

Submission to the Public Works Committee on the Australian War Memorial Development Project

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment to the Committee on the Australian War Memorial development project proposal. My view of the proposal is informed by my long experience at the AWM - I was the previous Head of Buildings and Services and had a significant role in planning and development of the Memorial and the conservation and management of its National and Commonwealth Heritage values. I am also a long standing member of Australia ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites).

Introduction

Any development proposal at the AWM constitutes a public work of extraordinary importance. Public buildings of the stature of the Australian War Memorial are priceless and Australians must be assured that such significant public places are managed and developed properly and to the highest architectural standards. Any change needs exemplary design, thorough public consultation, and must be fully compliant with all components of the legislation protecting National and Commonwealth Heritage.

The AWM heritage building and site has extraordinary power. It has a unique and intangible quality. This sacred place is intrinsic to how we commemorate. Recent developments such as Anzac Hall (2001) and the Eastern Precinct (2010) have won the highest award for architecture; not only because they are outstanding in their own right, but most importantly because of how they respect and compliment the Main Building and sit within a nationally significant heritage landscape.

There is no doubt that the Australian War Memorial needs to continually evolve to fulfil its role. However, this need for constant change presents a significant challenge to the site's custodians. Award winning developments such as Anzac Hall and the Eastern Precinct show that with care and sensitivity the heritage building and site can evolve without impacting the intangible and sacred character of the place.

The proposal you have before you has immense adverse impact on the Memorial. It is not compliant with the AWM's own Heritage Management Plan and, at the time of writing this, it is a 'controlled action' under the EPBC Act because of its likely significant adverse impacts to a National Heritage place. There has not been full public consultation, proper consideration of less costly and less damaging alternative proposals, let alone a national design competition unimpeded by restrictive criteria that excluded the retention of Anzac Hall. The proposal represents poor design, flawed planning and lack of proper process. It is an identified risk to a unique National Heritage place.

Comments addressing the Committee Terms of Reference

(a) The stated purpose of the work and its suitability for that purpose;

The AWM states that the purpose of the work is primarily to provide additional exhibition capacity so that the Memorial can continue to 'tell the stories of Australian experiences of conflict and operations'. Whilst this stated purpose appears to support the role of the Memorial and is acceptable in its own right the AWM's associated demand for a huge and costly expansion at the expense of the unique heritage attributes of the site has gone unchallenged and unjustified. The unique nature of the site ensures it has immense commemorative power. If this extraordinary quality is to be maintained into the future it must

be recognised and preserved. Even CEW Bean's intuitive sentiment that the Memorial should be 'a gem of its kind' and 'not colossal in scale' has been ignored by this proposal

The AWM says that they intend to develop in a manner that 'preserves the national significance of the Memorial whilst enhancing the visitor experience'. This is the fundamental flaw in the AWM's proposal; such a statement by the AWM can only be seen as lip-service when the sheer scale of this development proposal and its adverse impact on the nationally significant site is understood. The AWM's own Heritage Management Plan (2011) and the (still yet to receive accreditation) HMP review (2019) do not support the proposal because of how it would impact both the tangible and intangible values of the site.

Understanding this is critical. The site changes irreversibly once these values are diluted or lost. A bigger Memorial is not a better Memorial.

There are other options to the removal of Anzac Hall and massive, costly development of the site. The current proposal showing an insensitive construction joined by an imposing atrium to the rear of the heritage building, a new grandiose southern entry which impacts the existing southern elevation and the significance of entry via the Commemorative Area, a new rearranged and oversized Parade Ground, along with further impact on the architectural quality of the Eastern Precinct development and its carefully designed separation from the main building, is poorly conceived and damages the fundamental nature of the site. The proposal shoe-horns huge development into what has been up until now a well-planned and sensitively developed place. It provides additional space but at huge cost to the unique character of the building and site. It does not address circulation issues: most of the proposed new exhibition would be at the very rear of the site with no changes to (or funding for) the First and Second World War galleries in-between, there are only undeveloped or non-existent concepts for egress from a cavernous new southern entry, and there is no apparent consideration of well-established statistical studies of optimum visitor time in the building and the impact of significantly increased size on visitation and sense of place.

(b) the necessity for, or the advisability of, carrying out the work;

It would certainly not be advisable to cause irreversible damage to the fundamental character and physical structure of one of our most significant places. The AWM has not properly considered alternative options that retain Anzac Hall or the use of the nearby Treloar Centre at Mitchell for display of large technology items. The potential for increased development of the Memorial has been documented for some time – the AWM Heritage Management Plan and the appended Site Development Plan are examples of this – none support the destruction of Anzac Hall, intrusive development in the Eastern Precinct, changes impacting the southern elevation, complex and extremely high risk excavation adjacent/under the Main Building, or the exclusion of Treloar for commemorative display.

Renowned architects and heritage professionals, with years of significant experience at the AWM, have already provided alternatives that are consistent with the AWM Heritage Management Plan, do not involve the destruction of Anzac Hall and are less costly - but these have been ignored in the current proposal. For example, the CEW Bean Building by Denton Corker Marshall was always designed to be sensitively expanded to the east to provide room for back of house activity still in the Main Building and free that space for exhibitions; Johnson Pilton Walker has provided concepts for achieving comparative on-site exhibition space that retain Anzac Hall and do not overwhelm the Eastern Precinct with new development. Site development planning for Treloar has always considered its role as a

centre for the storage and commemorative display of Large Technology Objects. Previous appropriation for the development of Treloar has been based on this premise and the strategy is common worldwide in comparative museums with constraints to onsite development. Developing a delicate and human scale Memorial site to provide significantly increased space for display of very large technology objects such as modern aircraft and armoured vehicles is not a sensible or cost effective use of valuable space on that site. It is an untenable and unrealistic use of a unique and limited resource.

Why have years of considered review and site development planning (and funding) been cast aside for a development proposal that shows extraordinary budget overreach and massive changes to the nature of the site? Where is the detailed business case on the need for such a development? Why was design selectively tendered with the set condition of demolishing Anzac Hall? Why did the AWM Council insist on this approach? Where is the comprehensive and independent Heritage Impact Assessment for the proposal? Why is the design/delivery methodology so awkward (and risking budget increase) requiring multiple architectural practices for the different ‘components’ of the development – all apparently working to an overseeing architect whose role is to ‘ensure’ consistency in design?

(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 destruction of Anzac Hall, simply justified by the AWM as it is not big enough is a shocking waste. It was completed in 2001 at a cost of over \$11M and is a highly acclaimed building, eminently fit for purpose, and acknowledged in both the National and Commonwealth Heritage lists. Both the AWM Heritage Management Plan 2011 and 2019 specify retaining and conserving Anzac Hall.

The statement by the AWM that veterans need (for more space) outweighs retention of Anzac Hall shows a fundamental lack of understanding of the value, quality, and significance of this building. That veterans require it (demolished) is an arrogant assumption by the AWM, and an ill-thought-through position which the AWM has steamrolled since the beginning as the only option. It shows an extreme overreaction to perceived need, an unenlightened view of the complexities of the site, and a lack of understanding of contemporary museum practice.

The \$500M budget is extreme and the AWM has acknowledged that cost increases are likely (particularly related to the as yet undeveloped and risky proposal for Main Building refurbishment which includes the removal of existing columns to increase gallery space). It cannot be ignored that there are development options that provide similar space for less cost. Whilst \$500M to one cultural institution is extraordinary appropriation at any time, the current economic climate must surely justify rethinking how critical this expenditure is on one institution. There are many examples of projects in the health, education and cultural sectors for example that would justify support if economic stimulus is a consideration. This level of funding to the AWM alone is certainly not justifiable in the current economic climate.

(d) where the work purports to be of a revenue-producing character, the amount of revenue that it may reasonably be expected to produce;

No comment

(e) the present and prospective public value of the work.

The AWM feels that this development proposal will ‘future proof’ the Memorial by providing increased space for museum galleries and display of large technology items.

This logic is flawed. Huge development of the site simply to provide more floor space ignores the adverse impact of such development. It is untenable to just demand on-site development in the guise of ‘future proofing’ and ignore the impact on the existing heritage and architectural value of the site. The AWM’s own Heritage Management Plan states ‘the success of the Memorial as a landmark is due in part to its distinctive massing and symmetry; its relative visual isolation given its privileged site on the land axis; the landscaped grounds and the backdrop of the forested slopes of Mount Ainslie’. This proposal would adversely and radically impact the significant public value of the site and its ‘success as a landmark’. Comparable institutions overseas recognise the danger of site over-development. Consider for example the Imperial War Museum which has expanded to sites at Duxford and Manchester; the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum which has an offsite facility at Dulles airport.

Clearly, simply developing the heritage building and site on the basis of needing more space for more conflicts and larger objects means additional space will always be required. The Memorial can be sensitively developed, but this must be based on a long term approach to the role of the heritage building and how we view commemoration occurring on that site for the next 50 to 100 years. Simply increasing gallery space in the heritage building/site as the need arises does not address the complexities of ongoing commemoration, and the constraints of the heritage building and site over time. Good planning must take a holistic view of the current Memorial holdings (at Campbell and Mitchell) and consider all options for appropriate development. To destroy the discrete sense of place and the intangible, and emotive character of the Memorial by poor design and overdevelopment would be a tragedy and unforgivable.

Finally, it is important to understand that contesting this development is not about whether or not you support veterans. Objecting to it does not equate to obstruction of the role of the AWM or belittling the service and sacrifice of contemporary veterans. Objection is not saying that the AWM shouldn’t properly address recent conflicts; or that nothing additional or new should be done at the Memorial for commemoration of these conflicts. An enormous and costly development which shows little respect for the heritage site and building is not the way to do this. There are already developed alternative and less costly design options which achieve the necessary space without the destruction of Anzac Hall and that do not cause irreversible harm to the National Heritage site.

The Public Works Committee has a significant responsibility in ensuring the high standards expected with the expenditure of public monies. This proposal by the AWM raises many questions to do with protection of heritage, planning, design, process, and the effective use of public money. I believe this proposal is ill-considered and it is time to pause, take a breath and reconsider what constitutes proper and cost effective development of the Memorial.

Yours sincerely

Stewart Mitchell
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