

Heritage Guardians

Arguments against the \$498m expansion of the Australian War Memorial

1. The arguments supporting the expansion are spurious. The Memorial claims it needs more space to tell the stories of recent conflicts. Yet all cultural institutions are only able to show a small proportion of their total holdings; managers make decisions to rotate exhibits through the space available. The Memorial has also said it needs to provide a ‘therapeutic milieu’ for recent veterans. This argument is essentially a smoke-screen for the bid for more space. The therapeutic milieu concept is also medically questionable.

2. The proposed design is destructive and defective. The Memorial Council’s preferred design includes the destruction of the award winning Anzac Hall, only 17 years old, and its replacement by a multi-level space, which has potential problems of suitability for large technology objects. The preferred design emerged from a process that lacked assessment against metrics, was subjective, and often emotive and lacking in evidence. The preferred design includes features which are outside the appropriate function of a war memorial (real-time feed from Defence Department) or which duplicate services already provided by other sources (illustrated database of local war memorials).

3. The process has been deeply flawed. The Memorial knew how much funding it was to receive at a time (around April 2018) when its plans had not been settled; it was able to tailor its plans accordingly. The Prime Minister then confirmed an amount of \$498m seven weeks before the Detailed Business Case went to government. This contravened mandatory Department of Finance requirements. The assessment of options also failed to meet Finance criteria that options ‘must be comparable and assessed objectively and consistently’. Then, in arguing for expansion at Campbell, the Memorial contradicted arguments it was putting at the same time for construction at its Mitchell annexe. Further, the Memorial has carelessly flown ‘kites’ – for example, about car parking space in the Remembrance Nature Park – then retreated in the face of opposition. Finally, the Memorial has made greatly exaggerated claims about the consultation it has done and the degree of support the project has received. It has benefited from the ‘Anzac cloak’ which frequently shields commemorative projects from appropriate scrutiny.

4. The money could be better spent. Despite increases in the funding of mental health, suicide prevention and other support for recent veterans, more money is still needed for these purposes. Government should be diverting the money towards direct benefits to veterans and their families. There are also unmet needs in other cultural institutions, which have been far less favourably treated than the Memorial in recent years.

5. The Memorial's future needs can be adequately met at its Mitchell campus. New space at Campbell will cost more than 14 times as much per square metre as new space at Mitchell, yet space in both campuses will be heavily devoted to accommodating retired military aircraft and vehicles. The only obstacle to public visitation at Mitchell is management reluctance to extend opening hours there from the present one day annually. Providing space at Mitchell for the Memorial's foreseeable needs would cost about 20 per cent of the cost of expansion at Campbell. In the United Kingdom, the Imperial War Museum's separate Duxford campus, a home for retired large technology objects, is a precedent for development at Mitchell.

13 August 2019