

Media Release



Designs on our future

New exhibition celebrates 200 years of public architecture

22/2/2016

Can you imagine Bennelong Point without the Sydney Opera House? Utzon's visionary design may never have been realised without the intervention of one of the world's longest running architectural practices!

For 200 years the NSW Government Architect's office has been the driving force behind many of our most celebrated buildings, as well as some of our most controversial – from the Sydney Opera House and Taronga Zoo to Darlinghurst Gaol and the Mental Hospital at Parramatta.

The State Library of NSW's new exhibition *Imagine a city: 200 years of public architecture in NSW* celebrates the extraordinary impact of the Government Architect's office in defining the state's cities, suburbs and regional towns, through rarely seen original drawings, plans, photographs and models, including works by iconic artists and photographers, such as Max Dupain, Lloyd Rees and Harold Cazneaux.

Since Governor Macquarie's appointment of Francis Greenway in 1816 to 'make a handsome town of Sydney', the successive government architects and their staff have given us many public buildings that "hold special status in both our public and private lives," says exhibition curator Charles Pickett. "One of the Government Architect's office's enduring achievements is the design of most of our major museums, galleries and libraries."

Across the state hundreds of architects working under the direction of the government architect have designed thousands of everyday buildings for work and play – courthouses, post offices, schools, police stations, gaols, libraries, hospitals, galleries and parks.

"*Imagine a City* is an exhibition that touches us all," says Charles. "We have all experienced the work of the Government Architect's office in one way or another – with some buildings evoking strong responses to the 'hits' and 'misses'!"

"Since the 1950s the Government Architect's office has produced brilliant school buildings, and the commissioning of award-winning Italian architect Dante Bini, who brought his quirky concrete domed Binishells to Australian schools in the 1970s, was a 'hit'."

Only a handful remain of the 30 or so Binishells built; several are still in use at schools including Kurung-gai High School and Ashbury Public School.

On the other hand, UTS Tower is widely regarded as Sydney's ugliest building. "It may be a 'miss' in terms of aesthetics, but is very functional which is why there are no plans to change it," says Charles, who admits to being fond of it! Plus, it's innovative construction makes it very hard to demolish!

Another 'miss' is the controversial Katingal Special Security Unit at Malabar which closed in 1978 after just four years – prisoners hardly saw the light of day!

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According to Peter Poulet, the 23rd and current NSW Government Architect, “Our most successful public buildings can endure physical changes as well as changes in attitudes, uses and the make-up of the population they serve.”

The State Library’s Mitchell Building is a perfect example of the adaptability of public buildings. First built in 1910 to house the private collection of benefactor David Scott Mitchell, the Mitchell has been adapted, added to and refreshed over 100 years to accommodate the changing demands of it readers and visitors.

Imagine a city, on show from 20 February to 8 May 2016, will be presented in the State Library’s original galleries, designed by the 10th Government Architect Walter Vernon.

The exhibition will be supported by an exciting public events program featuring leading architects and designers. There’s a self-guided walking tour of Sydney’s public buildings. Exhibition visitors will also have the opportunity to share their views on #publicmade buildings and their future, within the exhibition space and online.

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