



SUBMISSION 6

Villawood Immigration Detention Centre Redevelopment

**Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on
Public Works incorporating a Proposal for a
Migration Museum and Ethnographic Park as part
of the Redevelopment in a Heritage Precinct.**

1. BACKGROUND

The Villawood Migrant Hostel was my childhood home. Over the last twenty five years, I have watched the site slowly deteriorate with many heritage buildings demolished or falling into a state of disrepair due to neglect of maintenance and indifference to the facility by successive Commonwealth authorities.

The Hostel, which became a detention centre, was the first Australian home for thousands of post World War Two migrants. It offered temporary accommodation. The Hostel residents had their first intimate contact with Australians and Australian way of life during their periods of stay. They developed relationships with the surrounding community, went to local churches, attended local schools and shopped in the local retail strips. Many settled in nearby streets or surrounding suburbs, like Regent's Park, Chester Hill, Fairfield, Yagoona and Guildford.

The Hostel was the place which fostered new citizens and exposed residents to Australian values; it also helped to nurture ethnic communities and their organizations.

Most of the Nissen Huts which were the predominant form of accommodation at Villawood were demolished in the late 60's. They were replaced in this major redevelopment with two storey apartment style units. These units subsequently fell into disrepair with a reduction in migration intakes. They were vandalized and eventually also demolished. Concurrently, some of the facilities were adapted for detention of illegal arrivals and asylum seekers.

The site has had a sorry history in the last three decades or so. This history is an indictment of the Australian Government and officials who advised it. The history demonstrates scant regard for the local community who are predominantly either immigrants, new citizens or working class, often older, Australians.

People living in the area have learnt to coexist with this sorry history of neglect regarding themselves as relatively powerless to intervene with remote bureaucracies.

Those migrants, or new Australian citizens, like my parents, who settled in their own home near the hostel, have been reluctant to make representations to improve the amenity, always fearing the spotlight and/or being seen as special pleaders. Others have wished to leave their experience of hostel life in the past looking to a future integrated with the Australian community. It is now a site remote from, not part of, the community. The community has been alienated from it for some years, and more so recently.

I make this submission on behalf of all who lived in the Hostel over the years. I hope it will draw attention to an important migration heritage in Villawood which has been overshadowed in recent years by the controversies surrounding the Australian Government's shameful immigration detention policy.

I am hoping for a more positive outcome for all in the Villawood community and its surrounding suburbs from the proposed VIDC intense and massive redevelopment taking an estimated two years to complete.

I understand that Bankstown City Council will also be making a submission commenting on a range of issues raised by the redevelopment.

Essentially, I support the redevelopment of the site, but question the proposal as outlined in the Joint Departments' Statement of Evidence to the Committee. I question its scope, its intensity, its design, its lack of consideration of the impact upon the local community amenity, its missing of an opportunity to create an heritage precinct worthy of the site's important history. I question its intention to remove almost all trees from the site and demolish some of the remaining heritage buildings.

The redevelopment proposal, while acknowledging the importance of dignified, non-punitive detention facilities, a view I support, fails to imagine beyond fairly conventional institutional designs. The statement of evidence from the Departments acknowledges also that there is "little in the way of formal standards for administrative infrastructure" in overseas jurisdictions and indicates that national standards for "people-focussed" IDC's are under development by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. It is hoped therefore that the plans will be substantially revised following the adoption of standards.

2. OVERVIEW

I wish to make specific representations regarding the proposed redevelopment of the VIDC with respect to heritage and history, social impact, the nature of the community amenity in the immediate neighbourhood and the opportunity that the redevelopment offers for building a more positive profile for the Centre and integrating the facility better with the community.

At the core of my comments is a proposal to create a heritage precinct containing a Migration Museum and Ethnographic Park periodically open to the public. By implication, the scope and scale of the development, I regard as unnecessary, and insufficiently justified by the data and its projection into the future of resident numbers for the Centre.

3. HISTORY AND HERITAGE

The original Villawood Migrant Hostel, later Westbridge Hostel, was administered from January 1952 by Commonwealth Hostels Ltd as a Commonwealth owned company. It operated until 1978. It was established, like many other migrant hostels, to accommodate displaced persons and assisted migrants after World War Two. It was part of a network of hostels in NSW.

These hostels were, in the main, converted from former Army and Air Force camps. As such, they form part of our military history. Photographic and administrative records are held by the National Archives of Australia, many in the Sydney facility at Villawood.

The accommodation was temporary until migrants were able to find or afford houses in the community.

The shortage of housing in the post-war period, however, resulted in many migrants living in hostels for many years. As such, their early history in Australia, and that of their children, was inextricably linked to these hostels.

According to the Joint Submission by the Departments of Finance and Administration and Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, the present VIDC site was listed on the Commonwealth Heritage List in 2004. The Submission also notes that there are eight buildings on the site which were retained following earlier redevelopments. The Submission (p.10) proposes that some of these be retained, one, the Magazine Hut, in its current location, and three others (Mess and two Nissen Huts) be relocated, either offsite or on a heritage precinct on-site adjacent to the western boundary. Four buildings are proposed for demolition due to their poor structural condition and contamination, presumably with asbestos.

I submit that, not only should all heritage buildings be retained, but also those contaminated be decontaminated, restored and that a heritage precinct be created on the site that contains a Migration Museum, open to the public for inspection on special occasions and for specific exhibitions. Further, this precinct should take the form of a "skansen" or ethnographic park which recreates the life of the period with appropriately fitted out and furnished interiors. This proposed recreation would promote our migrant heritage and history and could be the suburban Sydney commemorative site for the post World War Two migration experience. (See Bonegilla, Block 9 Project, Albury Regional Museum)

Such a variation to the very limited suggestion in the redevelopment submission (p.10) of a heritage precinct would make more economic sense and would permit future generations of Australian citizens to gain insight into and understanding of the living conditions experienced by migrants during the two decades following WWII.

Photographic records held by the National Archives and a range of artifacts and other memorabilia could form the basis of a NSW Migration Museum and Ethnographic Park.

If the experience in Victoria and South Australia, with their migration museums, is a guide then there will be generous and enthusiastic ethnic community support for the concept. There is no such facility in NSW. There is only a virtual migration heritage centre with its office in the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.

4. COMMUNITY AMENITY AND SOCIAL IMPACT

The site proposed for redevelopment is bounded by residential and light industrial facilities. There are no substantial parks, gardens or green spaces in the immediate vicinity, the nearest in the Bankstown Municipality, being in Chester Hill at Nugent Park, Maluga Passive Park and Jim Ring Reserve. Noteworthy also, are recreational facilities in the Auburn Municipality bordered by Campbell Hill Road.

The present VIDC site has considerable stands of native and European trees planted over a sixty year period; some are the original woodlands. These are significant. The site offers the possibility of creating parks and other passive green areas. It requires a reduction in the intensity of the proposed development and environmentally sensitive, people-focussed design.

The scale and intensity of the proposed development will militate against such creative inclusions. The Joint Departments' submission specifically states that "building work will require the removal of the majority of trees that are on the site." (p.10)

This intention seems at odds with another section of the Submission which refers to the Palmer Report recommendations being incorporated into the VIDC redevelopment project including: opening up compounds, allowing views outside the compound and the creation of vegetable and flower gardens. (p.7) It also seems to undermine the possibility for reducing boredom and dissatisfaction of detainees without reasonable access to a range of recreation and education activities. (p.7) A landscaping masterplan, referred to in the Submission (p.19) is not available for perusal at this stage.

This is an intense redevelopment focussed on administration and accompanying buildings, that is, six building blocks made up of 2 by 48 bedroom units, double storey and 4 by 24 bedroom units, single storey totaling 192 beds, courtyards of 45 square metres, less than the optimal 50, medical facility, recreational areas, education areas, canteen, hairdresser, central kitchen, dining facilities for 800 detainees and so on. (See pp. 12-15) Green, passive spaces with natural shading afforded by trees and other vegetation are not evident in the redevelopment.

Proper and respectful consideration of the positive features of the site, as it stands, incorporated in the design of the new facility, would allow for the retention of trees to form views and be part of the passive recreation for residents and present a more pleasant and attractive exterior face to the community at large! Such passive recreation spaces could also form part of the heritage precinct and ethnographic park if sensitively sited.

The additional benefit of a review of the design, incorporating a Migration Museum and Ethnographic Park in a heritage precinct, would be the positive profile of the Centre for the future. The residents in the area have felt the social impact of the VIDC mired in controversy, with neglected infrastructure, now with compounds surrounded by high fences and razor wire, obstructed from view by some stands of trees and bushland. To many in the area, it is a prison and a blight on the community.

The redevelopment is an opportunity to create an appealing site whose social impact will be more positive, restorative and more consistent with suburban life.

The surrounding areas are devoid of community amenities. There is a Catholic Church Hall in Gurney Road, but no resident priest. There is a small shopping strip in Miller Road on the north eastern boundary of the site. There is a public high school, Chester Hill in Miller Road whose students are predominantly of migrant background or children of recent arrivals. A heritage precinct could make a substantial contribution to their education and sense of acceptance and belonging.

The surrounding streets are being subjected to a range of redevelopments which are altering streetscapes and intensifying land use. The recent construction of block style commercial buildings in Miowera Road on the old Telstra site and a facility for worship by adherents of the Mormon faith also in that street are curious additions to a hotchpotch of housing stock consisting of public housing of the fifties and sixties, mixed with project homes, owner builder dwellings and modest cottages with some two storey town houses.

The sale by the Australian Government to a private developer of a large portion of the former hostel land to the east bordering Miller Road and facing the high school, for use as residential in the northern end and light industrial in the southern end, will add little to the community amenity, and add greater stress on local streets, services and utilities.

The redevelopment of the VIDC should not proceed without its social, environmental and community impact and context being accorded due consideration. This is the least the community deserves. It has demanded little to date. Though the Australian Government is owner and controller of the land, it is so on behalf of all citizens.

6. CONCLUSION

The Government's proposal has the potential to improve the community amenity and minimize its long term social impact as well as considerably enhance the living conditions of residents of the VIDC. It could be an international showpiece facility with \$176 million of taxpayer funds; a facility which promotes dignified detention and links to a multicultural heritage, a mixed use worthy of an advanced democracy committed to defending human rights and democratic principles internationally.

It could enhance community relationships and contribute to the education of future generations.

I urge the Committee to subject the Redevelopment Proposal to serious review offering a critique which questions:

- # scope and intensity
- # environmental impact
- # design features
- # the appropriateness of its projections as to resident numbers into the future
- # its impact on the surrounding community not just in the building phase, but into the future, and very importantly,
- # its potential to contribute to migration history and heritage in NSW
- # its opportunity to build a more positive profile of VIDC in the community and enhance community understanding of the migration experience.

I recommend strongly that all heritage buildings be preserved and sited in a heritage precinct. I urge that all major stands of trees be retained and there be sensitive treatment of the terrain.

I invite the members of the Committee to visit the site and make an assessment of the proposal based on an appreciation of the environment and heritage, vegetation, topography, current infrastructure and community context. This is a major public works proposal warranting careful and detailed scrutiny.

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