

# Memorial boss rejects 'theme park' concerns

Tom McLroy

The new boss of the Australian War Memorial has met vocal critics of a half-billion dollar redevelopment plan for the Canberra institution, rejecting suggestions its heritage architecture and solemnity are at risk.

Ahead of consideration by Parliament's public works committee and the release of a new heritage assessment, expected within days, director Matt Anderson said the expansion would make the memorial more accessible and allow more timely commemoration of future conflicts.

The former diplomat and Royal Australian Engineers troop commander took on the role in April and has held meetings with critics of the redevelopment, including heritage advocates and the Australian Institute of Architects.

At a cost of \$498.2 million, the memorial's footprint will be expanded by more than 80 per cent. Critics, including previous directors, historians and former senior public servants, say the plan is grandiose and unnecessary.

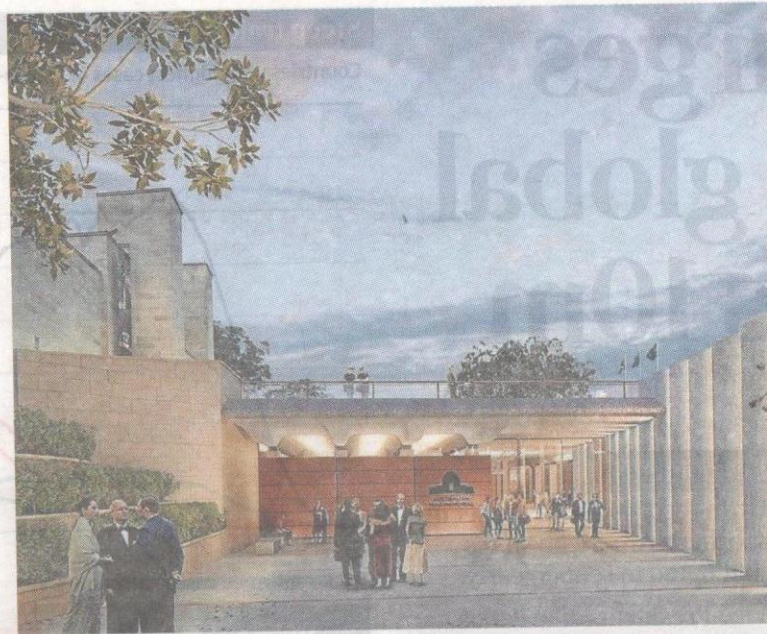
"When people criticise the development as saying it's going to bring 'a theme park' to it, I wonder what it is they're talking about," Mr Anderson said.

"Typically when I ask them that question they say it's the use of modern technology, bringing in modern fighter jets or Chinook helicopters, and overpowering what is a serene environment.

## Consultation with the public has been haphazard, deceptive and careless.

David Stephens, Historian

"I would argue that every single item that we have in the memorial right now, including some very large technology objects like the Lancaster bomber, exist to tell the story of the individuals who served them, who crewed them, who farewelled them, who welcomed them home."



Mr Anderson said the memorial's heritage-protected facade, which faces Parliament House across Canberra's central axis, would be unchanged. New underground exhibition halls will be created to display large military items and Anzac Hall demolished.

A new front entry will be added, along with a realignment of the parade group, a live feed of Defence operations overseas, reflection areas and an interactive display of cenotaphs and memorials around Australia.

"We are making sure we have in a museological sense all of the objects that we need, and the oral histories, and the photographs to tell a story of contemporary service. Currently we just can't do that," Mr Anderson said.

"This is a place, and will remain a place, of quiet reflection. It will remain a place where people will come to honour those who have served and paid the ultimate sacrifice ... and hopefully where people can come to heal."

The preliminary heritage documentation process, co-ordinated by the Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment, is expected to be opened for public comment next week.

Historian David Stephens has helped lead opposition to the redevelopment.

"The memorial commemorates the dead of a democratic Australia," he said. "Yet the project was conceived in back rooms."

"It cut corners in the Department of Finance rules applying to capital works



War Memorial director Matt Anderson; artist's impression of the new front entrance to the complex.

projects. It saw options knocked out of consideration based on shoddy reasoning."

Dr Stevens said much of the argument supporting the project had been based on emotive anecdote, rather than evidence.

"The memorial's consultation on heritage matters under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act has been disorganised and delayed. The memorial's consultation with the public has been haphazard, deceptive and careless, and has lacked transparency."

The Vietnam Veterans Federation said it strongly supported better recognition of Australians who served in the conflict.

The Australian Institute of Architects opposes the demolition of Anzac Hall, completed in 2001, and told MPs significant concerns remain about the memorial's heritage protection.