

THE DEMOLITION OF A SIGNIFICANT PUBLIC BUILDING

There is one manoeuvre that governments, particularly State and Federal coalition governments, have turned into an art-form and that is the practice of demolishing or compromising significant public buildings. By significant buildings I refer to structures that are historic, unique, architecturally important and a cherished component of our urban settlements. These public structures are after all, owned by the people of Australia.

This practice of demolishing and disabling fine urban structures seems, in this century, to have started in Sydney with the handover to corporate entities of a number of historic sandstone buildings along the length of Bridge Street. Lately we have been confronted by the proposed demolition of two recently completed football stadiums, both of architectural and community significance; the propose demolition of the significant 'brutalist' Sirius building; and the forced removal of the significant Powerhouse museum from Ultimo to Parramatta. Who knows what will happen to the forlorn remnants of the building in Harris Street!

Canberra seems to have learnt this art form from Sydney's demolitions, for it now appears that the Australian War Memorial and its mentor, the Federal coalition government, are hell-bent on demolishing the 2001 Anzac Hall, in order to allow a monstrous over-development of the Memorial at a half-billion dollar cost, for basically museological purposes. The local chapters of the Australian Institute of Architects is incensed by this proposal and have joined with the AIA nationally to promote a 'Hands off Anzac Hall' campaign.

The 'back-story' to this saga is as follows. Firstly, what is Anzac Hall? Denton Corker Marshall of Melbourne, one of Australia's most innovative and respected architectural firms, designed Anzac Hall, which was completed in 2001. The DCM design response was an exceptionally creative one, guided by the (then) Memorial Director and staff, with a thorough and carefully considered conservation management plan, and with respected conservation architects. The completed hall with its great sweeping metal roof, so beautifully evoking the wings of a plane, sits deftly in front of, but not obscuring, the Memorial's northern façade. A more sensitive design is hard to imagine. So impressed was the jury of the Australian Institute of Architects' National Architecture Awards that in 2005 it awarded the building its highest honour, the Sir Zelman Cohen Award for Public Architecture.

Fast-forward to 2015, when the AWM commenced work on redevelopment plans for the AWM precinct. There appears to have been no public consultation about these plans. At a recent meeting, Brendan Nelson, the director of the Australian War Memorial Director, has confirmed that eighteen different options for the redevelopment plans were put forward for consideration. Seventeen of these options did not involve the demolition of Anzac Hall. Only one did. Why was the only option that involved the demolition of the existing building the one that was selected? It is difficult to understand how this decision came about, the due process that should have been followed, and ultimately, who agreed to the proposed demolition.

This AWM proposal has been met by community and professional outrage but in response the director Brendan Nelson has responded coyly that he was 'unapologetic' about the decision '... By the time it [Anzac Hall] goes down, we will have had 19 wonderful years out of it.' This is spin of the highest order.

The Australian War Memorial must reflect the wishes of the community in whose heart it holds a special place. The ACT AIA Chapter's 'Hands off Anzac Hall' campaign has only just begun and the chapter will not give up until other voices in the debate over the Australian War Memorial's future are heard. Nor should we. This is a battle worth fighting!

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