Submission to the East Darling Harbour Design Competition
August 2005

The Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) is the peak professional body representing professions involved in planning Australia’s cities, towns, regions and places. PIA is a not-for-profit association delivering benefits to over 4,000 members nationally. Our members are drawn from a range of planning professions – urban and regional planning, social planning, urban design, environmental planning, economic development planning, transport planning and planning law.

The shared core interest of PIA, as stated in its Constitution is:

“the community, and the education, research and practices relating to the planned use of land, its associated systems, and of the natural and built environmental, social and economic impacts and implications of the use of land”.

The following submission is lodged on behalf of the NSW Division of the PIA.

PIA NSW supports the NSW Government’s initiative to explore new uses, activities and public places for the East Darling Harbour precinct of Sydney’s Central Business District. The Institute has noted Government’s objectives for East Darling Harbour, observed the Design Competition process and has reviewed the ideas of the competition finalists recently on exhibition. Invited by the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority to provide input, PIA NSW would like to present the following comments to assist the Government in the second stage of the design process.

Imaginative Urban Design Proposals

It appears that the ideas presented by the finalists did not fully grasp one of the key purposes of the exhibition described in the introductory material, which was to “stimulate imaginative urban design proposals”. Artificial foreshore beaches, linear waterfront parklands or an elevated landscape plane with buildings beneath akin to Parliament House in Canberra could hardly be considered innovative or imaginative.

We note in the General Jury Comments in the Stage 1 Jury Report that the jury dismissed proposals for high buildings in favour of the competition guidelines preference for mid-height buildings. Similarly ideas to reconfigure sea walls and manipulate water bodies were similarly dismissed by the jury as ‘too hard’ and ‘too expensive’.

In our view, the competition guidelines and the jury brief should have permitted exploration and free expression of ideas without any preconceived urban design restrictions. There is a well worn planning and architectural cliché in NSW that states that the Opera House would not be approved by the inherent conservativeness of authorities today. The outcome of the design exhibition, where both applicants and finalists have demonstrated a predictable, low risk and somewhat conservative approach to the presentation of ‘ideas’ merely, unfortunately, reinforces this cliché.

Where are the landmark buildings? Where are the dynamic public places? If an observer views the plan of each finalist, then closes their eyes, are the plans of such significance that they are etched in the viewers’ minds?
All finalists represent world-class design teams, however PIA NSW considers that no team has demonstrated its full design potential, due to the conservativeness of the process. The brief for Stage 2 would be the ideal place to encourage greater design originality. This is addressed further in the point below.

The Theory Informing the Process

Critically, the idea of ‘a form’ suggests that ultimately East Darling Harbour is informed by a complex and far reaching agenda for Sydney, one which guides the planning and design process, that is, investment, participation, decision making and implementation.

To this end, it was felt that the competition brief was far too restrictive for an “ideas” competition which is meant to engender community discussion about the future of the site.

The brief, it would seem, had already projected ‘the idea’. That is, disposal of government assets is acceptable if there is an ‘amount’ of compensatory public good. Arguments about ‘amount’ stifle more pertinent questions about the role of the public domain and activities that could occur in this location.

This current approach is likely to determine and limit ongoing discussion and the conduct of the second stage of the competition.

Therefore PIA NSW believes that the brief for Stage 2 should address this matter.

Vision vs. Detail

We note that the Competition Brief sought ‘ideas’ not ‘detail’ However the detailed requirements of the brief stipulated that a minimum of 50% of the foreshore should be foreshore parkland, that the development must be self funding, and that the NSW Government’s Public Foreshore Walkway must be realised. These requirements, by default, hinder the exploration of and proposal of new ideas, no matter how different.

Whilst PIA NSW appreciates that certain parameters are appropriate to assist in equitable assessment of proposals, it is our view that the first stage of the competition should have given applicants free reign to suggest a wide range of ideas and design solutions that satisfied a suite of performance based objectives (such as simply the provision of new public places, landmark architecture etc) and not the prescriptive requirements required in the brief. For example, why do new foreshore public domain areas need to be expressed in the provision of hectares of new open space? The boring and sterile foreshores of Perth in WA and Chicago Illinois are a testament to the open space fallacy that quantity is better than quality.

PIA NSW suggests that in Stage 2 finalists be given the opportunity to refine their ideas, judged against either prescriptive controls or performance based objectives.

Interpretation of Urban Design

The design competition presents 5 urban design concepts out of a total of 137 entries. All of the concepts comprehensively describe public open space and built form solutions for the study area.

None of the concepts comprehensively describe ideas for new public transport access, opportunities for affordable housing, and opportunities for new landmark community and cultural facilities. Urban Design is an encompassing term that seeks to create, in simple terms, quality spaces. This incorporates sustainable transport and movement, balanced communities and land use mix.

Furthermore, few of the submitted schemes embraced the histories that have contributed to what is now the current form of the site nor did they go on to propose new form from the line markings of old.

In addition, little reference was given to Harbour and Harbour-side ecologies. We should be embracing the notions of green city, green buildings, fossil-fuel independence, and full-fledged ecocycling.
It is appropriate that applicants be given the opportunity to suggest and promote components of their urban design vision that extend beyond open space, built form and the basic demarcation of commercial and residential land use. We recommend that this opportunity be extended to finalists in the 2nd Stage of the competition.

**Strategic Context**

We note that the competition brief provides for new floorspace which can generate in excess of 20,000 new jobs and residential and recreational space. However, we question the strategic context in which these planning parameters have been proposed within the competition brief.

Will the existing constrained road network in the north western part of the CBD support this increase in land use density? How will employment be accessed by public transport? Does the CBD lack hectares of lawn for recreation space to necessitate this approach or are more ‘urban’ (in lieu of ‘suburban’) recreation opportunities more appropriate for the site location? Is it appropriate that Government should be promoting such large scale commercial office space within the site, when it simultaneously is seeking to attract such uses to other centres such as Green Square, Parramatta and Sydney Olympic Park?

Furthermore, the five winning submissions appear in absence of an understanding of the relative isolation of the site, and the special qualities and challenges this brings, in reaching out to larger connections, to dramatic transport innovations – or to accept a relatively reclusive, segregated setting at the western backside of the CBD.

PIA NSW considers that any future use of the site must be placed in a regional land use and transport context to permit the realisation of orderly regional planning within the Sydney Metropolitan Area and an appropriate and harmonious use for the site.

**Exhibition Process**

We were disappointed that the public was granted only two weeks to review and provide comment on the plans of the finalists.

Similarly, with such a large response to the invitation to view the finalists, PIA NSW would have welcomed the opportunity for the public to review a larger number of entries. We note in the Jury Comments in the Stage 1 Report that the design ideas of the 137 entries could be grouped into 6 ideas on how the foreshore park could be conceived and 4 ideas on how the built form could be organised. While we find such limited variation disappointing, and a perhaps a reflection of the limitations of the brief and jury’s approach noted above, we believe it would have been beneficial for the number of finalists to be expanded to give the community the opportunity to be informed about the various possible approaches, and given the opportunity to comment on the various design permutations. If the public has sufficient skill to review and assess the many paintings of the Archibald Exhibition, perhaps this approach can be extended to the future of East Darling Harbour?

**Exhibition Questions**

The form and format of the questions required to be answered during the exhibition raise a number of concerns. They sought specific comment on specific aspects of each urban design concept that are not fully explained or supported in the exhibition. The lack of detail presented in the concepts frustrate any informed response to the questions and commentators are left at a loss as to what sort of comment is being sought.

For example, Question 2.4 seeks comment on whether finalists’ entries ‘have successfully preserved the northern tip of the site for future generations’. Many concepts leave the area as undefined open space of some sort (which we assume is an outcome of the Competition Brief). Does undefined open space, or a sandy beach, preserve the area for future generations? It certainly sterilises it from imposition by built form; but using the Opera House analogy again, Australia’s future generations would have been surely disadvantaged if the implementers of this landmark cultural facility had not realised their vision.
Both built form and open space can preserve an area for future generations. Applicants should have been provided with the opportunity to explore this objective and explain their approach.

Similarly Q.2.3 seeks comment on where concepts ‘have successfully retained the nominated working harbour uses on the site’. With such paucity of detail and such obvious opportunities to provide for the Spirit of Tasmania and other low impact and low scale maritime uses, this question would appear to be somewhat worthless and we question the value of the responses.

Recommendations

PIA NSW recommends the following:

1. That the Stage 2 Brief encourages originality in submissions.

2. That the Stage 2 Brief articulates values in relation to ‘working harbour’ and disposal of government assets in exchange for public goods.

3. That Stage 2 finalists be given the opportunity to refine their ideas, judged against either prescriptive controls or performance based objectives.

4. That applicants be given the opportunity to suggest and promote components of their urban design vision that extend beyond open space, built form and the basic demarcation of commercial and residential land use.

5. That proposals regarding the future use of the site must be placed in a regional land use and transport context to permit the realisation of orderly regional planning within the Sydney Metropolitan Area and an appropriate and harmonious use for the site.

6. Any jury from this point on include a Landscape Architecture representative (this has not been the case to date). This is considered particularly important given the focus on parkland and public domain.

7. That details of the next steps for community discussion, such as presentation of the criteria and process for the evaluation of the schemes and rationale behind the brief, be on exhibition in the Sydney Town Hall by the end of September.

8. That the 132 other schemes become publicly available for viewing (perhaps the folders could be lodged with the State Library and the City of Sydney Library at Circular Quay immediately).

Conclusion

PIA NSW trusts these comments are accepted constructively and believes that Stage 2 of the process can deliver to Sydney a magnificent vision for the site, and we welcome the progress of the process. Thank you for this opportunity to contribute.