

**SSD 5752-2012 Sydney International Convention, Exhibition and Entertainment Precinct –
Redevelopment of convention centre, exhibition centre, entertainment facilities and
associated public domain work**

Docomomo Australia Inc comments on the Development Application

Submission prepared by

Dr Scott Robertson, B.Sc (Arch), B.Arch (Hons), M.B.Env. (Btg Conservation), PhD

Founding President & current Vice-President Docomomo Australia Inc

10 May 2013

1.0 Introduction

Docomomo Australia¹ objects to the proposal to destroy the current Darling Harbour Precinct, involving the demolition of the Sydney Entertainment Centre, the Sydney Exhibition Centre, the Sydney Convention Centre and the public spaces associated with them. These public buildings and public spaces were created as a part of the celebration of the bicentennial of white settlement in Australia and are not only much used and highly regarded by the citizens of Sydney but are also highly regarded overseas as one of the world's best harbour side urban renewal projects.

2.0 Summary

Docomomo Australia submits that:

1. The existing Sydney Exhibition Centre should be retained. Its facilities should be updated and the Centre expanded over the site of the current Entertainment Centre Carpark as two new bays.
2. The existing Sydney Conference Centre should be retained. Its facilities could be updated and the Centre could be expanded to the north.
3. The Harbourside Shopping Centre should be demolished and a new hotel and shopping/dining venue constructed to a higher standard and quality than that currently provided in the existing shopping centre with extra convention centre or hotel meeting room and banqueting facilities included in the new facility.
4. The Sydney Entertainment Centre should be retained. The existing Centre could be upgraded on its present site which is centrally located near public transport and has proved to be both popular and profitable. Whilst this building does not form part of the current DA, its replacement with a smaller facility in the current DA proposal means that it would become redundant and would be demolished under the current master plan.

3.0 Problem identification and due process

The proposal for the demolition and redevelopment of the precinct has been carried out without any adequate, publicly examinable process in terms of identifying the problems, proposing rectification of the problems and obtaining extensive public input (from local residents and people from the greater Sydney area who enjoy Darling Harbour) into the process BEFORE the preparation of detailed plans. Such a process of *a priori* public participation would have been in

¹ Docomomo Australia is the Australian branch of an international organisation (Docomomo) currently based in Barcelona, Spain that advises UNESCO on significant modern buildings and spaces, including proposals for World Heritage listing.

line with the State Government's own proposed revision of the NSW planning process currently in the White Paper discussion form (ie Consultation with the Community being the centre piece of this proposed new planning process before development takes place).

This current pre-emptive process by the government through its Infrastructure NSW agency is a denial of the right of the people to have any influential say in what happens to some of its most used and valued assets. After all, this project was not taken to the people at the last state election and did not form part of either party's election platform. Therefore, there is no public mandate for the destruction of these assets without first seeking public input into the need for change. The general public of greater Sydney are not even aware that these buildings and most of their open space amenities at Darling Harbour are about to be destroyed and will become a large construction site for a number of years.

4.0 Design quality

Docomomo Australia is concerned about the loss of these award-winning buildings and spaces, the loss of public buildings that have proved their worth over the past 25 years, their replacement with buildings and spaces of lesser capacity and functionality and of arguably less distinguished design that harms the appearance of Sydney Harbour, and the process by which this development was sought. Any proper planning process would have included the Harbourside Festival Marketplace shopping centre as a part of the Darling Harbour precinct so that the entire precinct could be re-examined and planned in its entirety.

5.0 Lack of data

The DA documents contain generalised comments without any supporting data. An example (Environment Impact Statement page 3) is the statement that the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority has advised that Sydney had missed out on 27 conventions, 142 national conventions and 12 exhibitions. This statement has also been used by the Premier when responding to objections to the proposal. There is no explanation of why these events were not held at Darling Harbour. Were they held elsewhere in Sydney? Were they not held at Darling Harbour because the facilities at Darling Harbour were inadequate or too expensive? In short, we cannot accept the inference in the DA documents that there is a need to demolish and build new facilities solely on the basis of alleged lost business and revenue. When preparing for the 2009 Australia ICOMOS conference in Sydney, the facilities at Darling Harbour were not selected by the organisers (of whom the author was one) because of cost. NSW did not miss out on the conference as it was held at the Sydney Masonic Centre despite the buildings at Darling Harbour being eminently suitable for the conference's theme on modern architecture. In order to justify the demolition of such expensive assets there should have been an in-depth analysis of the conference market in Sydney that stated where the "missed" events went and why. If this document has already been prepared it should be publicly available.

6.0 Adequacy of facilities

In the same vein, the DA documents (Environment Impact Statement page 4) give a table of the size of facilities at Darling Harbour compared with facilities at other locations in Australia and Asia. However, there is no meaningful way these figures can be compared. For example, we do not know what type of exhibition space is quoted in the EIS (ie what height and how much is column-free). Moreover, there is no justification given for the demolition of the existing Sydney Entertainment Centre (maximum capacity 12,000) and the provision of a smaller facility in the redevelopment (maximum capacity 8,000). Is the existing facility underperforming? Is it too big? Again, no justification is given. One can only assume it is to be demolished to provide a development site for the private development of housing by the successful PPP consortium. It has also been stated that the provision of a smaller facility at Darling Harbour will allow the underperforming larger facilities at the Olympic site at Homebush to attract more business.

7.0 Urban environment & visual impact

Of great concern is the lack of appreciation of the existing urban environment at Darling Harbour. Of horrific concern is the impact of the proposed buildings on the urban landscape of Pyrmont/Ultimo, Darling Harbour and the western edge of the CBD.

DA Appendix O contains numerous visual impact comparisons between the existing and proposed views and vistas. In every case the proposed buildings obscure views across the Darling Harbour basin, and the proposed buildings loom up and overwhelm the new, reduced public spaces at Darling Harbour. The current buildings at Darling Harbour allow views across Darling Harbour from the City to Pyrmont/Ultimo and vice versa. The proposal will block these ground level vistas. The existing buildings are much lower than the proposed buildings and this existing height is in scale with the mature landscaping of the public spaces at Darling Harbour.

The future Darling Harbour will never be softened and screened by the proposed landscaping as the buildings are too tall. The sense of enclosure for Darling Harbour with the CBD buildings to the east and the former wool stores to the west will be lost and it is as if the scale of those two dense urban areas were extended over Darling Harbour in a constructed “land fill” that erodes the sense of a bay of Sydney Harbour. The new facilities might very well have been constructed in the flat topography of western Sydney for all the cognizance of the special sense of place in Darling Harbour.

The views of the existing apartment buildings, hotels etc on the west side of the curtilage of the Darling Harbour site will all be affected by the doubling in height (20 metres higher) of the proposed new buildings. These new buildings will also overshadow the natural areas of the Tumbalong Park during winter, which will affect the type of landscaping that will be possible.

8.0 Genius loci and design excellence

There is also no recognition in the architecture of the buildings of their special location on Sydney Harbour. The existing buildings reference the maritime nature of their location but the new buildings resemble the ice shard architecture of a frigid northern Europe. Why would conference delegates want to come to Sydney to attend a conference in facilities that look and feel like facilities they can enjoy closer to home?

There is no acknowledgement in any of the development application documents of the design excellence of the precinct or of its importance in terms of national and international recognition. The Heritage Impact Statement is of particular concern as there is no mention in that document of the importance of the buildings and spaces. Both the Exhibition Centre and the Conference Centre are listed on the Australian Institute of Architects (NSW Chapter) Register of Significant Buildings, but this is not mentioned in the Heritage Impact Statement. The HIS takes a strictly legalistic view that heritage concerns only those items on statutory lists. This is not in accordance with the *Conservation Plan* by J. Kerr which the HIS states is being used as a model. At the very least, buildings and spaces listed by professional bodies should have been discussed as items on non-statutory heritage lists and award-winning buildings and spaces should also have been discussed in the HIS.

The Sydney Exhibition Centre was awarded the Australian Institute of Architects NSW Chapter Sulman Award for Architecture in 1989, the highest award for public architecture in NSW. This is not mentioned in the HIS. The building is capable of both being altered and expanded sympathetically to provide increased floor space and yet this alternative is dismissed by the Environmental Impact Statement (page 9) as not being feasible. There is no justification for such statements in the DA documents and there is no analysis, or even mention, of the detailed feasibility studies carried out by the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority (before the establishment and involvement of Infrastructure NSW) to extend the existing facilities at Darling Harbour to provide greater capacity.

On page 24 of the Heritage Impact Statement it is stated that the “complex has American Inspiration, perhaps most obviously seen in precedent of Baltimore’s Harbour Place reflected in the Festival Marketplace.” Whilst an American influence for the Harbourside shopping mall can be discerned there is no justification for the statement that “the complex” (ie Darling Harbour) is American influenced. The Heritage Impact Statement fails to understand the design philosophy of the Darling Harbour Precinct, Tumbalong Park and the Sydney Exhibition and Convention Centre buildings. It is certainly not inspired by any American precedent and bears no resemblance to any

American waterfront redevelopments cited in the DA documents. John Docker, in his 1994 book on the analysis of Modern and Postmodern popular culture states:

The inspiration for the [Sydney] Exhibition Centre came partly from Paxton's 1851 Crystal Palace, and also from the European tradition of great lightweight exhibition centres set in public gardens; its skeletal mast-and-cable structure was designed to complement the background of massive woolstores and warehouses; the structure was also intended 'as a nautical metaphor giving the feeling of a great docked ship'.

Such buildings, with their ship-like spars and sails, help create Darling Harbour itself as a liminal space, between land and sea. They refer outwards to Sydney Harbour in general as a port saturated with nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of ships that crossed the world's seas, ...²

The Darling Harbour Precinct was conceived as one of Australia's first major modern pieces of urban design that contains important, well-used public buildings, external places and spaces, including the Chinese Gardens (a gift to the people of Sydney from the Chinese Government), the Sydney Aquarium and all its extensions, the National Maritime Museum, Pyrmont Bridge, Imax Cinema, Kings Street Wharf development, The Sydney Exhibition Centre, the Sydney Convention Centre, the Robert Woodward-designed spiral fountain, and Tumbalong Park. Darling Harbour, as it exists now, is much more cohesive and exciting than many of the overseas interventions in waterfront precincts including Barcelona, Spain.

9.0 Harbourside

The Harbourside shopping centre (formerly known as the Festival Marketplace) building at Darling Harbour is the only building to be retained in this proposal and is arguably the most architecturally undistinguished building at Darling Harbour. Its retention appears to be the result of pragmatism in that it is subject to a long-term private lease and this pragmatic approach is indicative that the government is not interested in proper long-term planning for the community good but rather is interested in short-term political and economic expediency. This is just one aspect of the lack of any proper planning process at Darling Harbour. This building should have been included in the redevelopment site as its demolition would allow the creation of a better development and would allow the retention and expansion of the existing facilities as well as the construction of a new conference hotel and shopping precinct more in character and of a quality to be expected at an international conference venue.

10.0 Ecological sustainability development and the existing embodied energy

There is no mention of the sustainability and embodied energy of the existing buildings that are proposed for demolition. The proposed new buildings pay lip service to green energy and materials. To demolish the existing buildings and replace them with new buildings when the existing could very well be modified and upgraded to world class amenities at a lesser cost, is certainly not sustainable.

There is no understanding of the existing planting of Tumbalong Park which was very carefully designed to take into account the very difficult situation of what types of planting could occur there. For example, the high level of the salt water table at the site dictated the use of palm trees where eucalypts could not survive. The current DA demonstrates ignorance of these site constraints.

² John Docker, 1994, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History*, p. 102, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

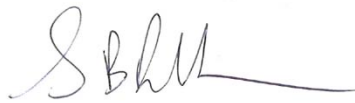
11.0 Conclusion

It is incomprehensible that the proposed replacement buildings at Darling Harbour all have less capacity than the existing buildings and have not yet demonstrated that they fit into the existing urban attributes already in place. If the underperforming and architecturally undistinguished "Harbourside" shopping centre were to be made part of the redevelopment, there would be a broad range of alternative options for the extension and upgrading of the Exhibition and Convention Centres to incorporate all the required shopping facilities, restaurants and hotel space.

Darling Harbour Precinct is an exciting place with great amenities, that may need upgrading to current requirements and can be without the unsustainable destruction of facilities only 25 years old. The people of Sydney have embraced it, as demonstrated ever since its opening in 1988, every New Year's Eve and Australia Day, during the Sydney 2000 Olympic and Paralympic Games, and for Chinese New Year.

Docomomo Australia, urges that the proposal be refused consent and that the NSW Government list the Sydney Exhibition Centre, the Sydney Convention Centre, the Robert Woodward spiral recessed fountain, Tumbalong Park with its distinguished water feature and unique landscaping as a precinct surrounding those items, on the State Heritage Register as a matter of urgency and we ask the Government to consult with the people of Sydney to explore alternative solutions to the demolition of valuable public assets that are also a part of our state's heritage.

Accompanying this submission is the Docomomo Heritage Alert sent to the International Council on Monuments and Sites in Paris. It forms a part of this comment on the current DA proposal.



Dr Scott Robertson
B.Sc (Arch), B.Arch (Hons), M.B.Env. (Blg Conservation), PhD