

# SYDNEY MODERN CONCERNS: BRIEFING PAPER

10 October 2017

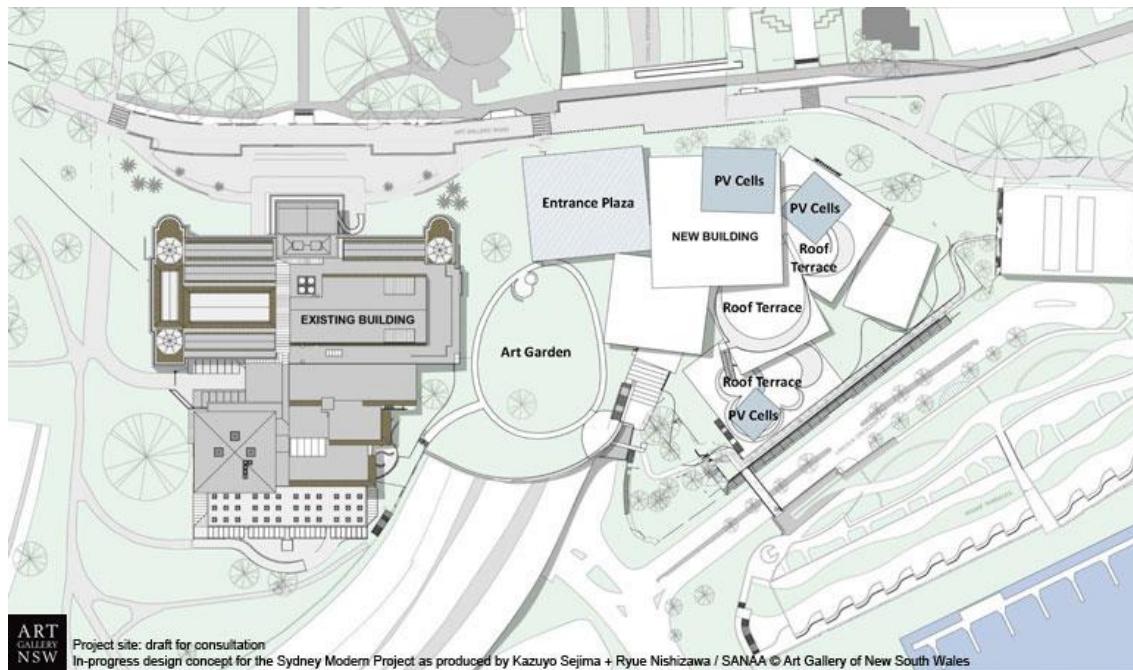
This paper discusses the growing concern about the Sydney Modern Project, its location and the process for public information and decision.

## Background

The Sydney Modern Project was announced by the Art Gallery of NSW in 2013, its stated objective being *to create a global art museum for a global city*.

In 2014 the architecture firm SANAA won the international competition for its design with its plan for eight linked pavilions. The cost of the Project was stated to be \$450m. The location was to be adjacent to the existing gallery on the landbridge across the expressway.

Following major public comment and concern, in June 2017 the design was adjusted and the location was moved north into the open space Domain lands at the entrance to Mrs. Macquarie's Point but with the Entrance Plaza and parts of the main buildings over the landbridge.



The Gallery has released a sketch drawing of the new design on this new location from a north east perspective.



## Rationale

The proposed functions of the building as stated by the Gallery include

- “ enable NSW to host more of Australia’s and the world’s best art exhibitions at the time
- “ enable the Gallery to embrace new and emerging art forms.
- “ more space for the Gallery’s collection and the display of ATSI, Australian art and art from the Asia Pacific region
- “ comprehensive display of modern and contemporary art
- “ specialised spaces for works on paper, photographs and the moving image

## People involved

The AGNSW assembled a formidable group, a virtual Who’s Who in the arts and commerce in Sydney, in connection with this project - from the judges of the architecture competition through to the Capital Campaign Committee undertaking fundraising. Current Gallery chair and member of this committee is David Gonski, credited with persuading former Prime Minister Paul Keating to drop his initial opposition to the Sydney Modern Project.

## **CONCERNS ABOUT THE SYDNEY MODERN PROJECT**

### **People and Organisations**

From the outset the Sydney Modern Project was controversial. Early critics included former Supreme Court Judge David Levine who described it as a money-making pleasure dome and former PM Paul Keating who called it a land grab....provision of commercial venues for hire (Paul Keating has apparently withdrawn his objection following the changed design and location.)

Following a briefing in May on the amended and re-located project from the Sydney Modern Project Team, former Government Architect Andrew Andersons raised serious concerns about the building itself and its location (his letter is attached). (Andersons was the designer of the Captain Cook extension to AGNSW).

The position of the Foundation and Friends of the Gardens has been consistently opposed to any loss of green space. The Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain (RBG&D) Trust has been more circumspect. Nevertheless, some members of the Trust have serious concerns about the way the Project was presented to them as a *fait accompli*.

To date, other people and groups have agreed for their names to be used in connection with concerns about the location of the Sydney Modern Project:

Bruce Robertson OAM (former Chairman Taronga Park Zoo, board member Keep Australia Beautiful, former RBG&D Trustee)

David Chesterman AM (Architect and Planner, Urban Designer of the Eastern Distributor and the Landbridge)

Leo Schofield AM (arts administrator/entrepreneur, director Arts Festivals)

Anne Schofield

Genia McCaffery (former President of NSW Local Government Association and former Mayor of North Sydney)

NSW National Parks Association

Total Environment Centre

## **MAJOR CONCERNS**

### **1. Loss of Gardens and Domain Land**

#### **The Project will occupy a large area of Domain greenspace**

The Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain, controlled by a Trust, are Sydney city's most historically significant remnant greenspace. The proposed Sydney Modern was originally stated to occupy a further 11,000 square metres of Domain land.

The gallery now states that the building will have a more compact footprint than originally envisaged, though they have not specified the actual size

<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/sydney-modern-project/about/design-concept/>

Over the past 100 years 10 per cent of RBG&D lands has been lost, for World War II emergency oil tanks, the Domain car park, the Cahill Expressway, an electricity substation, and portals and smoke vents for the eastern suburbs railway.

The NSW Government favours the project being granted a 50-year lease on the site, this being the limit on the power of the RBG&D Trust to alienate this land under its Act . It is open to question whether any institution would build an expensive monumental addition with such a limited life. The Friends of the Gardens believe that the Gallery - understandably - does not favour the leasehold option. The Gardens Trust understands that Sydney Modern has been designated a project of State Significance.

Trust lands are expressly mandated for open space and conservation purposes; any development on its land must directly or indirectly assist in attaining the objects of the Trust set out in its Act. It is difficult to see how allowing the construction of an extension of the Art Gallery benefits the Gardens. The chair of the Gardens Trust while not publicly expressing opposition to the project, has stated that it will require '*some compensation for the loss of ..... green space*', but the possible nature of such compensation remains is still under negotiation.

### **2. The Site**

#### **Minimal detail is publicly available about the selected site's potential impact on district views, traffic, parking, access and visitor amenity.**

After significant criticism the original site was changed to a site to the north east on RBGD Trust land described by the Gallery as ~~underutilised~~ and separated from the Gallery by the grassed landbridge over the Expressway.

The Gallery claims that the site chosen will enhance access between the Gallery, the Gardens, Sydney Harbour, Sydney Opera House, State Library of NSW, the CBD and Woolloomooloo.

The proposed building appears to occupy a footprint equal to or exceeding that of the existing Gallery buildings <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/sydney-modern-project/about/design-concept/>. In its new location, high on the grassy slope when viewed from Woolloomooloo, its size will be obvious and obtrusive. Until the Gallery recently updated its website, inquiries by the Friends have met with a response that details are not yet available~~s~~ as to the precise location, or dimensions and elevations of the building.

A newspaper report described the eight pavilions as ~~low-lying~~, but there is a significant drop from the land bridge level to the Fuel Tank Area, and without elevations or depictions of the building it is impossible to visualise the effect when viewed from the Domain or from below.

The views *from* the finished building are more likely to be of the Wharf and the naval dockyard in Woolloomooloo Bay rather than the harbour views claimed by the Gallery. Friends are also concerned about the possible treatment of a steep embankment covered by mature native trees immediately to the east of Mrs. Macquarie's Rd west of the Fuel Tank area.

No material has been released on parking or traffic implications, or on the effect on public access to Mrs Macquarie's Point, in view of the building's position on public space at the entrance to the Point. There are no details from the Gallery on the effect on the approach and ~~green entrance~~ to the Botanic Gardens, the emphasis is on benefit to the Gallery: '*The entrance plaza will become Sydney's vibrant new gathering place.....the entrance plaza and art garden will be integral to the experience of an expanded Art Gallery of NSW*'.

Finally, there appears to have been no analysis, or canvassing of public opinion, of suggestions for alternative sites. These have included Headland Park at Barangaroo, or at Parramatta instead of the uprooted Powerhouse, or on the area south east of the existing Gallery bounded by the railway and expressway..

### **3. Lack of consultation**

**By late 2017, there had been minimal public consultation about the project, and inadequate communications with RBG&D Trust and the Foundation and Friends**

In 2015, the Gallery mounted a public display of the entries in the design competition. This appears to have been its major attempt at testing public reactions to the project.

The Gallery now states on its website (<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/sydney-modern-project/about/community-consultation/>) that there has been  
*...consultation and engagement with a broad range of stakeholders, including the Gallery community, partners including the Royal Botanic Gardens and Roads and Maritime Services, neighbours, Indigenous communities, regional partners, art and community groups, and visitors to the Gallery.*

Recently, the Gallery significantly expanded the section of its website dealing with community consultation, adding a list of community information and feedback sessions in locations ranging from Sydney CBD and suburbs to Newcastle, Wollongong, and Orange, between 6-23 October. There is also an invitation to provide feedback directly to the Gallery via its website.

Where any alienation of public space is concerned, the public has a right to know. The Government has given assurances on the Sydney Modern Project and its funding to the Gallery Trust. The Minister must therefore have a good indication of the fundamental location and dimensions of the development for some time. She has told the Friends that she will be required to sign off on any deal, and that she has put in place a compensation process whereby she can receive advice on what compensation should be paid.

A DA with EIS is to be lodged in November. The Gallery's Project Team has to date declined to provide the Masterplan by Johnson Pilton Walker even though they say it contains the analysis of alternative locations for the Project. They claim it is not a public document. In a meeting with the Gardens Friends, they provided no details of the location plan and elevations although they tabled a model and advised they would provide the Friends with a photo of the model.

#### **4. Funding**

**Uncertainty remains about the availability of adequate funds to commence the project, and sources of funds to maintain it.**

It was announced in June that the State Government would contribute \$244 million over four years for the Sydney Modern Project. This announcement was accompanied by a statement that modelling by the Department of Premier and Cabinet predicted that Sydney Modern would pour more than \$1 billion into the economy over 24 years, create 240 full time jobs, and would almost double the visitation rate from just over one million a year to two million.

The Gallery claimed \$70 million had already pledged towards the \$100 million shortfall, though no details have been made available. Recently, the Gallery website announced a donation of \$20 million from the Wakil Foundation.

On the issue of funding, questions have been raised about:

- “ where this project fits within overall Government policy for funding arts institutions, particularly galleries in regional areas
- “ lack of information about recurrent funding to support staffing and maintenance for a major new development of this kind

" in the absence of a publicly available business plan, the extent to which Sydney Modern is likely to be heavily dependent on income from commercial ventures such as the rental of function venues.

**This paper has been prepared by and on behalf of concerned citizens:**

**Roslyn Andrews** (former member RBG and Domain Trust, former Chair Australian Horticulture and Landscape Foundation and NSW Institute of Horticulture)

**Gillian Appleton** (former member RBG and Domain Trust and former Chair NSW Arts Advisory Council)

**Bruce Donald AM** (lawyer, former Chair Environmental Defenders Office and former Australian Heritage Commissioner)

**SOURCES:**

Websites of AGNSW and RBG&D Trust

Personal contact with Foundation and Friends, email communications with potential supporters

Sydney Morning Herald, various:

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/agnsws-sydney-modern-dismissed-as-moneymaking-pleasure-dome-by-top-lawyer-20160912-gregbn.html>

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/paul-keating-michael-brands-plan-for-the-art-gallery-of-nsw-is-about-money-not-art-20151124-gl6j7x.html>

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/why-we-shouldnt-build-the-art-gallery-of-nsw-sydney-modern-extension-on-the-domain-20160303-qn9n9d.html>

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/how-paul-keating-kept-alive-his-bid-to-demolish-the-cahill-expressway-20170614-gwr2l6.html>

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<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/compensation-needed-for-botanic-gardens-after-art-gallery-expansion-trust-20170711-gx8w2f.html>

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/art-gallery-of-nsw-director-michael-brand-left-in-limbo-after-contract-rebuff-20170410-gvhvoa.html>

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/sydney-arts/art-gallery-of-nsws-sydney-modern-gets-the-cash-it-needs-but-questions-remain-20170613-gwq8tx.html>

## **ATTACHMENT 1**

### **Letter from Andrew Andersons AO to Sydney Modern Project team, May 2017**

Nicholas Wolff  
Sydney Modern Project Team  
[nicholas.wolff@ag.nsw.gov.au](mailto:nicholas.wolff@ag.nsw.gov.au)

Dear Nicholas,

#### **Re SYDNEY MODERN**

It was great to spend two hours with yourself and Sally discussing this project. No doubt you became aware of my view that the AGNSW would be far better off utilizing the massive space under the Headland Park at Barangaroo where, by my estimation, one would obtain far more space, suitable for the unbridled demands of contemporary art at a fraction of the price and project time.

If the Trustees of AGNSW were really interested in contemporary art they would pursue this course, but I appreciate how difficult it is to change direction after all that has been advocated in the five years since the 2012 master plan.

If SYDNEY MODERN is to be built in the vicinity of the AGNSW it must be justified by the following:

- It must be an ARCHITECTURAL MASTERPIECE
- It must read as FREESTANDING BUILDING from KEY VIEWPOINTS
- It must make the park and precinct a BETTER PLACE

I am pleased to say that the departure from the master plan in making the new building %freestanding+ is a great improvement but I think the separation is inadequate as was, in my opinion, demonstrated by the perspective from the west.

I must also say that I was surprised by the extent of the work that remains to be resolved two years after SANAA were identified as winners of the competition.

I realise that many architects have their own distinctive way of developing a design. However I can't imagine myself being in a position, two years down the track, without clear direction about such ideas as:

- Display and lighting techniques
- The mode of air conditioning in display areas
- The resolution of sun control for the extensive east-west walls

All of these can have a strong impact upon the quality and experience of the building.

The following are some quick responses to the design as presented. I feel somewhat limited by not having drawings in my possession for closer study as I appreciate the cross-sectional design is complex.

#### **MASTER PLAN**

It is pleasing to see that the fundamental precept of the ill-considered 2012 master plan has been abandoned, that of Sydney Modern being a massive composition around a new central entrance with Vernon's magnificent portico being reduced to a %Ceremonial Entrance+

The new concept of %Sydney Modern+as a separate building to the north breaks the almost insurmountable limitations of building over the expressway and generating a program for entry and orientation activities large enough to fill the space envisaged in the master plan.

This is along the lines of an unsolicited proposal discussed with the then Deputy Director, Anne Flanagan, urging her to make the master plan a design option but not the guiding document for the architectural competition.

It has taken the AGNSW five years to come to this more practicable proposition.

#### BUILDING SEPARATION

While the graphic of the entrance level plan is encouraging, the reality is that the entrance canopy comes quite close to the north-west corner of the Vernon Building.

The tabled perspective looking north east, still shows an unfortunate juxtaposition or %collision+of unrelated architectural language that can best be resolved by increasing the distance between the buildings, leaving the %bridge+over the expressway clear of structures other than the entrance canopy.

The computer-generated image with its questionable perspective and rendering of light does little to advocate the design.

The appearance from Art Gallery Road is of such importance that a number of views should be generated to test the efficacy of the design.

#### ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN CONCEPT

The architectural design concept is that of floating cantilevered roof planes surmounting a series of glazed pavilions. This forms a pleasing contrast with the essentially windowless masonry architecture of the existing building.

However the floating roofs are difficult to relate to the sloping ground plane. These problems are usually best solved with masonry elements making the necessary transition. Such elements do not appear to be part of the architectural language for the design. The original competition elevations highlight this issue.

#### TRANSPARENCY

Hardly an architectural competition design is presented these days without crystalline forms and glazed transparent screens. This was the case with the imagery of both the JPW 2012 master plan and SANAA competition design. The two schemes were extensively illustrated with clear glass walls of total transparency, clearly impossible with an art gallery.

Light levels required by materials conservation are a small fraction of external light levels, requiring glazing that is heavily tinted, reflective or protected with louvre systems. With any of these systems one can see out but not in. Drawings showing transparent display spaces are disingenuous.

Even lobbies and break-out areas facing east and west need to be protected from solar radiation at low levels. Solving this problem will impact strongly on the appearance of the building.

#### ENTRANCE CANOPY

The current entrance to the AGNSW with its architecture of Sydney sandstone and benign micro-climate is handsome and welcoming.

The canopy facing the street strives to do the same for the new building. However in its current configuration, it is unlikely to provide the necessary comfort conditions being open to the strong winds this ridge top location will experience from south-east and west, especially in winter. Presumably the louvred roof will be operable to allow for winter sunlight and summer shade.

There is little indication of the detail and activities that will make this a successful arrival space.

#### STEPPED CROSS SECTION AND VERTICAL CIRCULATION

With an ageing population an increasing proportion of visitors are likely to have impaired mobility. It is important that a public building with spaces distributed over four levels has an inviting and legible vertical circulation system.

The proposal is dominated by a monumental stair with a single escalator at one side and lifts relatively close to the stair at the entrance level, but increasingly distant from the stair and escalators as one steps down to the lower level.

An essential feature of a satisfactory vertical circulation system is that all three transportation modes have line-of-sight connection at all levels. This is currently not achieved where there are dog-leg connecting corridors on the lower levels.

The provision of single escalators between levels is problematic for a building in which visitors arrive and depart over the whole day.

#### VIEWS OUT OF BUILDING

One of the much appreciated contributions of the Captain Cook wing was the opening up of dramatic vistas over Woolloomooloo Bay from a building that was previously windowless. This connection between interior and exterior is fundamental to the perception of *sense of place* for AGNSW.

It seems unfortunate that the new building does little to capitalise on these views, especially from the circulation system, yet at the same time it blocks the key vista from the Captain Cook wing. The design relies upon a *viewing platform* which will be compromised as it has large areas of roof deck in the foreground.

#### ROOF PLANES

A key feature of the design concept are the square floating roof planes. They have been variously described as turf covered green roofs or of conventional roof cladding systems.

It seems a lost opportunity that there is no attempt to articulate these extensive areas with roof lights to provide top-lighting for display. This could also act as a way for compensating for the disability glare from the window walls without resorting to artificial lighting.

#### LIGHTING AND DISPLAY TECHNIQUES

One has only to think of great buildings such as Kahn's KIMBELL GALLERY in Fort Worth or Piano's MENIL COLLECTION in Houston to perceive how the lighting system determines the architecture.

Even the AGNSW achieves a certain amount of distinctive architectural character through the Captain Cook Wing grid ceilings, the exposed structure of the John Kaldor galleries or the traditional top-lit configuration of the historic courts.

The drawings give no indication of how this may all work.

The interior view, tabled at our meeting was singularly unfortunate. It has been my experience that perspectives with a downward line-of-sight are extremely difficult to generate. People and works of art need to be part of the computer model to be accurately presented.

Usually gallery interiors look best with very few people, just sufficient to give scale to the spaces and highly realistic brightly dressed people are to be avoided.

#### SEEING WORKS OF ART

It is a sad feature of the contemporary corporatised world of museums that one has to struggle through tedious %orientation+, %interpretation+, retailing and other facilities before engaging with works of art.

The design is at the risk of this same failing. The canopy and lobby would benefit from accommodating some powerful pieces, suitable for the lighting environment. The symbolism of locating the display of indigenous art closest to the entrance will be lost if it is contained totally within its %box+.

In the recent addition to the National Gallery in Canberra, the then Director, Ron Radford went to great pains to ensure that the emblematic %Aboriginal Memorial+is visible to all who arrive and depart from the building.

With regards,

Andrew Andersons AO

23<sup>rd</sup> May 2017