

A Submission Objecting to the Redevelopment of Harbourside Shopping Centre (Concept Proposal)

While I have no objection to the redevelopment of the Harbourside Shopping Centre within the envelope of the existing shopping centre I do have major concerns with the concept proposal as presented by Mirvac.

At present the site is occupied by a 2 to 3 storey building set back from the harbour's edge comprising a mix of retail and dining shops. The redevelopment as presented is not just revitalising an existing shopping centre to make it more attractive for tourists, both local and inbound, it is substantially altering the complexion of the northern end of the Darling Harbour precinct by the inclusion of a 166 metre residential tower.

This is just one more example of the overdevelopment that has occurred in the area once controlled by the Darling Harbour Foreshore Authority. The Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre, The Entertainment Centre and Harbourside Shopping Centre were among the first developments on the site previously dominated by mercantile activity. The vision for the area was a place where Sydneysiders could come and play. Large open spaces, tennis and basket ball courts and playgrounds were a feature. However over the ensuing years the public amenity has been slowly eroded by purely commercial interests.

The tennis and basketball courts gave way to the Sega Entertainment Centre (a very tawdry development it was) which in turn was torn down to be replaced by an even larger development comprised largely of commercial offices. So much for the public good. At least Sega provided some form of leisure activities.

The IMAX theatre sprung up and once again it provided visitors to Darling Harbour

with an entertainment outlet, sadly it too has succumbed to developer greed to be recast as a residential complex and having a considerably greater footprint than the previous building on the site. On the western side of Cockle Bay at the northern end of the revamped Convention and Exhibition Centre, which also encroached dramatically on open space, a forty story hotel has risen on what was open space as well. The fact that this building was given approval reflects poorly on the planning process. More correctly it highlights the fact that planning and development controls in the Darling Harbour precinct are virtually non-existent, and what planning instruments there are, are silent on fundamental considerations such as height, mass and floor ratios. Indeed it would seem that anything is permissible as long as it does not include a pawnbroking business.

Surely the Department of Planning must have realised that there was the potential for wily developers to buy up leaseholds, knowing full well that they could exploit the lack of planning controls to greatly increase the returns on their investments.

And so it is with Mirvac's proposal for Harbourside.

The proposal is dressed up with fine sentiments that allude to the proposal being "attractive to tourists, neighbours and the broader community". What they haven't said is that this is a unique opportunity to make a bucket load of money for their shareholders at the expense of the people of NSW. Without having access to the precise figures (although currently it is claimed that there is 20,00m² of lettable space), it would appear from the concept drawings that the retail space has more than doubled in size to somewhere in the order of 52,000m². However, this was not enough for Mirvac.

A tower block has been added to the shopping centre resulting in 35,000m² of additional floor space. No justification has been put forward as to how a residential

tower will contribute to enhancing the experience of tourists, be an attractive addition to Darling Harbour and in any way be of benefit to the broader community.

If the ICC Hotel is in indication of what constitutes an attractive building its a very low bar. The tower, whether it be in the original proposal commercial office space, or in its reincarnated form as residential, has been presented as a fait accompli. Indeed the assertion that the maximum gross floor area of 87,000m² required for the development is made without any reference to how it was derived. Without access to any modelling it is difficult for a lay person to gauge what constitutes a minimum size development that is economically feasible.

If it is not economic to redevelop the site within the existing envelope the Mirvac paid too much for the property in the first place. However, Mirvac being a longstanding developer would have been shrewd enough to realise that the only constraint on what they could achieve on the site was limited only by community backlash.

Let it not be forgotten that this application is to approve a concept, an idea, that the developer has conjured up to fully maximise the return on their investment in procuring this site. To what degree can the subsequent applications by the said developer to actually build their concept be altered and amended to increase the profitability of the investment made, and what indeed will actually be delivered? It seems that in the absence of any guidelines or objective criteria that the development application can be judged against, the whole process is weighted very much in favour of those seeking approvals for developments in Darling Harbour. The developer has made much in their submission that they have responded to numerous objections to their original proposal to locate a commercial tower block adjacent to the Pyrmont Bridge by moving it 50m to the south; increasing the

height, and turning the use from commercial to residential. If the tower can be moved 50m south it stands to reason that it could sit anywhere on the site and still provide a substantial return for the developer. While many pages of the developer's proposal are devoted to demonstrating that the view shedding from 50 Murray Street would be (in their estimation) marginal, I can find no such corresponding analysis from the IBIS, Novotel or the ICC Hotel should the tower be located at the extreme southern end of the site.

Given the extensive consultation that Mirvac claims has taken place with the owners and managers of these three properties, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that they have no objection to the proposed location of the tower block as the impact on their business would be minimal. The fact that the occupants of these premises are transient guests occupying a "room with a view" for limited periods of time, seems to take precedence in the developer's concept over the amenity of those who live permanently on the edge of Darling Harbour. Which leads to the question of why has the concept been skewed to protect the commercial interests of the hotel owners over the permanent residents of 50 Murray Street.

One other disturbing part of the proposal that is of concern is the provision of a pedestrian bridge linking the upper floor of the shopping centre to a point some 20m from the beginning of the Pyrmont Bridge on the western end. The Pyrmont Bridge has immeasurable heritage value. The span from end to end is for the most part intact and thus preserves what a bridge does by taking people from one side to the other. The breaking of this journey by putting in an alternative access point diminished the integrity of the bridge and should be strenuously resisted. It should be noted that the custodians of the Pyrmont Bridge have recently gone to great lengths to relocate the control cabin to its original position, it having been moved to accommodate the now defunct monorail. To allow any desecration of the Bridge

would surely be an affront to what has been a concerted effort to preserve as much of Pymont Bridge as possible in its original form.

Before any more follies are foisted on the Darling Harbour precinct the Department of Planning and Environment should draw up a set of guiding principles to be applied when considering the merits of any future development in and around Darling Harbour. As it stands now those who seek to comment on development proposals, concepts and applications have no objective criteria to measure the developers submission by. In fact it would seem that the developer is free to define the scope according to their preferred outcome.

Enough is enough. A sensible development that doesn't impose an overbearing presence at the north west of the precinct is surely not an unreasonable imposition to place on Mirvac.