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Monuments panel warns of war memorial heritage damage



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A leading international advocacy organisation for the protection of monuments and historic sites has warned the federal government that the heritage of the Australian War Memorial could be damaged by a major expansion.

Heritage and parliamentary approval processes are continuing for a nearly \$500 million redevelopment of the historic Canberra institution, a 10-year project that has attracted criticism from veterans' advocates, historians and former directors.

A new glazed link will be built at the back of the Australian War Memorial.

The Australian chapter of the International Council on Monuments and Sites, an advisory body to the United Nation's UNESCO world heritage committee, said the memorial's inclusion on the national heritage list meant a high commitment to protection was required in any changes.

While the listing does not mean the building should not undergo any change, president Helen Lardner told the Environment Department only moves sympathetic to heritage values should be considered.

Ms Lardner said a heritage impact assessment had found the works – set to increase the memorial's footprint by 80 per cent and see the demolition of the Anzac Hall exhibition space – will have a "significant impact" and change historic heritage values permanently.

"While the [assessment] also suggests that some of these changes could be viewed positively, and it suggests ways to reduce or limit impacts, the underlying finding of a significant impact is a matter of considerable concern regarding a National Heritage place," she wrote.

The group recommended options involving "no or minimal impacts" on the building.

Architect and heritage consultant Geoff Ashley has called for the proposed works to be revised, or for federal heritage approvals to be denied because of a significant impact on national and Commonwealth heritage values.

He said a proposed British Museum-style glass link at the back of the memorial will compromise its status as a "national memorial shrine" and expressed concerns about the new underground entry and a bladed wall at the front of the memorial.

"I strongly believe in the cultural importance and role of the Australian War Memorial and I support the AWM's objectives to better address Australia's involvement in recent conflicts," he said.

"However, I believe the project as described in the preliminary documentation will result in many adverse heritage impacts and also reflects failures of process and methodology in relation to heritage considerations."

Former director Brendan Nelson, the leading advocate of the plan, has argued it will provide a "therapeutic milieu" to veterans and their families. He is supported by [Seven West Media boss Kerry Stokes, the memorial's chair](#).

Veteran Judith Spence, who served in Rwanda, said she didn't believe the changes would provide additional comfort to Australians who have served overseas.

"The AWM is far more than a building, and the function and purpose of how it can record and reflect our military past has not been fully explored in the current plan," she said.

"The proposed development challenges the integrity of the AWM as a revered monument."

Last week, Prime Minister Scott Morrison described the upgrades as a "tremendous project".

Director Matt Anderson says they are necessary to continue to tell the stories of Australians who have served and died overseas.

"It was never intended that the memorial would be a static memorial," he told a parliamentary committee last month.

"Critics of the memorial's development often fail to understand the evolutionary nature of the Australian War Memorial."

Dr Nelson has hit out at some critics of the plan, [accusing them of being "disingenuous" and motivated by resentment](#).

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