

VCAT

Esplanade Hotel Site  
11 The Esplanade, St Kilda

Statement of Architectural Design Issues  
by  
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Norman Day worked with the late Robin Boyd and Professor Frederick Romberg before starting his own practice in 1971. He is an Adjunct Professor of Architecture at the University of RMIT which has also awarded him an honorary Doctorate of Architecture.

He is architecture critic for 'The Age' (Melbourne, (also during the period 1977-1984), architecture commentator for The Arts Show (ABC TV), and previously : ABC (Radio and TV) and 'Sydney Morning Herald' and 'The Sunday Age' (Melbourne). His buildings and writings have been published widely. Books include, "Federation Square" (Hardie Grant) 2003, "Note From The Laboratory - Norman Day Architecture" (due 2001) , " Heroic Melbourne - Architecture of the 1950's" (RMIT) 1995 , " Guilford Bell - monograph" , contributing author (38 South / Schwartz) 1997, "Fin de Siecle? - and the twenty-first century", part author (RMIT) 1992 , and " Modern Houses: Melbourne " ( Zouch), 1976 .

His teaching experience in architecture includes all levels (establishment years, thesis and post-graduate programs), at Melbourne University School of Architecture as a Design Tutor and at the Department of Architecture, Columbia University, New York, and has taught regularly at Australian universities and lectured at various institutions throughout Australia, London and New York - and at the Architectural League of New York.

Norman Day + Associates operates architectural studios in Melbourne, Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi and Dili.

This is an opinion on the architectural design proposal for the rebuilding of the Esplanade Hotel site, St Kilda.

Other than in general terms, it does not take into account specific issues of Town Planning legal matters, planning legislation, heritage legislation nor legal matters. It is an architectural opinion.

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I have analysed the submissions made for a permit for the redevelopment of the Espy Hotel site, and I have the following general comments to offer. These are preliminary comments, they may be dealt with in greater detail later, but I make them to indicate my architectural opinion of the submission as it now stands.

I have before me the briefing documents supplied by you (Councillor David Brand) comprising an architect's design report (dated June 2003), The City of Port Phillip appropriate Design and Development Overlay (dated 31 October 2002) and its Schedule 12 (dated 5 December 2002), a list of VCAT amendment documents – and a discussion paper or briefing supplied by you.

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There are a number of architectural issues raised for my comment:

1. The architects.
2. The overall concept design.
3. Historical and heritage issues.
4. Urban design.
5. Detailed design.
6. Functional matters.

I offer at this stage a summary of my responses to these issues:

1. The Architects

Fender Katsalidis are famous professionally and respected amongst a small group of talented and prolific architects of Australia.

Their reputation is international, their skills recognised and their history of producing fine architecture of invention and creative energy is exemplary.

Such an exceptional reputation places a burden on them to produce architecture of high quality which regularly leads the way.

2. The overall concept design.

This design is clumsy and lacks architectural courage. It's planning suggest an interesting and enticing Nonda Katsalidis/Carl Fender building, but the three dimensionality of its form suggests otherwise.

I have no particular problem with its height, nor position on the site, but the architectural expression - a series of horizontal ribbons of solid balustrade and void windows - does not in my opinion contribute to a successful solution for the building.

It is decent to attempt to establish an architectural character for the new which is different to the existing. That establishes the two elements of building on site as separate – old and new – and defines history in an appropriate way.

However, I am not satisfied that the design of the new building reflects successfully the quality of the original. More attention is due to establishing an architecture of appropriateness between the two compositions. In broad principle, I would argue that the new building should present a design of bulk and mass like the original, but in a contemporary language.

The part of the building located on the south (café and convenience store) offers no solace to the streetscape, does not enhance the existing hotel façade and is structured in a way that suggests the architect's "house style" rather than a considered design.

### 3. Historical and Heritage issues.

The existing buildings on site (motor garage stables in Pollington Street and Baymor Court Flats in Victoria Street) are delicate and powerful reminders of a particular piece of St Kilda architectural and social history.

I can see no need to demolish them. They should be woven into the new development, retaining especially the streetscape, texture and scale. Burra Charter conditions apply, the existing heritage buildings should be maintained allowing for refreshment and reuse.

Reuse of the hotel appears appropriate, while losing some qualities, it gains others.

### 4. Urban Design.

St Kilda is a cacophony of architectures, not all high art, not even by themselves works of great merit. But as a grouping these buildings create the place and give the locale its patina.

This proposal continues that attitude. Not special design, already dated as architecture, but nevertheless not of itself intrusive enough to damage beyond repair the existing urban design fabric. The main reason for that is that so much of the urban fabric is badly designed.

An opportunity to improve that design fabric on such a significant site as the Espy Hotel and located on the very significant The Esplanade - has been passed up.

### 5. Detailed Design.

At a detailed design level, relying on the state of documents that exist, an opportunity has been missed to effectively distinguish the elements of the new proposal so that it reflects the richness and delicacy of the hotel's Victorian architecture, and also the later styles associated with the suburb and site (Art Deco, Spanish-Adobe, early Modern).

The simplicity of horizontal white banding and recessed balconies, repeated and unbroken, is a banal expression for what could be an interesting building, I would not be surprised if the authors themselves are unhappy with the design as it stands.

Elements of the design at street level – the corner store and café, Pollington and Victoria Streets elevations – are a weak architectural solution, seemingly recycling an architectural language used by the authors in others of their projects, and without significant definition to establish a signature for this site and in this locality.

6. Functional matters.

I have not at this stage addressed the issues of functional design and planning and would wish to leave that scope open for a final report.

Summary

It is not possible to design good architecture in parts, and a factor of a VCAT appeal is that it might revert to a last resort of compartmentalised compromising, dealing and designing, especially by people untrained in architecture, which will produce final approved plans of banality that scar the urban design and architectural fabric of St Kilda for many years.

In this case, I would encourage the architects to redesign their building concept so that it deals more successfully with the matters raised, and I would ask that Karl Fender provide the urban design and that Nonda Katsalidis specifically produce the architectural design response .

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