

Wollongong Design Review Panel,

Presentation of revised documentation, for 10-18 Regent Street Wollongong.

Held at Wollongong Council on 5th May 2015

Present:

Scott Millican, PRD Architects
David Shalala Applicant

Mark Riordan, Wollongong City Council
Pier Panozzo, Wollongong City Council
Anne Starr, Wollongong City Council

Gabrielle Morrish, Panel member
David Jarvis, Panel member
Brendan Randles,

The Panel appreciates the peer review provided by Borst and Conacher and acknowledges that there have been some improvements made to key issues previously highlighted by the Panel. However the Panel have raised a number of serious design concerns throughout the design process. Many of these issues continue to constrain the project and compromise achievement of design excellence. A summary of the panel's position on the current proposal is as follows:

Context

The sites immediate context is in a state of transition, several sites have DA approvals for buildings up to 80m in height and some remaining sites have the capacity and potential to accommodate buildings of a similar height. A contextual study demonstrating how the proposed tower and its podium relate to its future context is an essential step in determining and developing an appropriate building form.

Throughout the design review process incremental steps have been taken by the applicant to provide an urban design – contextual analysis. Documents now provide some, but not all of the key elements expected in such a document. Clear diagrams showing building separation with neighbouring buildings / future towers demonstrating compliance with RFDC for example is an important piece of information that is yet to be provided. How this analysis has informed the current proposal is also unclear.

It is acknowledged that throughout the design review process positive improvements have been made to the building interface at street level. Vistas from Crown Lane to the proposal, now assists in forming a far more active connection with Wollongong's main retail precinct. The removal of the 11m deep south facing undercroft, providing vehicular drop off to Rawson Street is also a positive development. However the panel recommends the following refinements to ensure a safe, functional street is created:

- Width of vehicular lay back should be reviewed to ensure that it is no wider than necessary.
- Management of traffic along Rawson Street will need to be carefully considered to ensure that it does not create congestion.
- Planter bed to western end of lay back should be cut back to align with the building further west so as to optimize physical and visual pedestrian access along the footpath

- To facilitate unloading of persons and luggage without impeding pedestrian movement , pavements to Rawson street should provide a minimum clear width of 4m.
- The planter bed on street corner should be removed so as to maximize pedestrian circulation space and minimize unnecessary obstructions
- Columns should be rationalized to minimize visual and physical obstructions
- Rawson Street's relatively calm rectilinear podium language should be used as the model for the podium expression along Regent Street

Scale and density

The proposed tower is of a scale and density consistent with the potential future character of the Wollongong city centre. However distant contextual views provided by the applicant, show the squat proportions of the eastern elevations when viewed from a distance. These images highlight the need to model this elevation, providing two distinct elements with more slender proportions. This design principle has been consistently recommended by the panel.

In response to the panel's comments, attempts have been made to refine the proportions of the tower. The eastern face of the tower is now split into two separate facades separated by an 8m wide recess. The smaller northern façade element has been expressed with angled screens and projecting bays. It is a concern that the introduction of this new architectural language for only one portion of the building whilst still retaining the two different architectural treatments for other areas of the form, further confuses and complicates the aesthetic of the building. If this approach is to be taken it must be subtly executed and should influence other elements of the design to achieve a more complimentary architectural expression between the tower and the podium as well as the two portions of the tower.

The panel have previously highlighted simpler but clearly defined strategies to better express the tower form:



Images of the Renzo Piano building that were discussed with the applicant as an appropriate approach to mitigate the width of the tower frontage and expression of the tower edges. Please note images above show the tower with the apartment building in front of it in the upper picture

“The form of the tower could be further improved by creating a more dynamic profile that better relates to the back drop of the escarpment. It is suggested that this could be achieved by remodelling the upper two levels of the tower and varying the profile and alignment of each façade”.

The sheer size of building gives it great prominence, yet it appears not to meet the quality this demands. Awkward modelling and confused detail treatment gives the project a squat oddly scaled appearance, diminishing the intended expression and apparently light gesture of the curved glass skin.

Built Form

Previous adjustments made to the proportions of the podium (reduced by one level) contribute to improving the proportions of the tower to some degree. Some attempts have also now been made by the applicant to improve the proportions of the tower by breaking the eastern façade (See comments above, Scale and density). However the expression of the tower and its relationship with the podium remain unresolved.

Amenity

Circulation through some areas of the hotel remains awkward and results in poor way finding, dead ends and hotel rooms facing into internal voids. Levels 3 and 4 are of particular concern, hotel rooms on these levels look into internalised voids. Guests of the hotel will have no privacy, outlook or access to natural light or ventilation (once blinds are drawn to provide privacy). These rooms should be rotated to face Rawson Street or extended along the Regent Street facade. The sky light located above the void providing natural lighting in this space to service the circulation space is essentially a positive introduction. However it does not create a space appropriate to provide the sole outlook for hotel suites. The plant room suspended above the sky light also raise concerns about the detail resolution of this space.

The relationship of rooms in the north western corner of the building will also create potential privacy issues, This corner should be replanned.

Commercial floor plates are too deep resulting in spaces that will be dependent upon artificial lighting, A maximum depth of 10m to the core or centre line of the space or 20-22m overall is recommended.

Social dimensions

The proposed mixed use development will potentially provide an appropriate contribution to this to the city, pending improvements to the amenity of hotel suites and commercial spaces.

Aesthetics

The strategy to create simple slender glass facades to define the tower could potentially create a clear simple modern aesthetic. However for this potential to be realised it is essential that the form of the building be refined (as outlined above, scale and density) and that the detail treatment of façade allows the intent of the design to be realised.

This will be the largest / most prominent building constructed between Sydney and Melbourne. It will be seen from a great distance and will set the standard for future development in this part of Wollongong. It has a very high density and generous envelope in which to create a building of design excellence – a building well conceived, thoughtfully expressed and well resolved in its composition and detail. The building is very central and must activate the city's new high scale precinct. However, after months of discussion and iteration, the Panel remain very concerned about the building's appearance.

The splitting of the building's top part into two parts – as an attempt to reduce its visual bulk, is still clumsy in its execution and its junction with the podium remains very awkward and unresolved. This is compounded by the disjunction between building use and form; while one would expect the top of the podium to contain the building's "public areas" for example , these areas and facilities are distributed over a number of levels. Instead of the tower and

the podium expressing different parts of the hotel's many uses, an overlapping of functions throughout all levels makes the expression and interplay of each part very difficult. These decisions make clear articulation of the building's parts – between podium and tower, between commercial and residential uses, between active and passive uses - very hard to achieve.

The recommended use of Piano's glazed expression – a lightweight veil that sails past the building edge, top and in that case, a contrasting terra cotta base – still struggles to find resolution in this proposal. The glazing still clashes with concrete slabs at upper levels and fails to find a graceful relationship with its podium. Additional articulation of the northern portion of the tower does not address the problem of clarity and composition that the project has suffered and it is not referenced in the podium or anywhere else in the design as suggested by the panel at a previous meeting to tie the proposal together. The result is that in its current form the variety of treatments just create additional visual clutter and a fragmented concept.

The Panel have made numerous suggestions during the design process and this has lead to many iterations. However, the building form has remained largely the same and its architectural expression has not been developed to a cohesive and elegant architectural resolution.

Summary / recommendations

A number of improvements have been made during the design review process, the most notable of which being the improved interface with the public domain, however many of the fundamental issues raised by the panel throughout the design review process remain unresolved. The panel recommends the following:

- Further refinements to the detail treatment of the public domain to provide a safe functional environment.
- Resolution of the aesthetic treatment of the tower and podium.
- Improved amenity to the hotel.

Unfortunately the proposal is yet to meet the criteria set out in Clause 7.18 of Wollongong's Local Environmental Plan. Issues of particular concern are:

- *Clause 8.5 item (4)(a) A high standard of Architectural design or*
- *Clause 8.5 item (4)(v) Bulk, massing and modulation of the building.*

As stated previously, this may be the largest, most prominent building constructed between Sydney and Melbourne, it will be seen from a great distance and will set the standard for future development in this new high density precinct. Therefore the proposal must demonstrate design excellence in all respects. However, with numerous design issues continuing to concern the Panel, it is clear that the proposal struggles to meet the minimum design standards expected for one of Wollongong's most prominent sites. For the reasons outlined in this report the proposal in its current format is not supported by the panel.