

SHABBY TREATMENT OF HOBART'S GRAND LADY*

By Jeff Gilmore, Chief Executive, Sullivans Cove Waterfront Authority

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Hobart's City Hall used to be the centre of civic life before the start of a long, slow decline. These days, an occasional rock concert or flower show may lift the gloom, but the Grand Lady remains in desperate need of a makeover, says Jeff Gilmore.

As a relative newcomer to Hobart – I arrived and never left 18 years ago – I was sadly missing the night Killer Karl Kox launched himself from the top rope and landed on top of hapless Mario Milano at the Hobart City Hall.

But several thousand others weren't. They were packed into the hall, screaming at the top of their lungs as a succession of goodies (led by King Curtis and Spirios Arion) dispensed justice against a motley crew of snarling bad guys (think Brute Bernard and Mr Fuji).

This was a typical night out in downtown Hobart in the mid 1970s – a large crowd, whooping it up to live entertainment in a popular and much-loved venue.

It wasn't just wrestling. In the days before DVDs and video games, City Hall was a must-visit attraction most nights of the week where you could watch a cavalier and unpredictable line-up of roaming acts, from Russian Cossack Dancers to wild rockers (such as Billy Thorpe) and bawdy comics (Billy Connolly).

With bucket-loads more grit and charm than the far-more-posh Hobart Town Hall two blocks up the road, City Hall has been used for hundreds of purposes over the decades.

It has been the venue of dramatic public protests, a launch pad for political campaigns and the State's official tally room on election night. During the Second World War, it was the main collecting room for the 'Clothes for Europe' campaign as part of the war effort.

Unfortunately, time has not been kind to the grand old lady. On most days and nights, City Hall is cold and lonely and the streets around it are deserted. As younger audiences have drifted away to other venues, City Hall sits idle in its prime location, unsure whether it belongs to the city centre or waterfront.

It needn't be this way. The building deserves better, as do the people of Hobart.

Perhaps this isn't the best time to be raising these issues – upcoming council elections may see the debate hijacked by attention seekers rather than those with sensible ideas – but I'd like to provide a quick overview of what we've learned from the recently completed Hobart Waterfront International Design Competition.

Although there was tremendous variety among the hundreds of entries, both in terms of geographical makeup and design philosophy, there were a few common themes. Foremost among these was the idea that a vibrant City Hall has the potential to rejuvenate an entire section of the city, given its proximity to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Theatre Royal and the Docks.

Daily activity is important to realising this vision. Instead of occasional events spaced many weeks apart, City Hall should attract people every day of the week. This could be done by adding shops and stalls, a market, or hotel or conference facilities.

To make this happen, it may be necessary to increase the building's height, remove some of the brickwork along the sides, especially Market Place, or dig underground.

When tossing around ideas, it's important to remember that major changes are about to happen at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, with the Tasmanian Government funding a major redevelopment program that will finally create a worthy home for the State's major cultural institution.

As the new-look museum takes shape, there will be spin-off benefits for surrounding sites. Importantly, the design competition has given us a new impetus for thinking about these sites, and how they may affect the area in and around the City Hall.

Two sites worth considering are the docks (Constitution and Victoria) and Wapping Corner, the empty patch of land next to Theatre Royal on the northern side of City Hall.

We've always known the Docks are important – our fishing fleet and maritime heritage are among our prized assets – so maybe it's time we looked after them by creating a generous continuous space around the water's edge for pedestrians and those who service our boats. People should be able to 'touch the water'; if there are unnecessary physical or visual barriers in the way of pedestrians, let's get rid of them.

As for Wapping Corner, this is another site that is under-used and ripe for development. Just as a car-park on Dunn Place is poor use of a prime spot near the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, our much-loved Theatre Royal deserves better than bare ground and an abandoned garage as neighbours.

At Wapping Corner, let's think about uses that complement the theatre, perhaps a cinema, shops and cafes for patrons, or a pleasant courtyard that invites people to visit and sit.

Urban design on the scale described here may be complex and challenging, but it can be done. To make it happen, the Sullivans Cove Waterfront Authority is willing to assume the role of catalyst and facilitator. While the Authority does not own the land – this belongs to the Tasmanian Government, Hobart City Council and the Tasmanian Ports Corporation – we will negotiate projects between governments and the private sector.

Entrants in our design competition believe it can be done and have shown us the way. All we need is the will to act and the courage to accept change.

A post-competition analysis of entries from the Hobart Waterfront International Design Competition is available at www.waterfront.tas.gov.au

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