



INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF DEFENCE ESTATE ASSETS



Submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
References Committee

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

Submission date: 17 April 2026

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Institute) is the peak body for the architectural profession in Australia. It is an independent, national member organisation with around 13,500 members across Australia and overseas.

The Institute exists to advance the interests of members, their professional standards and contemporary practice, and expand and advocate the value of architects and architecture to the sustainable growth of our communities, economy and culture.

The Institute actively works to maintain and improve the quality of our built environment by promoting better, responsible and environmental design.

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- + At the time of this submission the National President is Adam Haddow FRAIA.
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The Royal Australian Institute of Architects recognises the unceded sovereign lands and rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of these lands and waters.

This recognition generates acknowledgement and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Countries, Cultures and Communities, and their ways of being, knowing and doing.

Caring for Country practices including architecture and place shaping have existed on this continent since time immemorial.

The Institute recognises a professional commitment to engage and act meaningfully through reciprocal partnership and relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Together we will support and develop the emergence of new possibilities for our shared future.

INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF DEFENCE ESTATE ASSETS

Executive Summary

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate inquiry into the management of Defence estate assets.

This submission focuses on the public consequences of how surplus Defence land is assessed, governed and transitioned. When Defence land is no longer required for operational purposes, its future should not be treated solely as a property or disposal matter. These are decisions that shape communities, heritage, housing opportunity, environmental performance and long-term public value.

The Institute submits that surplus Defence estate should be approached through a broader public-interest lens. This includes heritage stewardship, design quality, adaptive reuse, climate responsiveness, public realm outcomes and community benefit. Good conservation and design principles are central to ensuring that public land delivers lasting value.

The Institute is particularly concerned that where significant sites enter disposal pathways without early heritage, planning and design-led assessment, opportunities for better civic, environmental and social outcomes may be lost. Once land is sold without a clear framework for public benefit, government's ability to influence enduring place outcomes is substantially reduced.

The Defence estate should also be understood as a significant collection of places, building types and landscapes, with value that may extend beyond individual assets. That broader value warrants careful assessment before divestment occurs.

This inquiry provides an important opportunity to recommend a stronger framework for Defence estate transitions, one that embeds heritage and design expertise, requires public benefit assessment before disposal, and considers alternative public uses where these would deliver greater long-term value.

The Institute also submits that this issue highlights a broader need for national design leadership in Commonwealth decision-making. For complex and nationally significant public landholdings, the Commonwealth would benefit from access to independent heritage and design advice, including through consideration of a Federal Government Architect or equivalent advisory mechanism.

In summary, the Institute's position is that Defence estate decisions should not be reduced to disposal efficiency or market return alone. They should be guided by a transparent process that recognises the long-term national, heritage, civic, cultural and environmental value of public land.

Key Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That major Defence estate disposals be subject to a public benefit, heritage and design review before sale or transfer.

Recommendation 2

That significant or sensitive sites undergo heritage-informed, design-led master planning to guide future use and development prior to disposal, particularly where heritage, housing, civic or environmental outcomes are at stake.

Recommendation 3

That disposal frameworks prioritise adaptive reuse and heritage stewardship, including early heritage assessment and, where appropriate, consideration of State or Territory heritage listing processes prior to or alongside divestment.

Recommendation 4

That the Commonwealth adopt a clearer framework for assessing alternative public uses of surplus Defence land before private disposal pathways are pursued.

Recommendation 5

That public benefit, heritage and design reviews explicitly consider long-term outcomes, including heritage value, community benefit, housing supply, open space, climate resilience, embodied and operational carbon, and overall place quality.

Recommendation 6

That heritage, architecture, landscape and urban design expertise be embedded within governance, assessment and decision-making processes for major Defence estate transitions.

Recommendation 7

That the Commonwealth consider establishing a Federal Government Architect, or equivalent national design leadership mechanism, to advise on significant Commonwealth landholdings, public projects and major estate transitions.

Recommendation 8

That stronger intergovernmental design coordination be supported, including heritage and design leadership that assists local governments managing the planning and place implications of major Defence estate transitions.

1. Introduction

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee inquiry into the management of Defence estate assets.

The Institute's interest is not in Defence capability planning itself, but in the public consequences of how surplus Commonwealth land is assessed, governed, designed and transitioned. Defence estate decisions are not solely property or administrative matters. They are decisions that shape places, communities, heritage, housing opportunities, environmental outcomes and the long-term public value derived from nationally significant landholdings.

The Institute submits that where Defence land is no longer required for operational purposes, its future should be considered through a broader public-interest lens. This should include design quality, heritage stewardship, adaptive reuse potential, community benefit, environmental resilience and long-term place outcomes. Good design is not an aesthetic add-on to these decisions. It is central to achieving lasting public value from public land.

This submission is primarily directed to Terms of Reference 2, 5, 7 and 8, concerning disposal processes, heritage significance and protection, alternative public uses, and related matters.

2. The Institute's Perspective

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects is the peak body for the architectural profession in Australia. The Institute advocates for the value of good design, for the role of architects and the profession, and for a sustainable built environment.

Architects contribute expertise that is directly relevant to this inquiry. The planning, reuse, redevelopment and stewardship of significant landholdings require integrated thinking about built form, heritage, landscape, infrastructure, environmental performance and public benefit. The Institute therefore considers it appropriate to contribute to this inquiry where disposal and redevelopment decisions may have enduring civic, social and environmental consequences.

3. Core Position

The Institute's core position is that surplus Defence estate should be treated as a public value, heritage and place-making issue, not simply a disposal exercise.

Where land leaves Defence ownership, the Commonwealth should ensure that decisions are guided by a transparent and heritage-informed, design-led assessment of the site's long-term potential. This includes potential for heritage conservation, adaptive reuse, housing, civic and community uses, open space, environmental restoration, climate resilience and place-based public benefit.

The Institute also considers that the Defence estate may have significance not only as a collection of individual assets, but as a broader group of building types, places and settings that together reflect Australia's military, social and civic history. This broader significance should be recognised in the assessment of sites prior to divestment.

A narrow disposal approach risks irreversible loss. Once strategically significant public land is sold without a clear design and public interest framework, opportunities to shape better long-term outcomes are significantly reduced.

4. Heritage Significance and Adaptive Reuse

The Institute strongly supports the inclusion of heritage significance within the Terms of Reference. Defence land often carries layers of military, civic and community meaning. These sites may hold architectural, historical, landscape and commemorative value that extends well beyond their original Defence function.

The Institute submits that heritage should not be treated only as a constraint to be managed during disposal. Properly understood, heritage is an asset that can support enduring public value, local identity and high-quality adaptive reuse outcomes.

Adaptive reuse should be prioritised wherever feasible. Reuse can protect cultural significance, reduce waste and embodied carbon, preserve community memory, and produce distinctive and valuable place outcomes. In some cases, adaptive reuse may also support housing, education, cultural, community or mixed-use outcomes more effectively than clearance and redevelopment.

For sites with heritage significance, disposal frameworks should require:

- early heritage and design assessment
- adaptive reuse feasibility testing
- transparent heritage management plans where required and appropriate
- design expertise in decision-making and evaluation
- genuine regard to veteran and community connection to place.

For sites with identified significance, disposal processes should also ensure that statutory heritage obligations are addressed early and that consideration is given to ongoing protection mechanisms following divestment, including relevant State or Territory heritage listing processes where appropriate.

This is especially important where Defence sites carry strong associations with service history, training, remembrance or local identity.

5. Design-led Stewardship of Public Land

The Institute submits that major Defence estate disposals should be subject to a stronger design-led framework before sale or transfer occurs.

That framework should begin with the premise that public land is a strategic asset. Its future should be determined not only by what it can realise on disposal, but by what it can contribute over time to communities, cities, regions and the nation. In many cases, the greatest value of a site will not lie in immediate financial return, but in the quality of the place outcomes it can support.

For this reason, the Institute recommends that significant sites undergo a public benefit and design review before disposal decisions are finalised. This review should test matters including:

- heritage significance and adaptive reuse potential
- contribution to housing and supporting infrastructure
- public realm and open space opportunities
- First Nations and community connections
- climate resilience and environmental repair
- long-term civic, cultural and social value.

This would assist government to make better-informed decisions and reduce the risk that nationally important sites are treated in an overly transactional way.

6. Alternative Public Uses and Public Benefit

The Institute supports consideration of an amended framework for surplus Defence land that prioritises alternative public uses over private development where that would deliver stronger public outcomes.

This should not be interpreted as a blanket opposition to private development. Rather, it is a recognition that the Commonwealth has a responsibility to consider whether certain sites may deliver greater long-term benefit through public, civic, cultural, educational, housing or mixed public-purpose uses.

The Institute considers that the threshold question should not be “how quickly can this site be sold?” but “what future use will produce the best public outcome?”

For some sites, this may involve direct public use. For others, it may involve a mixed model in which private redevelopment is guided by clear public objectives, design standards and place outcomes. What matters is that public benefit is assessed deliberately and transparently before disposal pathways are locked in.

7. Why Heritage and Design Quality Must Be Embedded Early

The Institute emphasises that heritage and design quality must be built into the earliest stages of decision-making. If these matters are left until after land has been sold or transferred, government’s ability to secure strong public outcomes is substantially diminished.

Major sites should therefore be subject to heritage-informed, design-led master planning before disposal, particularly where they are:

- historically significant
- prominent in metropolitan or regional settings
- capable of supporting housing, public infrastructure or civic uses
- environmentally sensitive
- likely to have major community impact.

A heritage-informed, design-led approach does not impede efficient decision-making. On the contrary, it can provide clarity, improve public confidence, reduce conflict and help align disposal decisions with long-term government objectives.

8. National Design Leadership and the Role of a Federal Government Architect

This inquiry provides a practical context to consider a Federal Government Architect as a governance solution. Where Commonwealth agencies are making decisions about nationally significant sites with long-term urban, heritage, housing and civic consequences, government would benefit from enduring access to independent design advice.

A Federal Government Architect would not displace state or local responsibilities or duplicate statutory planning roles. Rather, it would provide national design leadership across complex Commonwealth landholdings and major public projects, helping ensure decisions are informed by long-term public benefit, design quality and place outcomes.

This would be particularly valuable where Defence land transitions require coordination across Commonwealth, state and local jurisdictions, supporting better alignment between disposal decisions, strategic planning, heritage stewardship and community expectations.

The role could also add practical value for local governments, particularly those without in-house design leadership capacity. Major Commonwealth land transitions can create significant local planning and design impacts, and a Federal Government Architect could help strengthen coordination and improve outcomes while respecting local decision-making.

A Federal Government Architect would ensure that nationally significant public land decisions are supported by credible design expertise and a stronger framework for intergovernmental collaboration.

Practical implementation mechanisms could include independent design review processes or panels incorporating heritage, architecture, landscape and urban design expertise. These mechanisms should, however, be understood as supporting tools within a broader framework of national design leadership, not as a substitute for it.

9. Recommendations

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects recommends that the Committee:

Recommendation 1

That major Defence estate disposals be subject to a public benefit, heritage and design review before sale or transfer.

Recommendation 2

That significant or sensitive sites undergo heritage-informed, design-led master planning to guide future use and development prior to disposal, particularly where heritage, housing, civic or environmental outcomes are at stake.

Recommendation 3

That disposal frameworks prioritise adaptive reuse and heritage stewardship, including early heritage assessment and, where appropriate, consideration of State or Territory heritage listing processes prior to or alongside divestment.

Recommendation 4

That the Commonwealth adopt a clearer framework for assessing alternative public uses of surplus Defence land before private disposal pathways are pursued.

Recommendation 5

That public benefit, heritage and design reviews explicitly consider long-term outcomes, including heritage value, community benefit, housing supply, open space, climate resilience, embodied and operational carbon, and overall place quality.

Recommendation 6

That heritage, architecture, landscape and urban design expertise be embedded within governance, assessment and decision-making processes for major Defence estate transitions.

Recommendation 7

That the Commonwealth consider establishing a Federal Government Architect, or equivalent national design leadership mechanism, to advise on significant Commonwealth landholdings, public projects and major estate transitions.

Recommendation 8

That stronger intergovernmental design coordination be supported, including heritage and design leadership that assists local governments managing the planning and place implications of major Defence estate transitions.

10. Conclusion

The management and disposal of Defence estate assets is not solely a matter of internal estate efficiency. It is also a question of how the Commonwealth exercises stewardship over public land with lasting implications for heritage, community, environment and place.

The Institute encourages the Committee to recommend a framework that is more transparent, more heritage-informed, more design-led and more attentive to long-term public value. Good design can help ensure that when Defence land transitions to new uses, it does so in a way that honours heritage, supports communities and leaves a positive legacy.

Surplus Defence land should be assessed not only for what it can return on disposal, but for what it can contribute to communities, heritage, housing, public life and national legacy over time.

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects would welcome the opportunity to elaborate on this submission if that would assist the Committee.

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