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'Diminished' Barangaroo and Sydney's challenge

Ed Lippmann

Sydney is a beautiful city. Its undulating topography, stunning harbour and coastline, surrounding river system and mountain range created a paradise for the 29 clans of the Eora Nation for more than 30,000 years.

The treatment of these Indigenous people by the colonists after 1770 reflected their hostility towards a foreign environment. There was no clear agenda or vision of the future. It took at least two centuries for the newly arrived antipodeans to understand this place and to reconcile their relationship with its Indigenous people.

Sydney has become a cosmopolitan city of 5.2 million people. We spread out and sprawled across 12,500 square kilometres before accepting that we cannot continue to expand relentlessly and erode our food bowl and natural environment. Instead, we're pursuing a higher density, more compact city which is a sustainable road map to the future.

The East Darling Harbour (later called Barangaroo) Masterplan Competition was announced in 2007. Changes in shipping technology made Patrick's container terminal at East Darling Harbour redundant. The government, quite rightly, resolved to give back the 22-hectare precinct to the people of Sydney and opened it up to the western harbour shoreline.

Then-premier Bob Carr had for many years championed the concept of a pedestrian promenade around the harbour's edge and this was an opportunity to extend it. The brief required 50 per cent of the precinct to be public open space with building development restricted to 30 per cent of its footprint – a good brief for sustainable, visionary redevelopment.

Like the Sydney Opera House competition 50 years earlier, many of the Barangaroo participants (25 per cent) came from overseas.

In the case of the Opera House, the result was a globally recognised World Heritage-listed building. Despite the recent back-patting by some of our local politicians, the outcome at Barangaroo has not been as successful.

Hill/Thalis with Paul Berkmeier (architects and urban designers) and Jane Irwin (landscape architects) were eventually declared winners of the competition. However, their masterplan was never implemented. Instead, the design jury directed the competition winners to modify their
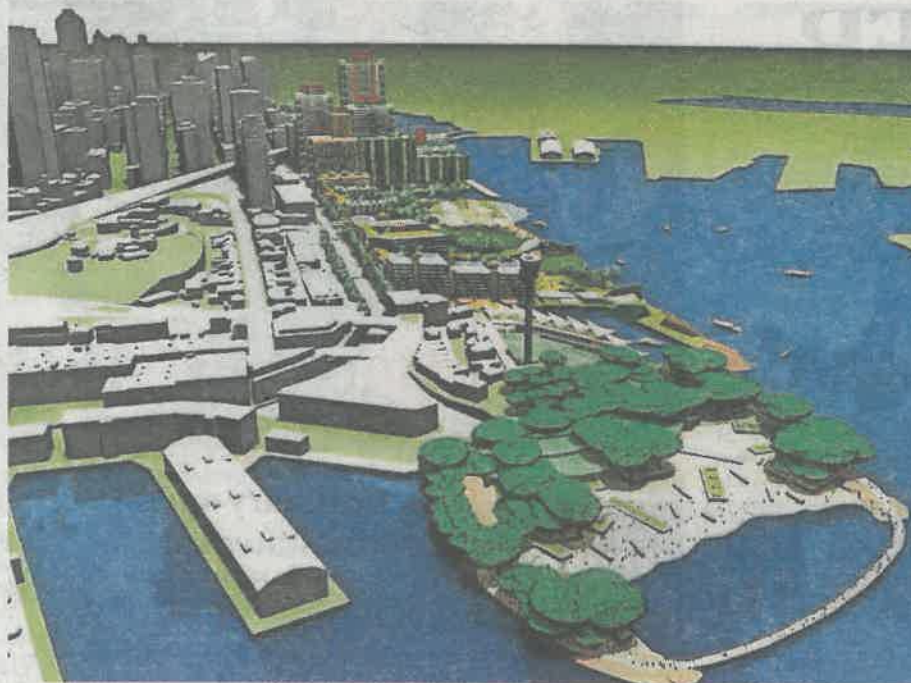
concept to include concepts from the runner-up scheme by Lippmann Associates/Richard Rogers Partnership (architects and urban designers), Martha Schwartz (landscape designer) and ARUP (environmental engineers)

The attempt to blend two plans into one was an impossibility because they were completely different. The Hill/Thalis concept retained Patrick's concrete deck and extended a fine-grained city street grid over it, nuanced to its new location.

The Lippmann/Rogers masterplan, on the other hand, removed the concrete deck and re-established the pre-colonial natural shoreline and the northern green headland. It envisioned a low-rise recreational precinct in the middle of the site and a high-rise commercial core to the south.

The jury's attempt to blend the Hill/Thalis masterplan with the runner-up was unrealistic and ended acrimoniously. This was a similar scenario to the Opera House experience but in the case of the Opera House, the people of Sydney inherited a brilliant, albeit imperfect building. At Barangaroo, we got something else completely.

Masterplan competitions are, by nature, loose, flexible conceptual diagrams, destined for future change. Architectural competitions are more defined and prescriptive. Nevertheless, 10 years on, Barangaroo bears no resemblance at all to the jury's selected winner. Instead, it's a diminished

version of the runner-up scheme.

The reasons for this are complex. It involved the government's abandonment of the competition process altogether and its replacement with a commercial bid for design and delivery of a more commercially pragmatic development of the precinct.

Despite former prime minister Paul

The brief required 50 per cent of the precinct to be public open space.

Keating's description of the Crown casino as one of Australia's most beautiful buildings, it blocks views from The Rocks and casts long shadows throughout the public realm.

Its existence reflects the short-term financial benefit of its owner and the government which authorised it. Keating describes those less excited by

its aesthetics as "fruitcakes" but while they make for entertaining journalism, these comments miss the point. The priority for economic gain over longer-term civic value has been a recurring theme in Sydney's history.
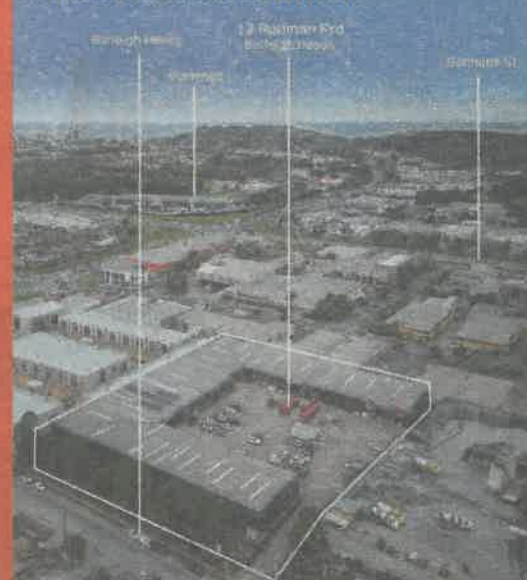
Just as the Opera House would have been superior had its original architect seen it through, the development of Barangaroo was marred by process and expediency. Sydney is a developer-driven city and many great cities have been shaped by market forces, developers and local authorities. We often credit the Medici family with the rebirth of Italian culture during the Renaissance, but Sydney's development industry will have to step up before it deserves such high praise.

Sydney's next big opportunities are the redevelopment of Circular Quay, including the reconfiguration of the Cahill Expressway, and the development of airspace above Central station. We need to appreciate that great, sustainable, vibrant cities are a long-term investment.

We have to approach the future with vigour while respecting the past, and we must create a long-term civic vision. This is Sydney's great future challenge.

Ed Lippmann is an award-winning architect, director of Lippmann Partnership and member of the design team who was runner-up in the Barangaroo Masterplan Competition.