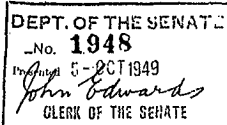


THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS.



R E P O R T

relating to the

proposed erection of a

H O S T E L F O R O F F I C E R S

at

D A R W I N,

N O R T H E R N T E R R I T O R Y.

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THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS.

HOSTEL FOR OFFICERS AT DARWIN.

R E P O R T.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, to which the House of Representatives referred for investigation and report the question of the erection of a hostel for officers at Darwin, Northern Territory, has the honour to report as follows :-

S E C T I O N I.

I N T R O D U C T I O N.

I n i t i a l A c t i o n.

1. Prior to the war there were two hostels in Darwin, one for men and one for women. The latter was taken over by the Army and the Men's hostel was taken over by the Navy. Darwin is the only town in Australia which suffered extensive damage from Japanese bombs during the war, and it is estimated that roughly 30 per cent of the available houses were damaged by bombs. In addition no maintenance work was carried out for four or five years and deterioration of another 30 per cent has occurred. As all costs are now so high, it is completely uneconomical to repair many of the dwellings, and special provision must therefore be made to provide accommodation for single men until the time arrives when adequate buildings are available to house married men and their families. With this in mind plans have been drawn for a hostel to accommodate officers, and the project is regarded as one of great urgency.

S E C T I O N I I.

T H E P R E S E N T P R O P O S A L.

G e n e r a l.

2. The proposal for the erection of a Government hostel in Darwin is about 2½ years old. It is submitted that single officers of the various Departments are scattered in accommodation provided in a number of hostels in Darwin, some of which are very much below standard, and they are grossly overcrowded. Until suitable accommodation can be provided it will not be possible to bring more officers to Darwin to carry out the work of re-building the town.

The Building.

3. At the request of the Administrator plans have been prepared for a permanent hostel which will provide ultimate accommodation for 178 persons. The complete scheme is to comprise eight residential blocks, a dining room and kitchen block, a recreation and lounge block, and two laundry and garage blocks. As portion of the site is at present occupied by temporary accommodation for the Supreme Court and associated activities it is proposed to defer construction of one residential block, laundry and garage until a later stage, thus reducing the accommodation to 158 persons in the first stage.

Accommodation.

4. In the first stage 158 persons, including household staff, will be accommodated in 124 single rooms and 17 double rooms, the areas provided totalling 63,949 square feet as follows :-

	Square Feet.
Six residential blocks Type "A"	40,368
One residential block Type "B"	6,764
Lounge, Office, etc.	3,313
Dining room, Kitchen and Staff Quarters	7,000
One Laundry and Garage Block	2,924
<hr/>	
Total for buildings	60,369
Covered Ways	3,580
<hr/>	
Total area	63,949.

Site.

5. The site is situated in a high density dwelling zone and is close to the site for future Government Offices. It has a frontage to the Esplanade of 497 feet and to Peel Street of 412 feet. The area is fairly level and has a shallow top soil over rock foundation.

Estimated Cost.

6. In October, 1948, when the estimates were prepared, the total cost of the first stage of the building now proposed was set down at £255,000, compiled as follows :-

Buildings.

Item 1. Lounge and Recreation Block.	
" 2. Dining room and Kitchen (Staff Quarters over)	
" 3. Six residential blocks Type A.	
" 4. One residential block Type B.	
" 5. One Laundry block with garages.	£218,203
<hr/>	
Carried Forward	... £218,203

	Brought Forward	£218,203
<u>Engineering Services.</u>		
Item 1. Electrical Installation		
" 2. Mechanical Services		
" 3. Water Supply		
" 4. Sewerage and Stormwater Drainage		
" 5. Roads and Paths.		13,603
	Contingencies 10%	23,181
		<hr/>
	Total ...	£254,987.
	In round figures say ...	£255,000.
		<hr/>

SECTION III.

THE COMMITTEE'S INVESTIGATIONS.

General.

7. The Committee studied the plans submitted and took evidence from officials of the Department of Works and Housing in Melbourne. The investigation of this proposal was also included with other works in the programme of the Committee in its visit to Alice Springs and Darwin during May, 1949, when the opportunity was taken to visit the site of the proposed buildings and to inspect the accommodation at present in use in various parts of the town of Darwin. Evidence was also taken in Darwin from the Director of Works and a number of officials connected with the question, as well as from other individuals interested in the proposal to erect permanent buildings for accommodation purposes in the town.

Reasons for a Hostel.

8. The critical shortage of accommodation in Darwin, both of the hostel type and of dwellings, was particularly stressed as the main reason for increased hostel accommodation. The condition of most of the present living quarters was also emphasised, and the opinions formed by the Members of the Committee during their inspections of the various hostels leave no doubt of the urgent necessity for better conditions.

Present Accommodation.

9. The Committee was informed that, at the present time, there are nine separate buildings accommodating single officers. They include the Mitchell Street Hostel, Number 3 Hostel, Mareenah House, the Town Mess, the Police Mess, and the Mess of the Department of Civil Aviation.

10. The Number 3 Hostel was one of these inspected by the Committee who regard it as very poor indeed, though it may not be actually as bad as its familiar name of "Belsen" would imply. Mareenah House is for single girls, and, being of a much better standard, should be sufficient for its purpose for some time to come. It was stated that the total normal capacity of the nine buildings was 264, though the number of tenants actually accommodated at present is 341. It is therefore true to say that practically all these buildings are hopelessly overcrowded, and living conditions are far below what should be provided by any organisation. The Committee was informed that the Administration is thoroughly ashamed of the accommodation it has to offer to single officers who have to go to Darwin to work.

11. At the moment there are 266 single men and 76 female employees being provided for, and one of the factors which contributed most to their dislike of the conditions was the necessity to share rooms with others. The hostels are composed largely of small huts, a few of which are on concrete foundations, and they are in all stages of disrepair. Many of the huts are badly in need of paint, and the Committee was informed that the cost of maintenance of all these huts is very high, their life is very limited, and it becomes most difficult to keep out the heavy rains in the wet season. When two or more beds are placed in the huts there is very little room left, and it is only possible to live in them in the hot weather by propping up the hinged sides to let in the air. When having to live in these huts the necessity of sharing them with others makes the position intolerable for many, and the result is that it is difficult to retain staff in Darwin for any length of time.

Other Camps.

12. While considering the question of accommodation for officials the comparison with the conditions obtaining for other employees was brought to the Committee's notice. From the evidence taken in Darwin and from the Committee's own inspections it became apparent that accommodation of even lower standard is

provided for many of the employees who live in camps some distance out of the town. Although it is not within the scope of the Committee's investigation to make recommendations in this regard, very strong representations were made that the proposed hostel accommodation should be pushed ahead with all speed, so that the quarters at present occupied by the officials might be used for other employees who are so much worse off in their camps. In this connection it was stated that, owing to the poor conditions, it was usual for a large percentage of the employees to come to Darwin for a short time in the good weather season and return South after experiencing the unsatisfactory living conditions. It was stated, in evidence, that, in the past 21 months no less than 4,000 employees have been engaged by the Department of Works and Housing to retain 861.

13. In consideration of all the above factors the Committee is convinced that hostel accommodation is urgently needed in Darwin.

The Proposed Buildings.

14. Residential Blocks. The hostel planned is to be composed of blocks of residential buildings arranged on either side of the Recreation and Kitchen Blocks. The residential blocks will be of two types, Type "A" will be two storied and will contain 20 single rooms, 12 feet by 10 feet, while Type "B" will contain 16 double rooms, 14 feet by 12 feet, eight to each floor. All the blocks will be connected by covered ways, and although long covered ways were criticised as being of little use in rough weather, it was stated that, in the wet season heavy rain falls almost continuously, and some protection is essential when passing from one block to another.

15. Administrative and Recreation Block. In the centre of the residential blocks will be the main office and recreation block. The lounge has been planned as a single large room and can be used for dancing or other social functions. Associated with this public room are the office suite, toilet conveniences for both sexes, and refreshment kiosk.

16. The Dining Room Block. The Dining Room Block will be connected to the Recreation Block by covered ways, and it is designed to take guests over two sittings with waited service. It also contains the Kitchen, Stores etc. on the ground floor, and male staff will be accommodated in one double room and four single rooms on the first floor. It is anticipated that female household daily staff will be recruited from town residents, but, if this is found impossible, and accommodation for female staff becomes necessary, a typical residential block has been arranged so that it may be subdivided with the first floor allocated to the use of guests and the ground floor set aside for staff.

17. Laundry and Garage Block. A compact block containing three garages, laundry, staff laundry, fuel storage, drying rooms and drying areas will be placed at the rear of the residential blocks.

Design.

18. A good deal of thought has been given to the design of this hostel in order to provide accommodation which will be specially suited to the tropical conditions obtaining in Darwin, and, being a proposal of a permanent character the whole establishment has been designed to embody principles of planning which will give optimum conditions of physical comfort by exploiting to the full natural rather than expensive artificial aids.

19. The two storied residential blocks have been grouped in pairs with the blocks spaced at sufficient distances to avoid screening of prevailing winds. Bed rooms are grouped on either side of a central passage with ample cross ventilation, and each pair of bed rooms is placed opposite a permanently open side passage or lung which will entrain prevailing breezes into the centre passage and the individual rooms. Specially designed louvred panels will be fitted to a large section of each bed room wall to the centre passage.

20. A noticeable feature of the design is the placing of the floor level near to the ground, instead of the popular practice in hot climates of elevating the house on piers. It is contended that the most effective way of minimising the heat in a building is to eliminate areas of hard ground paving or road surfaces

which absorb and radiate considerable solar heat, and to ensure that the buildings are situated in such a way that they do not screen the prevailing winds. Precautions have been taken along these lines by locating roads and paths as far as possible from the external walls, and having the immediate surroundings to buildings grassed and planted with shrubs in a manner which will not obstruct prevailing breezes.

Construction.

21. All the buildings are to be constructed of cement bricks and will have reinforced concrete floors, the bedroom floors being finished in coloured granolithic. Roofs will be framed with timber trusses, covered with corrugated asbestos cement and coloured. Window openings to bedroom blocks and recreation block will be fitted with adjustable louvres, the centre panels being glazed and the remainder asbestos cement.

Fly-wire Screens.

22. External door and window openings to dining room, kitchen and store will be provided with fly-wire screens in pressed metal frames, removable for maintenance purposes. Inquiries were made regarding the advisability of including wires for bedroom windows as protection against flies and mosquitoes, but it was stated that there is very little trouble with mosquitoes in Darwin and practically no trouble from flies. Moreover, the opinion is held that wire screens to the windows obstruct a considerable percentage of the air flow which is so important in the humid climate. It therefore seems to be the general practice to rely on mosquito nets when necessary, though some houses are provided with one wire-protected room.

Engineering Services.

23. The engineering services of the hostel will not be extensive but will include kitchen equipment, hot water service and refrigeration. Hot water to residential blocks will be supplied by independent electrical installations but will not be available to lavatory basins in bed rooms. Other services allowed for are electric light and power, fire protection, public address and house telephone systems, roads and pathways, sewerage and drainage.

The Site.

24. The site chosen is one in an excellent position on the Esplanade, with a fine view of the Harbour, and it is generally considered to be eminently suitable for the purpose. However, there was some objection to the use of land in this position on the ground that it should be used for private buildings. The opinions of various witnesses were obtained by the Committee, and the view is widely held that the location would be put to the best possible use when providing accommodation for a large number of people. Furthermore, it was pointed out that, in this position, the hostel will be close to the future Government Offices, and guests would be able to walk to their work with a minimum of discomfort in the very wet season. A suggestion that a suitable site might be found at Myilly Point, about a mile from the town, was considered, but it was found that no site was available in that area.

Darwin Planning.

25. In considering the location of the proposed hostel and the possibility of alternative sites the question of the planning of the town of Darwin came before the Committee, and evidence showed that the plan adopted for the reconstruction of the town, following the devastation caused by war damage, has been the subject of a good deal of adverse criticism. The opinion was held in some quarters that many of the roads, services and facilities of the old town, and some of the sound buildings, could have been utilised in the new Darwin instead of creating a new plan disregarding them. However, the plan has been adopted, building is proceeding, and commitments have been made by numbers of citizens in various sections of the town. In this case the Committee is satisfied that the question of the planning will not affect the choice of site for the proposed hostel, and it agrees that the site on the Esplanade is suitable for the purpose.

Estimated Cost.

26. The estimated total cost of the first stage is set down at £255,000, and no estimate is given for the second stage as it will probably be a considerable time before the buildings, at present occupying the ground planned for the second stage blocks,

will be removed. The figures quoted were calculated in October, 1948, and are stated to be subject to variation due to changing circumstances governing costs in the building industry. The Committee has found that the most careful estimates available in regard to any building work at the present time are so unreliable that wide margins have to be allowed if a total figure is to be near the actual completed cost. In Darwin, where conditions of supply and delivery are magnified and added to the general scarcity of labour and materials, the estimated total cost can only be regarded as an indication of the actual expenditure which will be involved. It is therefore necessary to rely on a conscientious costing and audit system while the work is in progress, and the Committee, being assured that such a system is in operation in the Department of Works and Housing, can do no more than stress the necessity for vigilance in this regard.

Urgency of the Work.

27. All the evidence pointed to the fact that accommodation of the type contemplated is urgently necessary in Darwin, and the Committee's inspections and inquiries convinced them that every effort should be made to push forward the construction of the project.

28. There is general satisfaction with the plan, which offers modern comforts and facilities specially suited to the conditions and the climate, and the Committee recommends that the plan should be adopted as proposed.

29. Owing to the critical shortage of accommodation it has been suggested that two residential blocks at the Peel Street frontage should be proceeded with and completed for occupation ahead of, and not necessarily concurrently with, the remaining work. The Committee is heartily in accord with this suggestion and recommends that it be adopted.

30. An additional reason for urgency was stated to be the fact that work is already being carried out in Darwin by a contracting firm prepared to provide shipping to bring materials and labour from the South, if continuity of work can be assured.

The Department is therefore anxious to proceed with the complete planning of several major projects in order to make it possible for the firm concerned to complete arrangements which will ensure smooth working on the jobs and a reliable flow of the materials as required. The Committee made inquiries into this aspect of the matter, as it was felt that it is most desirable for major projects to be thrown open for general tender, and there seemed a possibility that other firms would be interested in such proposals. It was stated that the Department of Works and Housing had no other firm of contractors in mind, as it was very difficult to get contractors to undertake work under such difficult conditions and at such a distance from the main sources of supply. The contract system is applied wherever it is possible to do so, but the necessity of pushing ahead with construction in Darwin is of paramount importance, and the method which will produce the maximum results has to be adopted.

SECTION IV.

THE COMMITTEE'S CONCLUSIONS.

31. The following is a summary of the decisions arrived at by the Committee after consideration of all the evidence :-

	Paragraph in Report.
(1) Hostel accommodation is urgently needed in Darwin.	13
(2) The site selected is suitable for the purpose.	25
(3) The plan should be adopted as proposed.	28
(4) Two residential blocks at the Peel Street frontage should be completed for occupation first.	29

CHARLES A. LAMP
CHAIRMAN.

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