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NEWCASTLE FORESHORE LANDSCAPE
AND URBAN DESIGN COMPETITION

Introduction

"Since last Century Newcastle has turned its back on the Hunter River. It has erected buildings which block the view, railway lines which prohibit access and it has used the waterfront for utility structures."

"We believe the Hunter River Frontage should be Newcastle's front garden. The thrust of our solutions rest upon this simple but fundamental premise. We propose to turn the face of Newcastle once again to the waters of the Hunter River and beyond." 1)

It was this perception of Newcastle coupled with a bold design objective that won for Tract Consultants the National Competition for the Newcastle Foreshore Landscape and Urban Design Competition against 74 other entries.

The Competition represents a benchmark for landscape architecture in Australia. Although milestones in history tend to be made in retrospect, there are two turning points which can be observed and recorded here.

* The first is the vision of Newcastle City Council in identifying a prime space in the city and recognizing its contemporary opportunities and its potential for future use.

* The second is that the design was won by a group of Landscape Architects against Architect competitors who are traditionally seen as stewards of urban design.


A 'LANDSCAPE AUSTRALIA' REPORT

The competition was not just a means for simply generating ideas for discussion, because the Council, supported as well by a number of prominent local business houses, have made clear its intent to implement the chosen scheme.

Lord Mayor Alderman Joy Cummings, in the forward to the competition conditions, said:

"It has always been my hope that someday the City would be opened to the Harbour, where the people of our Region could enjoy the fascinating, ever changing Harbour scene — ships, tugs, dolphins and gulls." 2)

The competition was assessed by:

* Mr Lawrence Halprin — Landscape Architect and Urban Designer of San Francisco.

* Professor Peter Webber — Faculty of Architecture, University of Sydney.

* Mr Bruce Mackenzie — Landscape Consultant of Sydney.

* Mr David Chesterman — Architect and Planner of Sydney.

ABOVE: Tract Consultants' perspective sketch shows the proposed traditional timber "Queen's Wharf and buildings proposed for retailing and harbour related light industries. The tower is at the conclusion of the pedestrian walkway and provides a viewing deck and access to ground level.
The Brief

Newcastle serves a region of 450,000 people, in the second city of NSW and the third largest port in Australia. As the following comments from the brief indicate, the centre of Newcastle—

"is compactly developed on a framework laid down last century, crowded with buildings old and new. It has some buildings of architectural and urban significance (for example, the Law Courts, the Civic Group, the Customs House, the Railway Station)."

"As well the fringe of the Centre is ripe for substantial change. The riverfront adjoining the City Centre has long since passed the peak of its life as the force of shipping activity, the rail yards are approaching redundancy and the Power Station has already gone."

Tract in their assessment of this situation felt:

"The Brief establishes a series of objectives, perhaps the most important of which describes the opportunity of redeveloping the waterfront and re-establishing its interaction with the Centre. The project may be a catalyst for enhancing the environment of the historic centre of Newcastle as the focus of the City for its people." (Tract P.7)

The Methodology

Tract's response to the brief is based on a new, not any text book scientific method. Their approach was, in part, born from the experience gained in the St Kilda foreshore study (Melbourne) and the Fitzroy Landscape Study (Melbourne). It is a systematic method, not a knee jerk reaction to the site. The design team was careful not to pre-empt their solution until the site was

fully understood. Reading Tract's report it quickly becomes apparent that the design is based on thorough research, sensitivity to the site, and an overriding ability to appreciate the components that are Newcastle, like its toponography, social fabric, history and economy. This was demonstrated in their investigation of the history of the city which states in part:

"We are especially impressed by the history of Newcastle, from the first sighting of the Nobbys by Captain Cook in 1770 through to the establishment of the BHP Works in 1913-15 and beyond. The first landing by Shortland in 1797; the grim period of convict settlement from 1804-22; the development of the coal industry during the convict era and the granting of the 31 year mining lease to the Australian Agricultural Company in 1828; the occupancy of Fort Scratchley from 1860 and the opening of the rail link to Sydney in 1869. The vitality and pace of Newcastle in those days when the waterfront was alive and vibrant are portrayed vividly in books such as "Newcastle Sketch Book" (Parrely) and in the library and archives of BHP."

"The challenge of this competition for Newcastle is to produce a design in harmony with the opportunities and constraints upon the site; realistic and capable of implementation by the Council; enriching to the urban fabric of the city in contemporary terms yet recapturing the flavour of Newcastle’s illustrious past." (Tract P.8)

Here is a pertinent insight into the motivation behind a design that is entirely suited to Newcastle. By adopting this method of approach the Tract team has created a solution that is appropriate to its contemporary setting and possesses the ingredients to make it timeless.
ABOVE: Trust Consultants' Master Plan for Newcastle Harbour Foreshore Development.

LEFT: The details of the proposal for Customs House Square which are simple and unadorned but successful link the Customs House, Railway Station and Foreshore.

BELOW LEFT: Cross sections which illustrate some of the proposed planting and the levels to separate and control different functions.

BELOW: The new Queen's Wharf at one end of the Market Street axis with pedestrian link terminating in the leaves on the waterfront with access to deck level.
The scheme

The Tract design contains a variety of subletries that are drawn together in a simple and consistent theme. The major elements of the scheme are:

- A Dock built from traditional construction and materials around the core of the waterfront on an axis along Market Street to the core and hub of Newcastle in the Hunter Street area. The design intent is to create a linear extension of the City core to the waterfront. This is the most important element of the proposal.
- The Customs House and Railway Station are seen as the two most important historic buildings and here formal planning will be guided by the Customs House and the waterfront. This space is simple and uncluttered, traditionally landscaped but with a lot of historic significance.
- A dock built from traditional construction and materials around the core of the waterfront on an axis along Market Street to the core and hub of Newcastle in the Hunter Street area. The design intent is to create a linear extension of the City core to the waterfront. This is the most important element of the proposal.
- The dock will be designed to accommodate regular passenger ferries from the other major river ports, as well as occasional special vessels.
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