

PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE INQUIRY AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Summary:

This submission addresses the terms of reference and submits that the project is inappropriate for the site due to its proposed massive built scale as well as the inappropriate and wasteful demolition of the existing Anzac Hall. The memorial's present character of serenity and contemplation will be destroyed by the proposed work. This is not a memorial expansion but a total makeover which will change the nature of the memorial forever. This submission contends that other more imaginative ways can be found to suit the memorial's vast expansion aims, if indeed they are justified.

Submission details:

This submission addresses the terms of reference as follows:

A. the stated purpose of the work and its suitability for that purpose;

The Australian War Memorial states that: "The time has come to modernise and expand our galleries and buildings so we can tell the continuing story of Australia's contemporary contribution to a better world through the eyes of those who have served in modern conflicts; connecting the spirit of our past, present and future for generations to come." (AWM website).

Nowhere does the Australian War Memorial give evidence that this stated purpose needs to occur at the current site at the head of Anzac Parade. The stated purpose could be equally, or better, served at a nearby or appropriate other location.

It is a pity, for example, that the Australian War Memorial Council, who have been planning expansion strategies since 2015, did not acquire the former CSIRO headquarters site, only 500 metres away, for \$20 million when it was on sale in 2016. This elegant elevated site could have provide ample space for expansion without compromising the existing serene character of the memorial or involving the demolition of Anzac Hall.

What further investigation of alternatives has taken place? For example, the existing memorial's administration could be relocated off-site and the administration's building area used for new display galleries. The existing Anzac Hall, valued at some \$17 million, could be retained with obvious financial and heritage benefits. Some imaginative thinking may fulfil the memorial's needs more sympathetically to the spirit of the institution than what is now proposed.

The major problem with the stated purpose – expansion – being located where proposed is that it destroys the character of the very memorial it sets out to enhance. The extensions will destroy the current spirit of contemplation and research. Furthermore Anzac Hall, opened in 2001 and the winner of the 2005 Sir Zelman Cowen Award for Public Architecture, will be needlessly demolished.

The Australian War Memorial Council should be asked to demonstrate how they explored other sites and options before reaching their current proposal.

B. the necessity for, or the advisability of, carrying out the work;

It would seem inadvisable to carry out the work as planned. The major problem, even if the need for expansion can be justified, is that the proposal destroys the very memorial it sets out to improve. The Australian War Memorial's spirit of contemplation and research will be shattered. Anzac Hall will be needlessly demolished. The massive expansion will turn the memorial from an important national institution into something like a theme park.



Anzac Hall, elegantly and robustly complementing the original building.
(May 2020, photo by author)

C. the most effective use that can be made, in the carrying out of the work, of the moneys to be expended on the work;

The demolition of Anzac Hall, a large and successful exhibition space valued at \$17 million, only to replace it with equivalent exhibition space, cannot be an effective use of money.

Demolition of Anzac Hall represents the removal of an existing \$17 million asset which the Australian taxpayer has paid for. To build the equivalent space again represents another at least \$17 million which the Australian taxpayer will again pay for. Removal plus rebuild thus totals \$34 million or a significant 6.83% of the entire \$498 million budget. Where is the cost benefit analysis showing that demolition and replacement, albeit in another form, is cost effective?

The demolition of Anzac Hall is not **the most** effective use of the moneys to be expended.

And, how “future proofed” is the current expansion strategy? If major elements of the building, only 17 years old, are now proposed for demolition, what parts of this current plan may the taxpayer expect to see being proposed for demolition in 2037?

D. where the work purports to be of a revenue-producing character, the amount of revenue that it may reasonably be expected to produce; and

The Australian War Memorial has over 1 million visitors a year. Entry is free. Nevertheless, these visitor numbers of course generate income for the memorial through the cafes, shop or donations.

However, increased visitor numbers (there is no guarantee that a larger building will increase visitor numbers) may occur wherever the expanded galleries are located.

E. the present and prospective public value of the work

There is no public value to be gained by destroying the existing character of serenity and contemplation and making the memorial look like a shopping mall. For example, the precinct’s proposed new entry foyer looks more like the Palace cinema Prosecco bar than a dignified memorial entrance.



Proposed new War Memorial entry



Prosecco bar at Palace cinema entry

Does the memorial really want to present itself to visitors as a prosecco bar? In what possible way does the mood of this entrance “tell the continuing story of Australia’s contemporary contribution to a better world through the eyes of those who have served in modern conflicts” (to quote the memorial’s website)? The design concept looks more suited to a shopping mall or amusement centre? **The proposal belittles the memorial and in no way enhances it’s “public value”.**

Furthermore the demolition of Anzac Hall is contrary to the respectful preservation of Australia’s heritage. Anzac Hall is a work of great architecture, elegantly complementing the original memorial building and beautifully integrated into its landscape setting at the base of Mount Ainslie. Awarded the Sir Zelman Cowen Award for Public Architecture in 2005, Anzac Hall represents one of the best works of architecture built in Australia this century.

The Council of the Australian War Memorial is entrusted with the **respectful preservation** of our heritage through the retention of records, objects, memorabilia, art works and the building itself. **The proposal to demolish Anzac Hall is not an act of public value.**

RECOMMENDATION

Judging by the design presented, it is doubtful that the Australian War Memorial Council is getting the best advice possible. The iconic memorial building and precinct are of great national significance and **deserve better treatment.**

There appear to be two options for future growth.

Option 1. Leave the iconic heritage listed building essentially as it is and provide expansion off site, nearby if possible.

Option 2. Expand on site but with a world class architectural design. The uninspired design now proposed is not world class. Nor does the design do justice to its context with Parliament House, the building at the other end of the Anzac Parade axis. If the memorial is to be expanded, a proper design competition should be conducted to find a truly exceptional design. The Australian Institute of Architects provide competition guidelines for important buildings.

The current fragmented and uninspired design results from a flawed competition process. To quote from the Canberra Times, 7 April 2019, “**Australia’s leading architects turn back on war memorial project...**The Australian War Memorial may struggle to attract Australia’s best architects for its redevelopment as many distance themselves from the project over the decision to demolish Anzac Hall”. The competition for the design of Parliament House was endorsed by the Australian Institute of Architects. The memorial’s competition was not. Given the national significance of the memorial project, why did the Australian War Memorial Council allow this unsatisfactory outcome to proceed?

Expansion of the Australian War Memorial calls for a design of exceptional character. Exceptional character is not evident in this proposal.

Notes:

Subsection 17(3) of Public Works Committee Act 1969

- a. the Stated purpose of the work and its suitability for that purpose;*
- b. the necessity for, or the advisability of, carrying out the work;*
- c. the most effective use that can be made, in the carrying out of the work, of the moneys to be expended on the work;*
- d. where the work purports to be of a revenue-producing character, the amount of revenue that it may reasonably be expected to produce; and*
- e. the present and prospective public value of the work*

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