

An International Conference to explore approaches to the preservation of urban built heritage, with a focus on Melbourne

Melbourne Brain Centre | Kenneth Myer Building | University of Melbourne

<http://artinstitute.unimelb.edu.au> | aiah-info@unimelb.edu.au | +61 3 8344 8957

Andrew Andersons

PTW Architects

SYDNEY SINCE THE 1960s: Sydney's architectural heritage

Over the past sixty years, Sydney has tripled in population and changed from an export hub and a centre of industrial production to an international node of finance and service industries. In this period perceptions of architectural heritage have altered significantly. Heritage listed buildings and conservation areas are now an inseparable part of the planning process after the politicising events of the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time there has been a major shift in architectural philosophy, from the ideological positions of modernism to a far more inclusive view of the architectural value of evolutionary development.

At the end of the 1950s, Sydney was still a low-rise city. Little development had taken place since the depression of the 1930s. Sydney's central area was still surrounded by the finger wharves built by the Sydney Harbour Trust in the early twentieth century. Shipping, warehousing, light manufacturing as well as the majority of retailing and business occupied a richly layered urban concentration, served by the underground railway lines built in the 1920s and the extensive network of electric tramways and ferry services. The majority of CBD users came by public transport.

By the 1960s substantial change was afoot. The 30 level AMP building was the first Sydney building to break the old 150 feet limit and was part of the new focus on the harbour, led by the construction of the Sydney Opera House. The 1960s saw the demolition of large numbers of fine city buildings including the T&G Building, The Royal Exchange, The Union Club and the Australia Hotel. In 1969 the State Planning Authority of NSW produced a scheme for extending the CBD of Sydney into the Woolloomooloo basin. This proposal was strongly opposed by residents and this, together with the proposed demolition of the "Rocks" area, led to one of the most celebrated "green bans".

By the 1970s an era of significant change began challenging the attitudes of previous decades. The National Trust, Royal Australian Historical Society and Institute of Architects provided the intellectual basis for this. Jack Munday of the Builders Labourers Federation introduced some forty green bans in Sydney giving real clout to conservation groups. The election of the Whitlam Government in 1972 led to the National Estate Inquiry and the setting up of the Australian Heritage Commission in 1975. The Labour Government provided the funding to put the Woolloomooloo Area and Glebe Estate into public ownership as government housing.

The newly elected state labour government, led by Neville Wran, was highly responsive to the raised levels of new heritage awareness. In 1977 the government established the NSW Heritage Council and the subsequent state heritage protection system, which remains a fundamental part of planning in NSW with the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979. The adoption of the Burra Charter did much to clarify the methodology of architectural conservation. By the 1980s an effective conservation regime was in place preserving the best of Sydney's pre-

World War II architectural heritage. Conservation of post-war modernist buildings has proved far more difficult. No attention has been paid, however, to the impact of developments upon vistas of well known landmarks, as is evidenced by the ever-changing context of heritage buildings in the growing city centre.

After several failed rounds of tenders and a Commission of Inquiry, which found that the magnificent Finger Wharf at Woolloomooloo could not be economically maintained, the building was struck off the Heritage Register. However, the Institute of Architects was able to persuade the NSW Government to retender the project in the early 1990s, leading to this vibrant hotel, residential and restaurant complex. The finger wharves at Walsh Bay were also the subject of a number of rounds of development tenders in the 1980s. The final round of tenders was won by Transfield and Delmo in the early 1990s. The introduction of a new partner, MIRVAC, led to pressure to demolish the majority of the Sydney Harbour Trust built structures. The NSW Government invited French conservation architect, Philippe Robert to advise. Robert's scheme, which promoted a balance of conservation, adaptive re-use, new construction and the introduction of a water front promenade, has led to an outstanding heritage precinct.

The City of Sydney Planning regulations require mandatory maintenance of "street walls" with a minimum height of 20 metres to a maximum height of 45 metres to preserve the traditional 19th-early 20th century character of the city and conserve the context of heritage buildings. Together with floor space ratio controls and height limits, this has been effective. Nowhere is the problem of conserving the architectural heritage of modern buildings more in evidence than in the demolition of three fine publicly-funded buildings in the current re-development of Darling Harbour by the NSW Government. This major project was the centrepiece of the NSW government's celebration of the bicentenary of European settlement in Australia in 1988 and was opened by Queen Elizabeth II in that year.

The development was the recipient of numerous design awards including the Sir John Sulman award, for The Sydney Exhibition Centre. Although Darling Harbour proved hugely popular with the general public, the newly elected NSW coalition government declared the site to be of "state significance" and called for development proposals from industry, totally outside any normal planning process.

Less distinguished architecturally than the 1988 scheme, the new design incorporates an assembly of disparate building forms, including high rise apartments and hotel towers that fill in the Darling Harbour basin contrary to the nature of the topography.

In 2006, an international competition for the Barangaroo development attracted some 173 entries and was won by a team led by Philip Thalys. All shortlisted entries made much of the need to make a transition in the form of the development from the high rise nature of Sydney's CBD to the 19th century low rise fabric of the "Rocks" conservation area to the north. In 2009, Lend Lease Corporation was judged the successful bidder for the \$6 billion Barangaroo South section of the site in a scheme that significantly increased the Gross Floor Area on the site.

In February 2012 the NSW Premier announced that he had received an "unsolicited proposal" from James Packer's Crown Casino to build a new casino complex on a section of the Barangaroo site, designated for parkland. A scheme designed by UK architects Wilkinson Eyre was accepted by the NSW Government. With a height of 275 metres and fluid sculptural forms, the design makes no attempt whatsoever to relate to the historic scale of the

Rocks precinct. The “unsolicited bid” process is totally contradictory to what was envisaged in the Environmental Protection and Assessment Act 1979.

Events in Sydney over the last five years suggest continuing changes in attitude towards architectural heritage and urban design. Such diverse factors as the “world economy”, universal Internet access, our newfound focus on Asia, and changing demography have all combined to effect profound and escalating cultural change. Not the least of this is the dramatic change in architectural thinking that emphasises “landmark projects” designed by international “signature architects”, a process that is changing the face of cities like Sydney. For those who value the aesthetic richness and diversity as well as sense of collective memory provided by a rich architectural heritage, now is the time for constructive advocacy.