

Sartor's leisure centre plan tagged a 'beached whale' on The Rocks

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Sydney's Lord Mayor, Councillor Frank Sartor, stirred up a storm some little time back by commissioning plans for a "leisure centre" in a proposed refurbishment of Phillip and Cook parks, near St Mary's Cathedral.

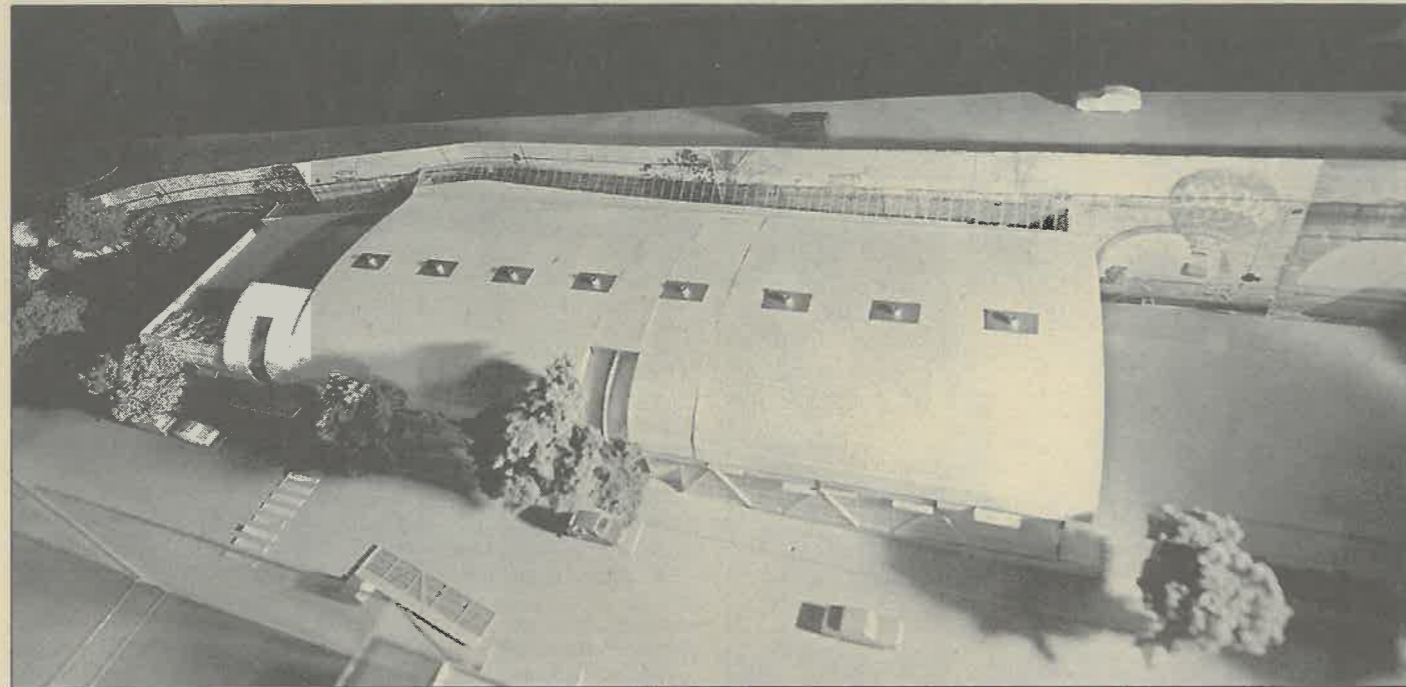
Now he is facing a storm over proposals for another leisure centre, this time in Cumberland Street, The Rocks.

King George V Recreation Centre occupies a narrow strip of land, under the wall of the Bradfield Highway, a low-key mix of courts, children's playground and child-minding centre.

While critics admit the present centre has little aesthetic or heritage appeal, some have been appalled by the proposed new building which one described as "a beached whale".

Mr Stephen Davies, conservation director of the National Trust, said it was "a question of whether you want something on that site at all and, if you do, how it should reflect and relate to the scale of the street".

While the site is Crown land, under the control of Sydney



A model of the proposed centre and, right, the site at Cumberland Street, The Rocks.

City Council, the approval body is the Sydney Cove Authority, on whose board Cr Sartor sits.

The authority originally had

a six-metre height limit for the site but the scheme's architect, Mr Ed Lippmann, said it had agreed to allow the building to rise to nine metres "on the

basis of the form we proposed". The building itself, housing basketball courts and other facilities, would be 64 metres long, with a 24-metre "facility

building" at its southern end. At the northern end would be an outdoor basketball court.

While he acknowledged it was "obviously a long building", Mr



Lippmann said the roof's arch shape would keep the perceived height much lower from the western side of the street; from the opposite, eastern side of the street, the building would be screened by trees.

The roof, in any case, was below the top of the Bradfield Highway wall and the Cumberland Street frontage would be broken by a mix of sandstone footings, a three-metre-high glass wall providing views through to the mural on the highway wall and by lou-

vres for natural ventilation.

Critics are not mollified by the design. Mr Philip Cox said he admired Mr Lippmann's design, which would be "terrific somewhere else", but the area was "a park, not a building site for the Lord Mayor".

"Surely the task for the Lord Mayor - and for the Sydney Cove Authority - is to increase green space in the city, not diminish it," he said.

"This is just an easy land grab [to replace the basketball

courts lost at Darling Harbour] without considering the alternatives. I'm not opposed to a leisure centre but it should be where the centres of population are. There's not the population around there to support something of this scale.

"There's a parking problem there, it's a nuisance problem and the site I believe is inappropriate. Cumberland Street is one of the most delicately proportioned in the city with a lot of two-storey buildings. We've got a national treasure there [in The Rocks]."

The Sydney Cove Authority's chief executive, Mr Bob Mitchell, said yesterday the board had asked the architectural committee members, Mr John Richardson of Philip Cox Richardson Taylor Architects and the Government Architect, Mr Chris Johnson, to look at "a couple of issues" relating to the proposal.

A spokeswoman for Cr Sartor said that \$1 million of the \$3-million-plus cost of the new centre would come from the State in return for the surrender of the Darling Harbour courts. "In his view there is widespread support for the project," she said.

Photographs by PETER RAE