Pedy's hottest block

From LANCE CAMPBELL
in Coober Pedy

Lot 6 is nothing to look at. It may appear just another tract of dirt in the middle of the desert, but it is also the hottest property in Coober Pedy.

The council wants to sell the prime piece of real estate next month and use the proceeds to build the town's first council chambers nearby. The oldtime opal miners say they bought the land for the town in the first place, and it is akin to a "white man's sacred site".

They don't want it sold, or at least, if it has to go, they want a say in what happens to the profits.

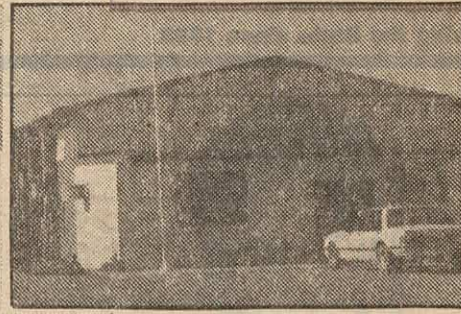
Lot 6 was sold once before by the residents' association, the forerunner of the council, in the mid-'70s, but the uproar was so great that the new owner gave it back the next day.

The future of Lot 6, an octagonal block 100 metres by 80 metres at the business end of town, is the subject of a community survey, a satirical column, a front-page story and a letter from the mayor, Mr Eric Malliotis, in the local *Coober Pedy Times*.

The origins of the dispute go back into the dusts of time, when the residents were granted the block by the Department of Lands in the '60s. It was there the council chambers were to be built when the world's best-known opal town got big enough.

Some say the miners paid for the block, others say they footed the bill for the paperwork only, but they put up a tin shed anyway, and showed 16-millimetre movies in it.

Then in 1977 Coober Pedy be-



LEFT: Mr Dellithanassis (left) and a former president of the Miners' Association, Mr Jonathan James, on Lot 6.

INSET: The existing council hall.
Pictures: CAMPBELL BRODIE

low miner Takis Dellithanassis insists that townspeople want Lot 6 as the site for a town hall.

"I worked my guts out for this block, like others did," Mr Dellithanassis said. "There's always been a Lot 6 — the centre of Coober Pedy, and we've always believed the town hall should be in the centre, not over there at the end."

Mr Dellithanassis said he had been asked by a council official last week if he was going to bid for Lot 6 himself.

"I said: 'This block is not for sale'. If they sell Lot 6, I'll make sure not one of them gets re-elected."

On one thing both the council and the miners agree. Interested bidders at the public auction on July 20 can look at around \$200,000 to \$250,000 for Lot 6, the most famous address in town.

came the not-so-proud owner of a hall trucked from Maralinga. The council, which legally took over all assets of the residents' association, including Lot 6, when it was proclaimed last year, says the hall is "a joke" for a town of 4000 people and council office space now is almost non-existent.

Mr Malliotis, a former opal miner who was part of the protest against the previous sale, said

yesterday the council had investigated developing Lot 6 itself, "but that would cost a million dollars and the ratepayers wouldn't want us to take out a loan like that".

Instead, new council chambers built a few hundred metres away would be the first stage of a proposed community area, he said.

"Lot 6 was a sacred site to us years ago," Mr Malliotis said,

"when the miners were a closer lot than they are now.

"It was the only place we had, but Coober Pedy is changing. We now have 48 nationalities here. Selling Lot 6 is the best opportunity to do something about council space, and having something to be proud of."

Mr Malliotis refused to be photographed, partly because, he said, "there is no controversy", but fel-