

MAD about the BOY

The Andrew "Boy" Charlton pool is a Sydney landmark, if something of a 1960s concrete eyesore. All that's set to change with Ed Lippmann's winning design, transforming the pool into a place to see and be seen.

Woolloomooloo Bay has never been a stranger to the strokes of earnest swimmers. Aborigines were there long before the arrival of the Europeans and their nineteenth century idea of formal "baths". Birthplace even of the internationally recognised freestyle stroke, perhaps? One more thing for eager patriots to guard with jealousy, reclaimed now as the one and only "Australian Crawl". As the hunger for competition grew, a momentous leap was made out of the fields and into the pool when the Domain Baths finally opened on this site in October 1908.

With corrosion of the elements knocking always at its doors, deterioration of the baths was inevitable. A sixties-style facelift at a cost of half a million dollars sought to replace much older facilities with more modern and innovative renovations that many saw as saving the face of the swimmer, but destroying the eyes of nature-loving connoisseurs. Views of the harbour were momentarily blocked by the construction of wind breaks, necessary for a pool that was built on piers above sea level.

The competition

Not since the 1959 commencement of that once criticised "hideous monstrosity on the landscape" of a performing arts centre in Sydney has the city seen the likes of this. Roll-up, roll-up, the competition of the decade. More than 150 entries in the bag with nothing but water for filling. First prize to Ed Lippmann Associates and their design of intended simplicity.

\$10,000 of prize money and a commission to construct aside, this is a gold medal chance for an architectural company to build a lasting impression on the face of this city. Time to remove those barriers, open up the views and provide the public with a decent place to swim. "There are few cities in the world where one could swim in clean salt water with high rise office towers so close by." Plans for gravel flat rooves, interlocking pavilions, ambient radiation, silicone glazing. But above all, accessibility.

The announcement of first prize for Ed Lippmann and his team was based on the

shear strength of an entry that paid close detail to public demands, budget and style. Not to mention the nineties' necessity of a union with the land. Environment protection and nature enhancement are the key factors involved. "A sensitive element in the hierarchy between ridge and water, offering controlled views and vistas from the gardens, entry, change rooms, concourse and harbour." The new design seeks to allow surrounding elements of green and blue to dominate the landscape.

In the words of Lord Mayor Sartor: "For an architect seeking to reshape and revitalise such an important part of Sydney, the responsibility is great and I am pleased that Ed Lippmann and his team have been able to achieve success in that undertaking."

The experience

This is certainly not a place for those with fogged-up goggles. Too much to see, too

much to do. Unless of course I happen to be standing on the outside trying to peek into those changing rooms, in which case I am sure to be sadly disappointed. Well ventilated, bright open spaces they may just be. But with absolute privacy guaranteed. Shucks!

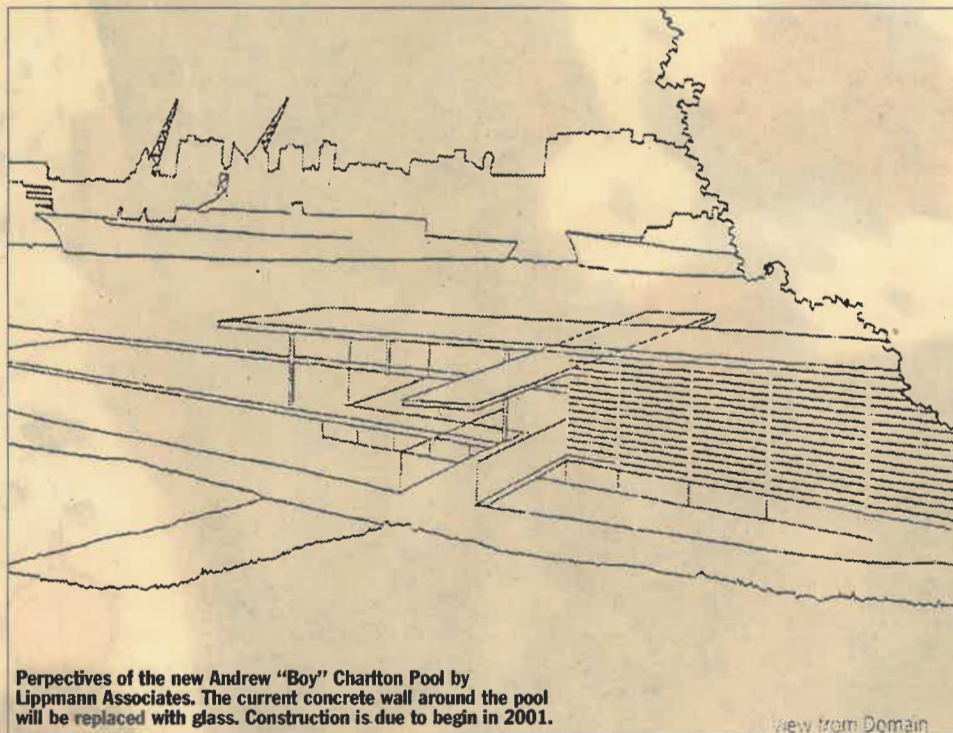
Instead, I take a stroll over the tiny connecting bridge. A step away from the harshness of life on tarmac roads to the gentler serenity of foyer views. There sits Lady Macquarie's chair. And the spectacular sights of Garden Island. Whilst here inside, the surroundings of a shallow pond whisk me away from garden green to the coolness of their salt waters within. Tickets here, snacks there, time for a meeting perhaps. Fancy a course in scuba-diving? Or simply one step down to the selection of pools below. 50m long for the big boys, hardly a splash for us youngsters.

An entrance that refuses me any chance to miss the splendours of its gravel rock

garden. Harbour views and natural light to keep those summer days alive. A quick dash to the shade of aluminium shelter to block out harmful rays that would see no "Boy" grow to be a man. For those of you who still dare to bronze, for those who still believe a tan looks good, fat-free baking areas are indeed sizzling on site. But don't say I haven't warned you.

This place may well have once been built with competition of the sporting kind in mind. But voyeurism was always a consideration for spectators on the sides. The distant sight of semi-naked bods was a fascination long before the wondrous days of video porn technology. Not so distant now. But still no amount of love nor money can get me those Olympic heat tickets. I suppose I'll just have to continue dreaming, or maybe wait for that year 2001 opening glimpse of my latest "Boy" in the pool.

■ DEAN DURBER



All about "Boy"

Born way back in 1907, yet still carrying the title of "Boy", as if eternal youth can only ever be granted to those who achieve fame at an early age, Andrew Charlton certainly had no hesitation about diving in head first, taking home the medals he swam for and then retiring at the ripe old age of 18. The dream goal of many a boy since, for sure. But none can quite compare.

Nicknamed "the flying fish of Manly" for his swiftness in the pool, Andrew was a local hero of champion standing who brought spectator pride and joy to Australian onlookers. In 1924 he managed to beat European champion Arne Borg at Sydney's Domain Baths. 440 yards of lapping it up in wave breaking time for a boy who went on to win Olympic colours of bronze and silver. A mere taste of what Australian swimmers could one day achieve.

Ill health at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics brought a sudden end to his revitalised career, but certainly not the legend. More than thirty years on, Andrew was offered a cementing of his place in Australian history with the renaming of the Baths that had seen him swim home to so many victories of national pride.

Boy Charlton, father of two and World War 2 veteran, died in Sydney on 11 December 1975.



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