

One site, 137 wild ideas

East Darling Harbour's future is obscured by a wealth of often conflicting proposals, writes ELIZABETH FARRELLY.

If intelligence is, as some say, the capacity to embrace contradictory ideas at one time, contemporary Sydney is somewhere near the genius basket. Historians may even see it as our defining characteristic; the way we've embraced virtuality to the point of accepting a near-total disjunction between the look and the fact. The way government is no longer about what is done, but what is said; government, that is, by press release.

We have, for instance, a 10-year-old Government that we placidly accept as green-tinted for its shameless promotion of bike policies, clean-air policies and rail-enhancement policies – despite the fact that it habitually scraps the bikeways, rail projects, integrated ticketing and natural gas bus programs so entailed. Then, like boys in the sandpit, it builds motorways instead. A Government that vows to double Sydney's rail freight within six years just as it kills White Bay, Sydney Harbour's only dock with direct rail access. A Government that pays counsel thousands a day to wage war on major rail projects that, as Justice David Lloyd recently found in Patrick versus the planning minister, actually "promote [the Government's own] policy target". A Government that talks about its Metro Strategy and its Freight Strategy as if such things existed, when in fact there are no such documents. A Government that, in pursuit of such strategy, spends two years and millions of dollars on a super ministry of planning, infrastructure and everything – then axes the lot on a whim, reinstating old feudal habits. A Government that now, heaping outrage upon outrage, makes the very sacker of the rail and cycleways, Michael Costa, the new Minister for Infrastructure.

East Darling Harbour, with stage one of its urban design competition completed, is both the latest product of such remarkable intelligence and its latest victim.

We call it East Darling Harbour, of course, to make it sound fatuous and kind of distant, like some peripheral leisure precinct we needn't lose any sleep over. In fact, it's 22 hectares of prime downtown land going begging; the first such site for decades; the last, maybe, ever. The area is vast – almost four CUB sites, seven World Squares – but the issues, well, they make the site look minute. Yet here we are acting like they're all sorted, so now we can get on with the prettification. Nothing could be further from the truth.

East Darling Harbour is a reclaimed concrete apron, sandwiched between a gentrified Walsh Bay and a gentrified King Street Wharf, and occupied by Patrick and P&O's last Port Jackson container ports. Patrick and P&O are moving out, voluntarily and soon, to Port Botany. The port wants to expand to accommodate them, but even the Government's own inquiry into the matter, chaired for most of its life by the new Minister for Ports and Waterways, Eric Roozendaal, recommended no expansion until Botany's environmental problems are solved. These include airport air and noise pollution, a toxic groundwater plume spreading towards the bay from the north, the heavily polluted Penrhyn Estuary, the Kurnell refinery output and Bob Carr's desalination plant, pumping hot water into the fragile bay. Plus there's a seagrass problem – it's a crucial fish-breeding ground and no one's sure it can survive any of the above, much less all. That's before you even start expanding the port.

Then there's the whole working harbour debate. Half of Sydney is still passionately engaged with it, though the Government continues to talk working harbour (meaning ferries and cruise ships) while acting like it's all over and gone to Wollongong. Leaving the docks to gentrification-by-design.

One can only presume that most of the 137



architect teams who spent tens of thousands of dollars each to enter the competition – just for the model, and as much again in time – weren't across most of this, or they might have thought twice about tossing their pearls into the swill. Yet toss they did, and a short list of five we have. Are we any the wiser?

"The task that now lies before you," intoned then premier Bob Carr, "is to provide

ideas and concepts that will underpin the transformation of this spectacular site."

Transform it into what? No one seemed all that clear, frankly. The brief called for 50 per cent parkland, 75 per cent of what is built to be commercial space and 100 per cent self-funding. Beyond that, it dissolved into a swamp of politically correct imprecision.

The jury, a 10-person polities' special with

Bold vision ... the Lippmann/Rogers/Schwartz/Lend Lease Development design, one of five on the short list for the East Darling Harbour site (bottom).

PHOTO: ROBERT PEARCE

a hefty preponderance of bureaucrats, wasn't much clearer. It sought view preservation for the noisy Millers Point types and something – but what? – that "captures the essence of Sydney". To cover itself, the jury chose as finalists exemplars of five different design strategies: a modernist mega-wedge (from PTW, Australia, which was covering the bases with no fewer than five separate submissions); a moment of wild'n'wacky figuralism (from American stars Thom Mayne and George Hargreaves with Project Architecture); a carefully knitted fine-grain old glove (from locals Hill Thalys, Paul Berkemeier and Jane Irwin); an old-style "bold vision" from Lend Lease Design Group showing one half solidly built over, the other half Canberra-esque parkland; and a rich one-of-everything mix from a team that includes the grand vizier of British urbanism, Lord Richard Rogers, the US's wild girl of landscape, Martha Schwartz, our own Ed Lippmann and Lend Lease Development (as opposed to Design).

This last is easily the most charming of the five. Like many others, it concentrates the high-rise at the southern, Wynyard end of the site. Unlike most, though, this scheme renounces the vast and friendless lawn feature for the chock-full city

None of it really matters. It's not like they're going to build the winning scheme.

precinct: food market, food school, cricket school, fishing pontoon, harbour pool, aquaculture facility, eucalyptus forest, wine centre, wetlands and city port. Plus a new city beach, modelled on Nielsen Park, and a whole system of canals and harbours carved from landfill. Fanciful perhaps, but it'd sure be fun for the flaneur.

Apart from the five finalists, who receive \$50,000 now and a further \$100,000 for stage II, an apparently random selection of 28 is also exhibited, while the remaining 100-odd also-rans languish in A3 files. This mysterious three-tier arrangement has sent a wave of angst through the refusés – not least because it means some appealing ideas will never see light of day: Lippmann Associates' other scheme, for instance, with three tall eco-pods at one end and a new rail station under Observatory Hill; and Tony Caro's elegant seven finger wharves solution.

The exhibited also-rans also offer some provocations, including the American Crawford Architects' proposed part-flooding to provide wetlands, mangroves and wind-harvesting, and SOM's bizarre blobs-on-sticks. Blobs, made possible by cyber design, are architecture's latest thing and SOM is one of America's shiniest corporate firms, but its fistful of smooth-skinned, snot-green blob-totems are the weirdest thing in the show. Not loveable, mind, just weird.

But that's the good thing about cyber-Sydney. None of it really matters. It's not like they're going to build the winning scheme – are you kidding? – just spend another few hundred thou on a masterplan, which is easier than a metro strategy and, anyway, along with the entire state infrastructure, will self-destruct within the next 20 seconds ...

A public forum on Sydney's working harbour and the East Darling Harbour urban design competition finalists will be hosted by the Working Harbour Coalition at the Sydney Town Hall on Wednesday at 5.45pm. For further information, see www.workingharbour.com.au and www.eastdarlingharbour.com.au.