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Dear John,

Thank you for forwarding the comments from the Heritage Council of New South Wales. As an active member of similar bodies here in Scotland, I am naturally sympathetic to their viewpoint, and believe that the preservation of the structure and setting of Aspinall House is important. However I believe that they have fundamentally misunderstood elements of the scheme and their contribution to the overall massing and stylistic approach.

They commented in particular:

However, the proposed Scottish Baronial style library is higher than the existing library because of the steep roof form. It is located beside Aspinall House (formerly St Killians) listed as a heritage item on the Woollahra LEP which has complex massing but a relatively simple form of roof form. The proposed library roof presentation is complex with high turrets on the two corners, multiple oversized dormer windows on all facades and a large roof terrace surrounded by heavy ornate balustrading. The roof balustrading mimics the balustrading on the tower of Aspinall House but is much larger in area and length when seen from a number of viewpoints. The complicated and more massive roof form with its high turret and dormer protrusions, and prominent balustrading to the roof terrace would overshadow and diminish Aspinall House.

and recommended:

The roof design shall be simplified to avoid visual competition with the Aspinall House.

Any significant simplification would compromise the integrity of the chosen Scots Baronial form. The existing library is, self-evidently, in the same place, and its 20th century form is anachronistic when considered alongside Aspinall House, with a solid block-like massing. In contrast, its re-cladding in Scots Baronial form moves the architectural language back to a similar Victorian period, and its adjustments to the massing will lighten the overall impact of the building.

One of the real strengths of this scheme is that it does not attempt to imitate or pastiche Aspinall House, instead choosing a different, coherent style with a particular significance to the Scots College. This mimics the variety of forms in 19th century villa developments in suburbs such as The Grange, Edinburgh, where large villas by different architects in

multiple styles were developed piecemeal on comparatively modest plots. Juxtapositions such as this were not unknown.

The steep, complex roof form is an essential part of 19th century Scots Baronial architecture, because that form mimics earlier Scots tower houses and castles, which feature battlements and towers on top of relatively plain, defensive walls. Roofs are steep to shed water, and those steep slopes dictate the angles of gables, whether crow-stepped or plainer. Shallower roof pitches and gables simply aren't found in this style.

It is the roof that draws the lower elements together – without the confident expression of the towers and roofline elements, the treatment of the lower elements becomes incoherent, and the massing tends back towards the ponderous failings of the current building. The complex elements do not weigh down the roof massing – they lighten it.

A cautionary tale exists in Scotland at Clatto House, Fife, where a Bryce re-cladding was shorn of its roofline detailing mid-20th century. The gradual build-up towards the roof suddenly stops, and the remaining large areas of slate dominate the lower walls without relief. The effect on a taller building such as the Stevenson Library would be more dramatic – the protruding towers and gables serve to lighten the mass of the building, rather than emphasise it. Similarly, the balustrading is modelled on its use in 19th century Scots Baronial buildings, not Aspinall House, and its purpose is to lighten the tops of walls more than either an overhanging roof or a solid parapet would do.

The first paragraph above talks of overshadowing Aspinall House “beside” the Stevenson Library. In reality, the proposed new library sits to the south-east of Aspinall House, at a lower level, and it appears to me that Aspinall House will largely retain its existing exposure to sun. The tallest tower will be lower than Aspinall House's tower, and the latter's principal elevations will be unaffected.

The integrity of Scots Baronial design depends on its faithful replication of historic roofline elements (typically from 15th to 17th century Scottish castles) to balance the more modern wall elements below (such as large 19th century plate glass windows). The design evolution of this proposal has sought to tauten the massing and vocabulary. Any significant simplification of the roof design would have the opposite effect to that intended, emphasising the mass of the building by removing the visual relief, and creating a non-sequitur between the elevations below and the roof above. I therefore strongly recommend that the design should continue to feature the towers, balustrades, gables and dormers as developed and proposed.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Alastair Disley