

Sutherland Entertainment Centre

Scoping Report: Architects' Design Statement

The Sutherland Entertainment Centre holds an important place in the collective memory of the Sutherland community. Designed and built in the 1970s primarily as a musical venue, the then 'Sutherland Civic Centre' relied on an inward focus on its auditorium and a narrow public address to Eton Street. This was a time when buildings like this relied on a separation between inside and outside and where spaces such as the foyer had only one purpose. This was also long before the development of Peace Park to the building's north.

Fast forward to the present day - what we now find is a 40+ year old building which is in relatively good physical condition. Yet, as a modern day public venue, it must cater to a diversity of cultural and technical needs. It needs to have a more open outlook and offer more to its community, not only in terms of its relationship with its immediate surrounds but also in relation to its spatial flexibility.

The refurbishment seeks to offer a new and more engaging address for the Entertainment Centre by virtue of a more friendly and integrated relationship with Peace Park. This speaks to an opportunity to re-affirm Peace Park as the Civic heart of Sutherland. A place with stronger connections not only to already established civic institutions but also with future developments within the Sutherland Town Centre.

The discrete spaces within Peace Park such as the War Memorial and the Chuo City Garden function as a series of connected landscape rooms with their own identity and public purpose. Accordingly, the Entertainment Centre will feel like it is much more a part of the park and, conversely, the park will also feel as though it is an extension of the building. It follows then that where the building and park come together there will be an open and friendly interface. The various elements that make up the park should read as extensions of the indoor spaces they serve, so that visually there is no clear delineation between indoors and outdoors.

To that end we propose an active interface with Peace Park - a 'verandah' - which serves as a connective threshold between park and building and between inside and out, where both the park and building benefit from each other. This interface will help mediate the change in level between park and building and provide an at-grade connection between Merton Street and Eton Street. The verandah space, with its future opportunity for a café/kiosk offering, will activate the park's southern edge and create a more visible and accessible entry for the Entertainment Centre.

The new foyer will be an extension of this 'verandah' space, envisioned as a new Civic Room or 'pergola', providing a better address for the Entertainment Centre and, in turn, an appropriate public address for the Park to Eton Street. In this way it will read clearly as the latest addition to the array of public structures within Peace Park, a structure that belongs as much to the park as the theatre. The foyer will encourage and facilitate this interactive potential, able to act as a flexible theatrical space in its own right for a host of less formal events that may not suit the Theatre itself. It will serve its traditional role as gathering place at performance times but also be a venue for a diverse range of community uses from banquets and exhibitions to intimate musical performances. The design of the Foyer is therefore the key to achieving this new friendly interface, and the point at which the open unprogrammed spaces of the park merge with the carefully curated events within the theatre.

The Foyer will be designed to provide a vibrant activated space that is a clear and decisive entry point into the SEC facility from the adjoining outdoor forecourt, verandah space and Peace Park. The foyer will provide a sense of anticipation for visitors arriving to see a show or participate in the various other activities in the SEC precinct. It should provide opportunities to showcase and reflect the cultural vibrancy created within the facility. The Foyer will assist in clear wayfinding and provide obvious locations for the Box Office/Reception as well as the other key functional areas that it connects too. Given that numerous activities will run simultaneously within the facility the Foyer needs to provide sufficient size and flexibility to separate or partition off spaces to enable these disparate activities to occur without disruption to one another.

Just as there is much spatial potential between the building and the park there are also wonderful opportunities to re-use and celebrate much of the building's current fabric. The structure of the proposed Foyer space takes its cues directly from the existing brick columns, adding to and reinterpreting the original structural narrative without overwhelming it: the existing western façade is put on display. The existing black box space and administration building will be retained and re-purposed to be theatre bar/cafe and foyer on the Ground Floor and multi-purpose community room and rehearsal space on Level 1, accessed by the existing main entry stair. Likewise, the structure and facade on the northern side of the building will be adapted for new uses such as cafe, kitchen and store on the Ground Floor and Administration spaces and Green Room on Level 1, each with a view of the park and connected by the existing ivy clad egress stair.

The auditorium also retains much of its surrounding envelope but will become an entirely new and lively space, with the addition of a full flytower allowing the theatre to host major theatrical productions and diversifying its range of functions. The existing flat-floor auditorium will be transformed into a more immersive tiered seating arrangement and all acoustics, accessibility and back of house functions will be revitalised to provide a venue with broad appeal for audiences and performers alike. The necessary back of house functions have been designed as a discrete and compact addition to the less visible east and south facades, visually interpreting and complementing the existing aggregated brick forms of the theatre and materially linking the building with the adjoining heritage listed church and presenting an appropriate scale to the park.

The design for the new theatre is designed to meet or exceed national benchmarks for Performing Arts Centres, achieving a four star rating for theatres on the local, regional and national touring circuit.