

20 December 2023

Ms Janet Carding
Executive Director
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By email: engagement@harbourtrust.gov.au

Dear Ms Carding,

National Trust submission relating to Cockatoo Island Draft Masterplan

The National Trust Australia (NSW) thank the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust for the opportunity to provide comments and recommendations regarding the Draft Masterplan for Cockatoo Island. We hope that our feedback will be helpful in ensuring that the cultural significance of this UNESCO World Heritage site is both duly conserved and appreciated.

Significance of Cockatoo Island

Cockatoo Island is one of the most important heritage sites in Australia. It is a place of national and international significance associated with colonial and industrial aspects of Australia's development. As noted in the 2009 Conservation Management Plan for the site, Cockatoo Island features "an outstanding and unique collection of physical remains, from its use as a convict gaol, through to its important role in Sydney's maritime and industrial history." The National Trust first listed various convict components of the site in 1974, and listed the entire site as an Industrial Conservation Area in November 1981, noting that:

"Cockatoo Island contains the remains of the earliest features of Australia's period as a penal colony, near Sydney. In addition it contains the earliest most extensive and most varied record of shipbuilding, both commercial and naval, in the nation. Some of these works were constructed by the convicts at the time incarcerated on the island... the site is of extreme significance as an historical, archaeological, military industrial, maritime and educational record for almost all the period of the nation's colonial and independent existence."

The National Trust's listing recognised the Island's position as a living site undergoing continuous development, however it is a place that deserves and requires the utmost consideration to ensure that any proposed works do not detract from the significance of the place and heritage value to the Nation.

Amendments from the Draft Concept Vision

The National Trust acknowledges that the 2023 Draft Masterplan has been upgraded from the 2021 Draft Concept Vision. Our previous submission outlined concerns that the Concept Vision endangered the cultural significance of the island, with a focus on commercialisation at the expense of the site's important industrial, maritime and convict history and character. The artist impressions referred to artificial 'natural landscaping', intrusive new infrastructure and an influx of commercial zones - none of which, in our opinion, sat respectfully in the historic landscape of Cockatoo Island. We note that similar concerns were raised by Australia ICOMOS.



The National Trust are pleased to see that the 2023 Draft Masterplan considers a more holistically sensitive approach. However, there remain ongoing concerns regarding some elements of the Masterplan.

While the Masterplan is necessarily bold and ambitious in its thinking, there is a very real danger that the attempt to implement too many changes in an effort to “tick all the boxes” could have the effect of removing some of the tangible authenticity of the place – surely the very thing that will be its most desirable feature in terms of visitation into the future.

There is no need, for example, for an *“island weather report”* to identify the best times to visit different parts of the island, or to create *“comfortable pause points to allow time to observe the changing tides and many moods of the water”* when anywhere else in Sydney Harbor affords the same opportunity. The focus of a masterplan needs to be on what makes Cockatoo Island unique.

We offer the following suggestions in this regard.

Natural history of Cockatoo Island

The Draft Masterplan notes natural history as one of the Island’s four distinct layers, and a focus for its ongoing vision. The National Trust supports efforts to rehabilitate our natural landscapes however such efforts must be undertaken authentically and with integrity. Simon Davies in his 1984 study *Islands of Sydney Harbour* noted that “in its natural state Cockatoo island was a heavily timbered sandstone knoll which rose to height of 18 metres above sea level.” Cockatoo Island is now however very different to many other islands of Sydney Harbour in that it is largely devoid of natural planting due to the historical changes that have occurred there.

- **Species of plantings:** We note that the species chosen for this rewilding process are from a hypothesis of shared wildlife with the nearby Berry Island. The Trust urges further research and notes that, in large part, the new plantings will in fact occur on areas of reclaimed land rather than original outcrop. There must be authenticity to any efforts to “restore native landscapes.” There is a disconnect in the proposal between a “natural” landscape that teaches care for Country and a highly formalised parkland.
- **Layout of landscaping:** The National Trust notes that the proposed “parkland” is shown as highly formalised avenues of plantings. Given the existing historic “haphazard” growth and change to the island, this is a significant departure to the character of the site. Indeed, if the formalised avenues of trees on the northern parkland are all planted, this would lead to a length of over 300m of formalised avenues – only marginally shorter than the northern avenue of Sydney’s Hyde Park. Similar small avenues are scattered around the eastern apron and the new arrival square. With so many previous layers to respond to these seemingly random plantings risk disconnecting important parts of the site from one another – for example the “industrial and turbine halls” precinct will not be visible or connected with the eastern apron, while the original shoreline interpretation is traversed by rows of trees. This is despite the masterplan highlighting the “collaged character” of the island where (p.35) *“remnant threads of former use will become the key to unpacking the key historic themes.”* The landscaping as proposed will obscure these layers and is one of the major elements of the proposal which the Trust feels warrants significant review in terms of what it is responding to and what it is seeking to achieve.
- **Artificial reef and changing tides:** The masterplan notes (p.49) that *“The island’s interface with the surrounding water is its most fascinating condition.”* Given the World Heritage Listing of this site due to its convict history, this is a rather major claim. While artificial reefs can of course of great benefit to the marine environment, they need to be very carefully considered. The Trust notes the extensive list of consultants (p.13) who have contributed to the Masterplan and note that a marine ecologist has not been involved to-date. Such proposals need to be the subject of detailed analysis, and the Trust would question the decision to introduce such elements on the eastern apron which has a very real maritime history with obvious deepwater berthing capabilities and the way that this history (and potential future use?) of the island is interpreted.



Arrival and accessibility

- **Wayfinding and accessibility:** The Trust supports new wayfinding information and improved accessibility around the island. This is a key aspect of the masterplan.
- **Resurfacing and new paths:** Paths, roadways and ground surfaces generally are an important part of the whole site condition, and some level of caution may need to be exercised in terms of new pathways in order to retain the integrity of the place. New paving will be necessary in some locations for safety and accessibility, but in others the current surface indicates the evolution of the site. There is a risk that the historic buildings could become curated “museum pieces” in a sea of new paving if a blanket approach is taken.
- **New ferry location:** The National Trust notes that there are already multiple arrival/docking points on the Island, and that the Draft Masterplan outlines an additional ferry point. This has been justified on the basis that it relates to better access for visitors from Western Sydney, as well as creating a new sense of entry to the Island. The Trust questions:
 - The role of Parramatta Wharf (shown as being retained and “supporting more frequent services to the island”) when “a new arrival and orientation square” and “main visitor hub” is being created in another location
 - Why Parramatta Wharf and the existing entry building cannot continue to be the arrival point
 - How multiple entry points will assist in the ongoing management of the place in terms of staffing, signage, amenities, etc
 - Why a Cockatoo Island needs to grow any further by means of land reclamation in terms of whole new wharf extension when the existing eastern apron could be simply incorporated into a ferry dock
 - The impact that the new “Ruby Steps” will have on the integrity of the Fitzroy Dock
- We would urge the Harbour Trust to consider a simpler, more sensitive approach. Cockatoo Island does not need more land, more buildings and more docking areas when there is so much adaptive re-use potential for what is already existing.
- **Lifts:** The Draft Masterplan includes two lifts to the plateau. The Trust supports introducing new infrastructure to improve equity of accessibility around the island. We do, however, question the location of two lifts being in such close proximity to each other. While the principle may be supported, further investigation may result in a more suitable solution with a single lift, offering less heritage impact and reduced ongoing maintenance.

Tourism and accommodation

- **Food and beverage:** The Trust notes the increased facilities and food and beverage services onsite and the important role these can play in making the place more appealing to visitors.
- **Accommodation:** The current use of existing buildings for accommodation has allowed many people to experience Cockatoo Island and also helped maintain numerous structures at the place, and is supported by the Trust. The Masterplan proposal to move camping to a more defined part of the island (rather than being the first thing that greets a visitor) is a sensible and welcome proposal. Any future proposal for long-term accommodation would bring in a much higher level of servicing and impact upon the place than the above options, and would need to be assessed on its merits as a separate detailed proposal.

Maritime use

- **Sutherland Dock:** The National Trust support the continued use of Cockatoo Island for maritime purposes, including the ongoing use of the Sutherland Dock. We believe the continuation of this industry allows the site to both be interpreted for its history and maintain its connection to this important element of the site’s history. The way that such activities are carried out however must be consistent with the heritage values of the place, and there is some concern about the “stacking” long-term storage of vessels as opposed to maintenance and shipbuilding activities. Cockatoo Island should not be allowed to become a luxury marina.
- **Fitzroy Dock:** The Trust support the ongoing preservation of the Fitzroy Dry Dock, and note that there is a proposal in the Masterplan to drain this structure. This may of course be possible and would bring



with it significant interpretation opportunities. The future of the Fitzroy Dock should avoid any “permanent” changes, and may involve it being empty, full, or indeed used as a dock. Whatever the case, the Trust would welcome further discussions regarding showcasing this significant element of the site.

Existing buildings and infrastructure

The National Trust supports the ongoing maintenance of utilities, services, and buildings across the site.

However, we would note the following:

- **Telecommunications:** The plan specifies upgrades to the mobile phone connections onsite. Considering recent issues at historic Callan Park regarding the placement of a large mobile phone tower, we would caution the Harbour Trust to be sensitive about the placement and visual changes to any communications infrastructures or facilities at Cockatoo Island and its wider setting.
- **Buildings included in masterplan:** The Trust notes that the Asset Management Plan proposes significant investment from 2023 required to maintain assets in a condition that will support delivery of services at Cockatoo Island and ultimately assist with many of the items noted in the Masterplan. This investment is supported and encouraged.
- **Use of buildings:** The Trust notes that 28 of the 98 buildings remain empty and 10 are used for storage alone. As such, we would urge for the activation of these spaces where appropriate over the creation of further infrastructure onsite.
- **Building removal plan:** Some of the buildings identified for removal are of recent construction and in good repair (eg: toilet blocks for camping facilities). Considering the age and condition of these facilities, it would be wasteful to demolish rather than incorporate them into the Masterplan – at least in the first instance. The reasons for the removal of building B142 are not clear, and need to be carefully considered in the context of the many layers of history at Cockatoo Island being one of its defining features. This space is one of many adaptations to the complex of buildings surrounding the Convict Workshop and the arguments that its removal will create a “naturally lit atrium space” are puzzling given this is almost its current state. While changes are of course possible, a cautious approach is required with the removal of any fabric in this space.

The National Trust welcomes the focus, energy and investment that is being given to Cockatoo Island by the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust. Properly directed, these efforts will help to preserve an important part of Australia’s history for the future use and enjoyment of many.

While any masterplan must necessarily be ambitious and wide-ranging in its approach, any changes at Cockatoo Island must be thoughtfully considered. The cumulative impact of many changes to Cockatoo Island could have a considerable impact on the integrity and significance of the place, and in some instances the enthusiasm for some of the proposed projects in the masterplan (listed above) may need to be tempered. It is the National Trust’s view that a more succinct and scaled-back Masterplan, which takes as its basis the existing features of the island as a starting point and reduces the number of new elements, will give a clearer direction for this important place and allow its special characteristics to be both identified and celebrated.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any of the above matters with you in the next stages of your program for this important heritage place.