

CREATING A GREAT PUBLIC PLACE AT PRINCES WHARF*

by Jeff Gilmore, Chief Executive, Sullivans Cove Waterfront Authority.

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For years it's been little more than a glorified car park, but now Princes Wharf is about to be revived as a vibrant public space. Jeff Gilmore explains what it will take to restore the fortunes of this rundown part of the city.

It's no secret why Salamanca Place works so well as an artistic and lifestyle hub – it's because of the people.

Everywhere you go in the cafes, shops and laneways, you can sense the energy and enthusiasm of this part of the city. It's so real you can almost taste it.

Yet a stone's throw from the bustle and charm of Salamanca Place, in full view of shoppers and restaurant patrons, sits a sad, lonely shed that has seen far better days.

Its official title is Princes Wharf No 1 Shed, but names can be deceiving. There's nothing princely about its appearance, there's no activity on the wharf it sits on, and as a shed it has little or no practical use except as a temporary car park.

Sure, it comes alive for 10 days of the year when the Taste of Tasmania comes to town, as it will in 2009, but that's scant consolation for the rest of the year when its potential is hidden under a blanket of motor vehicles whose owners are at work or enjoying themselves in other parts of the city.

It's clear that Princes Wharf is one of the most exciting and challenging redevelopment opportunities in Sullivans Cove. But like so many other parts of the Cove, the shed cannot be considered in isolation and any assessment must take into account the surrounding wharf aprons, forecourt, roads, parks and footpaths.

The challenge is creating a space that works all year round, attracting people through all seasons. Ideally, it will cater for small community events as well as large-scale galas. It will encourage daily activity and revive a neglected part of the Cove.

Such revival work is happening right across the waterfront, quietly and without fanfare, as rundown sites are being rejuvenated through incremental change.

There are no half measures with these projects; they are top drawer. As an example, one of Australia's leading architects, Richard Johnson, is working alongside local firm Terroir to create a master plan for a new-look Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. As a measure of the worldwide esteem in which he is held, when not in Hobart Johnson is refurbishing the Sydney Opera House and was recently honoured with a Gold Medal for excellence by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects.

Rejuvenation is also under way at Brooke Street, where a new pier will create a base for Hobart's ferry fleet; at Wapping Corner, where the Theatre Royal will finally get a worthy next-door neighbour instead of vacant ground; and Heritage Square, where a series of derelict buildings behind Parliament House will be redeveloped into a vibrant city block.

Spearheading these activities is perhaps the largest urban renewal project in Tasmania – redevelopment of the Hobart Railyards on the edge of the CBD into a new neighbourhood with a major public hospital.

Successful makeovers throughout the Cove, such as Henry Jones Art Hotel and Elizabeth Street Pier, are not only in keeping with Tasmania's clean and green image, they mean we can approach Princes Wharf with excitement rather than trepidation.

Yes, there will be challenges but they are not insurmountable.

The first step at Princes Wharf is to accept that there are three possible scenarios for the No 1 shed: refurbishment with minor changes, adaptation with some extensions or additions, or demolition of the existing building and replacement by a new structure.

Scrutiny of these three options must be informed by an understanding of the urban design implications on nearby activities and events, such as Salamanca Market and the Taste of Tasmania, as well as overall community benefits. The Hobart City Council has flagged changes to the Taste and this is to be applauded because Tasmania's biggest street party deserves to go from strength to strength and should not be constrained by a single building. If a new-look Princes Wharf plays perfect host to the Taste but stays empty for the rest of the year, the community will not be better off and we will have failed.

Responsibility for creating a public space that works all year round at Princes Wharf rests with the Sullivans Cove Waterfront Authority. Instead of taking a short-term approach and buckling to lobbying by vested interests, the Authority is seeking to maximise community benefits and adopting a clear and transparent process.

This will be done quietly and efficiently, working through issues coherently and rationally without seeking the limelight, because that's what it takes to get urban design right.

In the first instance, the Authority is completing a pre-design phase, which will establish the design principles that any redevelopment must adhere to.

Once these principles are agreed, the design phase can begin, culminating in a preferred design that will be scrutinised by the Sullivans Cove Design Panel to maximise aesthetics, urban design excellence and community benefits.

Along the way there will be many opportunities for the community to comment, including consultation about the design principles and exhibition of the proposed design.

Only then will construction begin to create a great new community asset.

And once it's built, I'm sure we'll enjoy this great new public space and embrace it as yet another feature of our constantly evolving yet always recognisable waterfront.

See you at the opening.

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