

**Romaldo Giurgola**  
architect

27 July 2011

Committee Secretariat  
Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration  
Legislation Committee  
The Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra, ACT 2600

Attention: Ms Christine McDonald, Secretary

Dear Madam:

**SUBMISSION – INQUIRY INTO THE PERFORMANCE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES**

The following letter constitutes my submission under the terms of inquiry set by your committee into the performance of the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS) at Parliament House.

I make this submission on the basis that I was the Founding Partner of Mitchell/Giurgola Architects in New York and Philadelphia in the USA, as well as of Mitchell/Giurgola & Thorp Architects in Australia. As such I was the Design Principal within our firm for the design, documentation, and construction of Parliament House from 1979 through the completion of the building in 1988. Our firm's design responsibility for the project included not only the building's conception, siting and architecture, but also the interior design, furniture design, landscape, and our origination and coordination of the commissioned Art/Craft Program for Parliament House.

Since its very conception, the design of the Parliament House has been guided by fundamental, interconnected principles which are expressed within the form, materials, details, and expression of this building as a place:

**1. The significance of the building as a democratic forum for the nation of Australia**

The Parliament House is a place which was conceived from the outset to have a national symbolic scope, rather than being limited to its place in the urban design of Canberra as a city. This design principle led to an articulated character for its building form, clearly reflecting the function of its essential parts, while at the same time allowing it to be a unique and popular symbolic focus, developing a sense of tradition and the manifestations of our national community's life.

## **2. Making the process of Government accessible to the public**

Despite the inevitable requirements of security and degrees of separation, every aspect of the building's design was considered in its capacity to create a clear sense of openness, transparency, and the capacity of citizens and visitors to witness democracy in action, with views for visitors into Parliamentary spaces where Members and Senators are carrying out their daily work, the capacity for visitors to experience debates and Committee hearings, and the opportunity of citizens to meet with representatives, whether as individuals or groups.

## **3. The building's design as a symbolic sequence of spaces with references to Australia's historical and cultural evolution over time**

While New Parliament House is in its essence the place of a working parliament, the building was designed as a sequence of symbolic spaces which make oblique references to the development of Australia's identity as a nation in the past, present, and future. These quiet, diverse references are created in the series of major spaces or "great rooms" along the Land Axis and Parliamentary axis of the building, and are expressed through the architectural and interior design form and furnishings of those spaces, working hand in hand with the commissioned works of art and craft.

This inherent symbolism is an essential aspect of how the building responds to the requirements of the original Design Brief issued by the Parliament, both for the international design competition and in subsequent volumes during its detailed design and documentation.

## **4. The design of Parliament House as a workplace which enhances the health and well-being of all occupants**

In its integration with the topography of the land, the original building design intentionally provides a multitude of connections for users and staff with daylight, exterior views, and the landscape, whether within the public, Parliamentary, or office areas of the building. Our aim, approved by the Parliament at every stage of the design and construction, was to create a good work-place with single high-quality standard of accommodation which respects the value and dignity of every worker, whether a Member of Parliament, a computer operator, or a carpenter.

These standards of accommodation and respect for every worker in Parliament House were intended to stand as a permanent demonstration of one of the most fundamental principles of democracy—the value of every individual in his/her contribution to the whole. These standards of accommodation were established in every detail of the building from the height of ceilings, the presence of windows within workspaces, the custom design and quality standards of all public area and office furniture, lighting, and furnishings, the global presence throughout the building of terracotta planter pots bringing living greenery into workspaces and circulation areas, etc.

These four principles (among many others which we established and recorded in approved design submissions throughout the nine years of the Parliament's design and construction) demonstrate a continuity of the design which establishes the completely interrelated functional, aesthetic, and symbolic character of Parliament House, essential for the comprehension of this unique national building.

It is this **integrated whole** which must be understood and preserved within the inevitable process of adjustment and change which will continue to occur throughout the building's 200-year lifespan as required by the Parliament's original Brief.

In the 23 years since the opening of Parliament House, the importance of this building locally, nationally and internationally has been clearly demonstrated, whether in the reactions of individuals who have made repeated visits over the years, bringing family and visitors to the building with pride in its visible expression of what Australians can accomplish, as well as in the international nominations of this building as one of the most important architectural and cultural achievements of our time.

This is now the critical “danger” period **for the survival of this building intact**—including its essential and subtle design, symbolic, and functional relationships inherent within and among its architecture, interior design, landscape design, designated functions, furnishings, art program, and its precinct. The Parliament House at this moment is neither very new (a time when change is resisted and relatively unlikely) nor old enough to be innately valued for considered, careful preservation.

Since 1988, it has been agreed that, on behalf of our firm of Mitchell/Giurgola & Thorp Architects, I would hold and exercise the moral and intellectual property rights in the design of Parliament House, recognising of course that the Parliament House is the result of the remarkable work of hundreds of architects, landscape architects, engineers, specialist consultants, designers, artists, craftspeople, construction crews, and stakeholders led by our Design Team. In the course of exercising those rights, I have had regular contact with the original Joint House Department and subsequently with the Department of Parliamentary Services when I was notified of proposals for significant change in the building and grounds, or when I was involved in selected projects.

Neither the Parliament nor the nation has yet exercised the urgent responsibility of putting in place the essential strategic policy framework and professional management-of-change processes capable of preserving the complex value of this remarkable project for the nation, whose cost at completion in 1988 of roughly \$1.3 billion would be multiplied several times if it were to be replaced today.

What is critical is the recognition that the preservation of the integrity or “wholeness” of the design intent of Parliament House, and thereby its heritage values, does not lie merely in the identification and preservation of objects of value (for example, in commissioned or acquired works of art or items in memorial collections) or in simply preserving specific important spaces within the building, but rather lies in the **protection and preservation of the interrelationships among the essential design ideas**, elements, detailing, materials, and finishes throughout the whole of the building and its landscaped precinct.

The protection and preservation of a national or international icon such as Parliament House as an effective working building requires the expertise of highly-trained professionals in multiple fields at the apex of their professions, equal in their experience and knowledge to the stature of the building which requires protection and preservation.

This expertise does not lie (and would not be expected to be present) within the staff of the Department of Parliamentary Services, which performs the multiple day-to-day roles equivalent to a those of a property management firm for a large office, apartment, or mixed-use building. By contrast, what is required to protect and preserve this important building is the creation of a workable framework of “checks and balances”.

These checks and balances are inherent in the different necessary kinds of knowledge and expertise which are essential for the proper preservation of the architectural and symbolic integrity of Parliament House:

- a) **Senior expertise in the relevant professions**--architecture, urban design, landscape design, interior design, cultural history, and heritage management--as well as the specific expertise in the creation of heritage statements of significance and conservation master plans for complex working buildings;
- b) The **expertise of key internal stakeholders**—senior staff members from the House, Senate, and Executive Departments, Members and Senators, the Parliamentary Library, etc—in understanding and projecting the necessary functions and traditions of Parliament House, while being well-versed in the building’s essential design intent in meeting the Parliament’s original Brief;
- c) The **knowledge and vision of key external stakeholders**—members of the public, local and national, who have distinguished themselves through their dedication to the perpetuation and preservation of living cultural icons in Australia—who are representative of the diverse views of the nation in ensuring that the quality of Parliament House, achieved through the national effort which created this building, is preserved without being weakened into the future; and
- d) The important **embedded knowledge and experience of the day-to-day management** of this functional building within its long-term caregivers, technical staff, and administrators.

It is not my place to try to define in this letter how the checks and balances of these necessary interested parties should be incorporated into an efficient, workable, sober strategic policy and management system capable of preserving the essential integrity of Parliament House in the short- and long-term. The best heritage preservation or design intent management systems utilised in national icon buildings elsewhere in Australia and around the world can demonstrate this clearly.

However, it is important to register that the precedent has already been set by the rigorous design selection and approval processes utilised in (a) the establishment of the Parliament House Construction Authority and its expert staff, (b) the diverse knowledge of the Authority Board together with its national Art Advisory Committee, (c) the Parliament’s Joint Standing Committee on New Parliament House, and (d) its cross-over relationships with other essential local and national agencies such as the National Capital Development Corporation (NCDC) at the time.

Combined with our professional role as the architectural consultant with our specialist sub-consultants in presenting to these entities, this formal structure functioned for over nine years in precisely that process of providing a workable balance of differing and competing interests which the nation would expect the Parliament to instigate in the preservation and management of the Parliament as soon as possible.

The instigation of a process which can both define the design integrity and heritage values of an iconic building, as well as an appropriate day-to-day management system which preserves those values, is often hindered by the lack of any documentation of what the essential architectural and symbolic intent **actually is** for a particular building. It is very important for your Committee to understand that, thanks to the vision of the original Secretary of the Joint House Department following the completion of Parliament House, our firm of MGT Architects was commissioned to produce the five-volume massive work entitled *The Architect’s Design Intent for Parliament House, Canberra: Central Reference*

*Document*, the current draft of which was completed in 2004 and submitted to DPS for its ongoing reference and use.

The importance of this document, written by my former MGT Partner Pamille Berg AO in close reference to MGT Partner Hal Guida FRAIA and myself, is made clear in her “Introduction” to Volume 1, which I quote here for the benefit of your Committee Members:

“In introducing the following document, it may be useful to begin by describing what it is not, rather than what it is.

“This text is not a catalogue of each space in the building which identifies every aspect of its specifications and construction. It does not describe the detailed functional parameters of each space, and it has no intention of providing a chronicle of the history of the building’s design and construction.

“The only purpose of this document is to express the Architect’s most basic intent in the design of the building and its surroundings.

“To that end, the document has two primary uses and functions:

- These volumes are intended to provide a timeless, permanent record of the Architect’s design intent prepared by a member of the original Design Team for the building, rather than by an architectural historian or other design professional peripheral to Romaldo Giurgola AO FRAIA FAIA and the small group of his colleagues and staff who were responsible for the project’s design. To this end, the document is intended to be held permanently in the archives of Parliament House as an accessible record of the key ideas and aspirations which shaped the building’s design and character.

Within this purpose for the document, it was critical that the text be written while the significant Parliament House Design Team members of the firm of Mitchell/Giurgola & Thorp Architects were still alive and practicing professionally, who were able when requested to critique and to comment on each section of the document to ensure its correct expression of the ideas.

- The purpose of these volumes is also to ensure that the Department of Parliamentary Services and the Presiding Officers have a text to which reference can continually be made in the daily management of the Parliament House when decisions on functional change, proposals for alterations, and replacement of fittings and furniture are required. The format of the text is intended to facilitate that ongoing management process and the need for single-issue, intermittent reference within the expression of the building design’s conceptual framework of the whole.

“Given these purposes for the document, the *Central Reference Document*’s intent is to provide general answers to the questions of ‘why’ the overall form of the building, the character of each space, the materials and detailing of its interiors, the provision of its furniture and fittings, and its unusual degree of provision for the incorporation and display of contemporary art and craft were originated as they were. The document approaches the answering of these questions of ‘why’ through several means:

- The pertinent sections from key formal briefing documents, such as the *Parliament House Canberra: Conditions for a Two-stage Competition*, Volumes One and Two, (PHCA, April 1979) and the *Brief for Parliament House Canberra: Attachment 1 Functional Requirements* (PHCA, August 1980), are quoted directly in this document, as in most cases the detailed prescriptions of the Brief constitute one of the most fundamental reasons why the spaces of the building were conceived as they were.

The content, wording, and inflections of the Brief are therefore essential to understanding the Architect's design response.

- Wherever possible, the words of the Architect at the time of the design, whether recorded in written reports to the Authority Board and the Joint Standing Committee on New Parliament House, pertinent extracts from the conceptual briefs written by the Architect for commissioned artists and craftspeople, or through internal records in the files of Mitchell/Giurgola & Thorp Architects, are directly quoted in explanation of the concepts for the building. The re-use of these original words, whenever available, minimises the desire to 're-write the history' of the ideas at the time of preparation of this document, more than fifteen years after the building's completion.

"From this writer's perspective, there is a third specific purpose of the preparation of this document: that in our time it is rare for a society, through its government, to give a brief to an architect clearly asking and hoping for the design of a highly symbolic place, capable of speaking continuously for centuries about who we are as a culture. This document intends to remind those who use it that the capacity of this building to 'speak' at so many levels is not merely the invention of the Architect, but was ardently and repeatedly demanded through the Brief by the society which commissioned it. Australia's unique good fortune was that it had public servants and commissioned professionals of remarkable vision at the critical moment in time who were able to formulate that desire into a remarkable series of briefing documents, approved repeatedly by the Parliament, which demanded so much conceptual richness from the Architect in the design responses.

"Whether that conceptual richness comes through, and the building continues to speak incisively and strongly in future centuries about this generation's sense of itself and its pluralist culture is hoped for, but unknown.

"Lastly, it must be noted that this document is unfinished in many respects, and is inevitably a product of the significant limitations on the time and means by which it was produced within a consultancy framework. Mike Bolton, Secretary of the Joint House Department in Parliament House, should be remembered for his vision in commissioning and supporting the writing of these volumes. Many additions, clarifications, revisions, and much more time for the project would be required to transform it into the ideal document for its purpose. It is hoped by this writer that the means by which this can occur may be available in the near future, thereby rendering the document as a much more complete record of the essential ideas which shaped Parliament House..."(Ibid, pp. 1 – 3).

As I write this letter nearing the age of 91 years old, I would suggest strongly to the Committee that one of the first steps in the urgent task of putting in place a high-quality protection of the Parliament House's design integrity and heritage values would be the immediate commissioning of the completion of these volumes by the original writer, herself a member of our core Design Team from the time of the international design competition. I believe that for this work to be speedily commenced and completed while I and other essential participants are still alive to comment on and approve the final texts only makes good sense, and would be a significant contribution to the building's future management-of-change process.

In closing, I emphasise that until the proper external expertise is sourced and enabled to complete the establishment of a proper preservation process for this important building, I can **do little or nothing** as the holder of the moral rights to the design to prevent the weakening and denigration of this building's essential design integrity.

There is no requirement under the moral rights legislation for my colleagues and I to be consulted on proposals for change or for our advice, when given, to be followed. During the past 23 years since the completion of the building, we have been extremely distressed at

**Romaldo Giurgola**  
architect

various times in finding that such elements as “life-time” furniture designed and custom-made for the building, specially-designed/hand-fabricated planters, custom light fittings, artist-designed wall textiles, and the fitouts for entire areas of the building such as the Members and Senators Dining Room were decommissioned and sold off.

Even more painful has been the inexorable intermittent redevelopment of underground and under-croft areas of the building, intended originally only for storage/maintenance purposes and part-time occupation by service staff. These underground areas have been transformed into lifeless office spaces, remote from natural light, for continuous permanent occupation by Parliament House staff, thereby violating one of the building’s most essential design principles regarding the provision of good work-spaces for every worker. In turn, the resulting lack of underground storage space and the annual expense of renting storage external to Parliament House has become a reason for the lack of retention of essential spare custom fixtures and furniture items, prototypes, and other useful archival material.

It will only be when the Parliament has entrenched a model process of carefully-crafted strategic policy in the protection of essential design values and management of change in the building that the Australian people can feel assured that in future, such decisions on change have been made wisely, utilising the expertise of both experts and stakeholders in forging a responsible way forward.

Thank you for the opportunity to express my views on this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Romaldo Giurgola AO LFRAIA LFAIA