

DROWNING BY NUMBERS: THE COMMERCIAL TRANSFORMATION OF HAROLD HOLT POOL

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INTRODUCTION

By celebrating the name of the Australian Prime Minister who drowned in 1967 off Cheviot beach on Point Nepean in Victoria, Harold Holt Pool is a typical Australian icon. Only in Australia would a facility be directly associated with the very activity that Holt both loved and lead to his final demise. The naming of the pool after Holt was both laconic and ironic and from this historical distance the pool appears to hark to an earlier era in Australia's history. There are no special trees, plaques, murals memorial gardens or philanthropic trust associated with the pool. Kevin Borland its architect believed that community engagement mattered and that it need not be divorced from the most advanced aesthetic experiments of the time. This was a time when architectural ethics and ideology were bound to the needs of the communities who used public buildings in the suburban Australia. In a sense it was part of an Arcadian vision that the suburbs of the 1960s and 1970s were places where public facilities could bind communities together by designing for all of the users of the building in an egalitarian manner. In the light of current proposals for the pool, embodying an unthinking commercialism, it is not hard to feel a certain nostalgia for this era.

Whilst Robin Boyd's Menzies College (1965) was arguably the first building in Australia to be built in the brutalist idiom, the Harold Holt pool can be seen as a work which gathered together a much wider range of architectural interests than that of Boyd; Borland's peer and rival. Kevin Borland designed the pool alongside his junior partner Daryl Jackson and it is an outstanding example of brutalist experimentation in an Australian context. However the resultant design, went beyond simply distilling the lessons of the plain speaking materiality of Alison and Peter Smithson, the earnest English architects who sought to revise modernism after the collapse of CIAM. Arguably the pool could easily be located within the Team X and revisionist tradition that characterized the work of the Van Eyck, Candilis, Josic, Woods and Bakema. This is design that could easily be slotted into a so-called "brutalist" tradition with its rhetoric of in situ reinforced concrete, expressive laminated timber columns, open timber web trusses, concrete blockwork and painted blue steel fascias.¹

However, in Australia this tradition was never really associated with the dour strictures of Team Ten but with more formalist experiments by English architects in the 1960s such as Gowan and Stirling, Sir Leslie Martin, and Powell and Moya. In Australia it is the architects of the 1970s who are most associated with this style including: Taglietti, Madigan, Jackson and Walker, Graham Gunn, and John Andrews. Jackson had worked for the noted English formalists Powell and Moya. Yet Harold Holt Pool because of its relationship to the local community was more than just an experiment in formalist tectonics or a simple copy of English brutalism. Reyner Banham's attempt to explain the nuances of brutalism in relation to the Smithsons points to the idea that Brutalism or New Brutalism, as Banham described it, also had an ethic. In other words, it had a political dimension. Banham's comments imply that whilst Brutalism was used to describe an aesthetic, *New Brutalism* was a polemical reaction to agendas of the time:

Brutalism...architectural style of exposed rough concrete and large modernist block forms, which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s and which derived from the architecture of Le Corbusier...The definition of the compound term, New Brutalism is more contentious...a counter to such coinages as...'New Empiricism'... a label invented by 'Architectural Review' to describe the compromise between traditional and modern domestic architecture that had been developed in Sweden...New Brutalism as a polemic in the Smithsons' phrase, 'an ethic not an aesthetic.'

As noted in the statement of cultural heritage significance for the pool Borland's interest in ethics or politics "is expressed through the expression of the construction materials as finished surfaces and the centrality of the user in the design of the building."

MASTERPLANNING

The events leading up to the current proposal can be understood by referring to the Master Planning Study for the pool recommending a new gymnasium, offices and change rooms produced in June 1993 by Daryl Jackson Architects. Another study was produced in August 1993, by Lacey Management Services which reviewed the Masterplan and argued that "a decline in attendances will occur unless there is periodic upgrading of facilities." In 1996 Stonnington produced a Project report whose aim was to provide council with a basis to consider future action in terms of the pool's wet and dry areas. Again, it was argued without substantiation that the Pool's facilities "were outdated and inappropriate" in relation to "current market needs." In November 1996 A Leisure and Cultural Services Strategy was prepared for Stonnington by Strategic Australia Pty Ltd. This study concluded that the Council should upgrade the pool's sauna, steam room, jets-spa and change rooms in order to receive a grant from the department of Sport and Recreation Victoria.

¹ Lovell Chen Architects and Heritage Consultants, Harold Holt Swimming Centre High Street Glen Iris, Conservation Management Plan, August 2006.

The shift towards transforming the pool into a so-called leisure centre began in April 1998 when Michael King and Associates Leisure and Tourism Planners undertook an Aquatic Facilities Development strategy. This consultant was charged with developing a master plan for Stonnington's pool as well as the Prahran Aquatic Centre including identifying a works program. As a result they argued that Harold Holt pool, with no reference to its architectural value, was "tired" and "run down" and in need of refurbishment. They then went on to argue that "the key design objective of the next stage of development is to enhance the family/recreation and fitness focus to provide both a greater variety of activities" for both current and future users. This report gave little or no regard to the pool's heritage values. It proposed that the pool include "interactive play areas", a multi-purpose dry programming space", "on-site childcare facilities", "improvements to food and merchandising outlets" and remarkably "development of waterslides to provide an increased variety of activities for young people" King's plan showed feasibility concept plans which incorporated all of these facilities; with the inclusion of an extensive water slide over the high diving pool which was now designated "leisure water."

In December 2000 Michael King and Associates developed a "Base Case Business and Financial Model" for the pool. This established a base case for forward revenues and expenses for the pool up until 2012. It indicated that the aquatic facilities provided in the centre were run at a loss and that the other services within the pool would offset this. In June of 2001 King produced a final report "Stonnington Aquatic Service Business Plan" which argued that the pool's management could be tendered out. This report canvassed 4 different "management structures" for council's consideration. These options suggested solutions to the issues surrounding the privatization of the pool's management. The RANS management group which had replaced Council staff had been responsible for the management and operation of the pool since 1995. Indeed, between financial years 1996/1997 and 1999/2000 there had been a "significant increase in nett loss." RAN's views as noted in the final 2001 plan appear to accord with, if not exactly match, the redevelopment proposals put forward by King and Associates in 1998. Again these concepts promote the idea of the pool as being a leisure centre focused on the concept of leisure water. For example in this report, RANS are quoted as saying that "there is a need to provide some form of moving water to amuse the teenage market". This could include removing the diving pool and using the existing diving tower infrastructure for some other leisure/feature activity." (Stonnington Aquatic Services Business Plan, Final Report June 2001).

By November 2004 the strategy to redevelop the Harold Holt Pool as a leisure centre was set in concrete. A successful application was made to Sport and Recreation Victoria's Community Facility funding program. SGL consulting group in association with Peddle Thorp Architects and Prowse Quantity Surveyors produced a final report outlining how the pool would be redeveloped. No mention was made of the pool's iconic character or heritage values related to its architecture. This report argued that key features that should be included in high use aquatic facilities were, non-static water play areas, water slides, multi-ride areas, and "computerized light shows and sound systems." Another feature of this new architectural type was what was described as Leisure Furniture which was "aimed to keep children and parents at centre's longer (to encourage greater secondary spending on food/beverage/merchandising)."

INTERVENTIONS AND MODIFICATIONS

The idea that the pool should be redeveloped as a leisure centre without regard for its architectural significance was reinforced by the way in which various modifications had been made to the pool over time. Since its construction, Borland and Jackson's 1960s pool development has undergone two major architectural alterations and myriad minor ones, culminating in what is today a compromised work but one whose alteration may be successfully reversed with an appropriate development. It is our contention that this is an option that should be given serious consideration. The most difficult area to deal with obviously is the north facade and the issue of the building's transparency. If the current proposal proceeds these important aspects will be lost permanently. In 1987 the Council, now Stonnington Council engaged Daryl Jackson Architects. A spa and therapeutic pool were added to the north side of the main pool hall. They

were accommodated under a sloping glazed roof structure between the existing ramps which has interrupted the clear statement of horizontality of the north elevation. Again, as suggested above this interference cannot be undone if any new works are added to the north elevation. In works carried out by Rick Bzowy Architects in 1998 the timber open web trusses were replaced with fine steel tubular section trusses off the grid, and the central section of the roof was raised to introduce a translucent clerestory window facing south for two thirds the length of the pool hall. The ceiling was replaced with white Luxalon, a ribbed aluminium ventilated ceiling system. According to Steve Morrell the current council project manager and engineer and Architect at the time, Rick Bzowy these works were precipitated by the failure of the original timber trusses. Rick Bzowy advises that the failure was not fully investigated at the time and as a similar truss system had failed in Box Hill it was assumed the trusses were under-designed.

In 1999 air conditioning ductwork was added by Beca Simons consulting engineers in consultation with Rick Bzowy. The circular section exposed ductwork that ringed the main pool hall was painted gloss white matching the replacement trusses. The strategy of using this form of exposed circular ductwork is quite in keeping with the original aesthetic of Borland and Jackson, an aesthetic which they continued to develop subsequent to the Harold Holt project. However the detailing and colour application in combination with white trusses, translucent clerestory glazing and white ceiling results in the eye being distracted and the form of the space being obscured. There are technical justifications for the introduction of light and reflective surfaces at ceiling level including for the translucent glazing in polycarbonate. The clerestory windows are also of a form that is familiar to Jackson's observers and appeared in Borland and Jackson's early sketches for the 60s pool. Nevertheless they detract to some extent from the singular concept of the original architectural statement, an effect exacerbated by the lack of transparency. The plant room was later extended on the south east facade facing High Street also in consultation with Bzowy. Against his advice paint, white paint was applied to the concrete block work leading to the subsequent decision to paint the existing internal timber columns white. These works have the cumulative effect of simplistically "brightening" up the space with the result completely undermining the severe almost monastic atmosphere conveyed by Ian Mc Kenzie's photographs of the original pool. As suggested in the numerous reports prepared by the council there was the idea that the pool was perceived to be "dark" and needed to be "brightened up".

Many additional minor works have been carried out and almost universally contrary to the aesthetics, and ethic, of the original building; from the roofing of outdoor change rooms, infill glazing including of the manager's cantilevered concrete box and the blocking off of the main circulation spine, to the use of blue paint on the raw concrete, incompatible signage and the general cultivation of an atmosphere of bustling bright retail struggling to counter Borland's muscular and eerily spiritual space.

THE CURRENT PROPOSAL

Stonnington Council's proposal of 2006 sought to redevelop the pool complex by doubling the size of the main building and further adding significantly to the building's footprint. A small L shaped indoor pool for learners is added and the external toddler's pool is deleted. Included in the programme are a gymnasium and expansion and upgrade of services administrative and retail areas and reconfiguration of the circulation. The new plans are by Peddle Thorpe Architects and include the Conservation Management Plan by Lovell Chen with design modifications contributed by Daryl Jackson of Jackson Architecture in 2007. The site planning options dictate massing on the north elevation of the existing building, massing on the south or along the western boundary in order to maintain the operational necessity of linking the new with the existing works. Any significant addition to the north or south would destroy the transparency of the building. A transparency which paradoxically ensures that the original building was indeed bright and well lit in terms of natural daylight. Although Jackson's input shifted some internal floor space to the west boundary the addition still obscures the existing building and the programme remains a squeeze on the site.

It is worth noting that the pool that preceded the current complex. Built in 1927 by the then Malvern Council was one of the first municipal pool developments and consisted of a large bell shaped pool in a garden setting. It was inspired by the pool at Harrow in the UK observed by the council engineer BM Coutie on his study tour to Europe where he was impressed by the trend to combine public pools with gardens. It is the concept of the garden setting that has been substantially retained from the 1927 development which forms one of the crucial elements of the 1960s complex which is now threatened by the current proposal. The drawings for the current proposal clearly indicate that the original building is no longer the dominant building on the site, often referred to as the pavilion in the park. In other words, a dramatic change is being proposed for the whole site aesthetically and programmatically. If constructed the 2007 design would double of the original volume of the main building and obliterate the outdoor toddler's pool. After community protests this has now been replaced in the January 2009 tender documents lodged with Heritage Victoria by a moon shaped splash dish with fountains. Open space and some trees are removed from what at present is a rather lush looking entry. A closer examination of the plans and you will see the change to the iconic circulation pattern in the existing building: the entry has been relocated from the top of the now functionally challenged entry ramp to ground level.

What you cannot see from the proposal but what was apparent in perusing the tender drawings lodged at Heritage Victoria in January 2009 is that there is no commitment to restoring the diving tower or any documentation of work to restore, repair and maintain the existing building or landscape. Steve Morrell project manager at Stonnington advises that minor landscape works are included in the budget and minimal conservation works to the original building are planned outside the budget, but "it is not a landscape project." In the original Michael King Concept plan the diving area was to be converted into a labyrinth like water slide. However, the conditions of the Heritage Victoria Permit of January 2008 include a requirement for extensive landscape works, the reinstatement of the diving pool, conservation works to the existing building and a reduction of intervention in the body of the original building. The documentation of the conservation works and a test of the addition's transparency were to be included and submitted to Heritage Victoria for approval prior to works proceeding. Heritage Victoria's negotiations with Stonnington on these conditions have been put on hold as of April 2009 and it is evident that costs have escalated not just as the building has expanded but as plant upgrades have also been incorporated. From around 5 million dollars the cost estimates are now in excess of 13 million dollars. From conversations with Peter Brook the director of Peddle Thorpe and Steve Morrell project manager at Stonnington the tender process commenced in October 2008 has been put on hold pending the result of the councils' application to the Federal Government for additional funds. As neither conservation work to the existing building, the repair of the diving pool nor major landscape works are included in this sum, finance for these important works would need to be found. We believe that the direction for the redevelopment was driven by the choice of Architect and looking at the register of works it is clear that between 1994 and 1997 Peddle Thorpe, in association with Michael King, replaced Daryl Jackson as design Architect of choice and appear to have set the direction for the development of Aquatic facilities in Stonnington. It is reasonable to assume that this shift occurred because Peddle Thorpe were able to argue that they could make the pool commercially viable.

The Harold Holt project became a divisive issue and attracted community opposition which spread to the broader architectural community in part due to and galvanized by Melbourne Architect and critic Norman Day's article in the Age December 5th 2006. This opposition was characterized by some in the media and some supporters of the development as sour grapes on the part of Architects due to a not unsubstantiated view that Peddle Thorpe the Architects of the proposal were not well respected as architects. In fact they are very well respected and acknowledged for their specialized services, project delivery and particularly aquatic experience. They are not recognized as well respected design architects and are not the logical choice of architect to work alongside and in fact in the middle of a heritage site. Norman Day's Article suggested importantly that the original architect should be given some mandate to revisit the work in the first instance and in the absence of the late Kevin Borland, Daryl Jackson who was co author of the original building would be the appropriate hand. Ongoing opposition to the

development from community and the architectural profession and a change of leadership at council may have led to Daryl Jackson being commissioned in 2007 to review Peddle Thorpe's design.

It was hoped by many observers that Jackson's intervention in the process would result in an interrogation of the brief and even a revisiting of the community consultation process. Another area with which there was some dissatisfaction, instead the project was altered by moving programme to the western boundary but ultimately in minor ways increasing the building volume and not altering the architectural statement devised by Peddle Thorp. As suggested above an obvious critique would suggest that there was too much space being shoe-horned onto the site and neither had the traditional device of explicitly expressing the separation between new and old building been adopted. Quite to the contrary the new works appear to swallow the existing and the junction is indecipherable.

Conclusion

We would argue that the changes are reversible and should be reversed so the building could be a national model of the value of this precious optimistic and experimental period. The demise of the pool and its subsequent treatment raises important questions about how post-war modern architecture is dealt with in Australia. It raises questions about the privatization of community services, the commercialization of previous public spaces and the competency of councils, project managers and even architects to deal with buildings of significant heritage value.

Community objections were vigorous and developed into a sustained campaign culminating in a demonstration on site on December 17th, 2006 the anniversary of Harold Holt's disappearance. It was covered by the national media in a sustained campaign which has resulted in the council's development plans being constantly scrutinized as they have proceeded to tender documentation. The community's significant concerns were the method of consultation carried out, unnecessary "improvements", the commercialization and the cultural transformation of a national icon. The Council's and its officers' apparent lack of appreciation of the quality and worthiness of the original building and its complex of pools in the garden setting appears to be shared by the current architect, Peter Brook, the director of Peddle Thorp. This is evidenced by Peter Brook's statements in public and to Heritage Victoria and the fact that in the current design the landscape elements are undervalued, or not maintained, the toddlers pool and the diving pool are sacrificed and many significant architectural elements and details such as the entry, circulation and finishes and aesthetic are unappreciated. Heritage Victoria to their credit have drawn attention to all these issues in their correspondence and in the permit conditions. Familiarity with the work of Peddle Thorp further allows us to read into the current drawings the elements of a house style. This is evident in the juxtaposition of one particular aesthetic with another or more crucially the subsumation of the original architectural concept by the proposed works. Along with this comes the cultural transformation to bright, artificially lit, highly articulated animated amorphous, uniform and mall-like retail space.

This process of transformation mirrors public responses to modernist post-war Architecture everywhere. Leadership is often provided not by heritage planners or bureaucrats but by interested parties outside of the heritage system: architectural historians, professional architects and in this case a small group of community users who valued the pool's original aesthetic and ethic. Hopefully with public debate the work is examined and public opinion shifted as it did to the value of Victorian then Edwardian works and as it is currently to an appreciation of the domestic architecture of the 50s and 60s. Even Federation Square the butt of many grumblings overheard on the tram and in the media during construction is widely regarded often grudgingly as a success in many ways, not least by the measure of the number of feet on the pavement. Over the last 3 years we have observed among the ardent opponents, all pool users to Stonnington Council's recent management and proposed works an awareness and appreciation of the brutalist style which was not a driving sentiment in the original opposition to the proposed works.

Architectural journals on brutalism and concrete can now be found on the coffee tables of pier to pub swimmers in East Malvern.

Stonnington Council and their Architects remain to be convinced that the Borland Jackson complex should be preserved and that the views of the profession and the most engaged pool users are necessarily relevant. Heritage Victoria's modest requirements are seen as an impediment. They believe that the denizens of Malvern must forego the preservation of a national architectural icon of historical and social significance, that leisure water trumps swimming facilities and the three pools and pavilion in the park. In their view these are at odds with a commercially viable 21st century.

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ⁱ Reyner Banham, 'Brutalism' in *Dictionary of Art*, London: Grove, 1996 vol.5, pp. 55-57.