

# Hobart Architecture and the Dilemmas of Development

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**The recent announcement by UTas Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Peter Rathjen, of plans for a Student Centre in the CBD brings to the fore a dilemma that often dogs city government and Hobart residents — how to strike a balance between desperately needed development and often-times controversial new architecture.**

Previous controversies demonstrate how desperation can swing the balance towards developers, and the question arises: How far is the Hobart City Council willing — or permitted — to go in reconciling development projects with heritage and community values? It is a matter both vital, and fraught. To put it bluntly, if the choice is between a controversial development and a vacant lot, development usually wins the day. On the other hand, citizens have to live with architectural follies for a long time, and sadly, examples abound.

In contrast to Hobart, Launceston did not suffer pell-mell development in the later 20th Century. Its CBD has for the most part been preserved; modest in scale and with a consistency of style no longer easy to achieve or maintain. The HCC does have a blueprint, of sorts: *The Gehl Architects Report: Hobart 2010 – Public Spaces and Public Life*, which calls for buildings that ensure, “delight for human senses.”

Oh, my — forget red awnings — delight, as with beauty, is very much in the eye of the beholder, and the UTAS Student Centre is a case in point.

The Mercury [4<sup>th</sup> October, 2013] rightly lauded the Vice-Chancellor for a proposal having “potential to recharge the city’s batteries”. And who can argue with an influx of hundreds of students, the creation of “a new cultural, economic and social hub”, landscaping, and a “cosmopolitan feel”. The site is rundown, muddled, and ripe for development. The lovely period café Basket & Green at the corner of Bathurst Street, and the two adjacent buildings on Elizabeth Street, will be preserved and their commercial tenants are supportive of the project.

There is much here to like and applaud.

Full steam ahead!

The proposed “futuristic” building was front-page in The Mercury, and what a sight it was: looming over its surroundings — stark; gigantic, and extending all the way from Melville Street through to Bathurst. Could this edifice possibly be a delight for human senses, or in harmony with its surroundings? For sure, Hobart, indeed Tasmania, has seen nothing like it. On 4<sup>th</sup> October, architect Scott Balmforth of *Terroir*, claimed on Southern Cross News that, “the design was made to fit within the grain of the city”. Conversely, Mr. Ray Wakefield, in a 10<sup>th</sup> October letter to the Editor, described it as grotesque and a monstrosity.



One wonders if the Vice-Chancellor, as lead client, ever questioned what the grain of the city actually means and how the design fits within it. A perusal of *Terroir*'s website reveals a corporate strategy of design driven by a “knowledge-generation process”. It is reasonable to ask what exactly was generated in this instance, and whether its wisdom was followed — or honoured in the breach. The nub of the dilemma is that while the city wants development, architects and their clients have a desire (indeed, an overwhelming desire) to leave their imprint. The Vice-Chancellor and *Terroir* have been graced with a rare opportunity, and, no

doubt driven by the once-in-a-lifetime nature of that opportunity, have gone for the predictable extreme — something that shouts: “Look at me!”

The look that results from their efforts could be one of delight —or dismay, as Messrs Balmforth and Wakefield ably demonstrate.

What are the corresponding responsibilities in all this?

For an extreme example, one need go no further than the *School of Pharmacy* at the Vice-Chancellor’s Sandy Bay campus — where someone else wanted to leave their imprint. It is reasonable to question the knowledge-generation process that spawned this gem, and ask: Does it delight human senses? Does it fit within the grain of its surroundings? Has it shaken any student out of complacency or inspired academic genius? The best that can be said for this functionless and insipid form is that it has not been planted in the centre of Hobart. In this, the University has fulfilled its responsibility to protect citizens from its folly.



School of Pharmacy. Photo Tony Hagar

To return to the present instance: If the Student Centre project should go ahead in its current form — and over the objections of Hobart’s citizens — somewhere, some time, some committee will no doubt award it a prize. But will that prize be bestowed with reference to the building, in situ? Will the committee get to delight in the McCann’s Music building, right

across the street? Never mind that it's in need of a spruce-up — it is a lovely example of the predominant architectural style that graces the City of Hobart; a style that should inform and inspire development.



McCann's Music Building. Photo: Tony Hagar

“Inform and inspire” does not mean followed, or mandated. One need go no further than the Supreme Court complex on Salamanca Place to see a contemporary interpretation of what we might call Turn-of-the-Century, or Early Federation, architecture — one that harmonizes with its surroundings; features local building materials and evidences a confidence that requires no loud statement — in short, that delights human senses.

The post-structuralism of the Student Centre bears no obvious link to any functional precept, nor to any other structure in the surrounding area. As presented, it would be better suited to a stand-alone site at the University, such as the middle of the rugby pitch.

Directly opposite the proposed Student Centre, in 1914, my grandfather, Robert W. Salter, built 124 Elizabeth Street, a modest structure to be sure — and one also in need of a spruce-

up — but, nevertheless, in some conformity with Early Federation style. It used to be a men's hairdressing salon and billiard parlour. Three of my uncles were billiard champions. Along with my mother, and grandparents, they lived in the tiny apartment upstairs. It is now a bicycle store. After walking around the neighbourhood, imagining the Student Centre towering across the street, I went inside to meditate on the situation at hand.

I invoked the spirit of my grandfather, looking for guidance.

It was not to be.

The message came back loud and clear that he was busy — turning in his grave.

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