

■ ARCHITECTURE

Sport and rec centre, but not as we know it

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IT LOOKS like a spaceship has landed in The Rocks. The King George V Sport and Recreation Centre, which opens next month, is elongated and tubular, mostly steel, with its spindly legs seen through louvred glass walls on the bottom.

While its architect, Ed Lippman, doesn't mind the spaceship tag, he prefers to think of it as an aeroplane wing, or a fuselage.

The \$3.5 million centre, owned by the Sydney City Council, is in Cumberland Street, hard up against the Harbour Bridge. Its volleyball, netball and basketball courts, two outdoors and one inside, and its gym, community centre and playground are designed for local residents and CBD workers, partly to replace the courts lost in Darling Harbour when Sega World moved in.

Its steel shape is curved, the roof arched and slightly bulbous. Lippman says this is "an obvious reference to the Harbour Bridge" from which he took his cue, rather than the area's stone buildings.

The shape is also practical. At street level, he was allowed only to go to two storey height – six metres – but a minimum of nine metres was needed internally, the national standard for a court. The curve resolved this.

When the design was proposed in 1996, it was tagged a "beached whale" by one critic, while architecture writer Philip Drew described it as "light and lyrical".

Lippman describes criticisms that the building was out of context in The Rocks as "reactionary".

He attacks the hypocrisy of his main critics – architects Andrew Andersons and Philip Cox, respectively designers of the East Circular Quay development and the Casino, "two of the most destructive" and inappropriately placed developments in Sydney – compar-



The King George V Sport and Recreation Centre ...
"spaceship" in The Rocks.

Photograph by JAMES ALCOCK

ing their designs with his "modest" community recreation facility.

Inside, the centre is light and airy, with a sunflower-yellow wall and lots of natural light, but saved from feeling too startlingly bright and new by an exposed old wall of the Harbour Bridge, complete with '60s murals painted by community artists.

A low budget – about \$1,000 per square metre, roughly the same as a factory or warehouse – had produced the right aesthetic for the building. "The simpler the form, the stronger," says

Lippman. "Hopefully it is a contribution. It forms part of the streetscape."

His main architectural reference was Sir Norman Foster, who is designing the Bankers Trust city tower. Lippman did his thesis on Foster and the Italian architect, Renzo Piano, who is also designing a city tower, and Richard Rogers who co-designed the Pompidou Centre with Piano.

"This was long before they were superstars ... I learnt from them on the whole issue of how architecture relates to the public realm," he says.