

The proposed redevelopment of the Australian War Memorial not only compromises Charles Bean's original vision for a 'simple, solemn, exquisite building', it calls into question our processes of public governance. By *Naomi Stead*.

Australian War Memorial

When Scott Morrison announced on November 1, 2018 that the government would provide \$498 million over nine years to fund a major redevelopment of the Australian War Memorial (AWM), he described the place as "the soul of the nation ... sacred to us all. It transcends politics, it transcends all of us."

Despite Morrison's overt religiosity and hyperbole here, he's not wrong. The commemorative spaces at the national memorial are deeply moving: the bronze Roll of Honour with its embossed names and poppies pressed into the cracks, the pool of reflection and eternal flame, the Hall of Memory with its sublime mosaics and stained glass, facing the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. A sequence of beautiful, intimate and elegiac spaces, they are an object lesson in the power of monumental architecture.

It's hard to improve on Charles Bean's own description of his imagined memorial as "a perfect, simple, solemn, exquisite building". Bean saw the AWM as a temple to the fallen, explicitly refusing any role as a celebration of militarism. It was to be an expression of sorrow, service, self-sacrifice and suffering.

So whether we like it or not, the spaces and rituals of the AWM play the role of a civil religion in Australian society. Many have observed the religious language: references to the "fallen" and to an "Anzac spirit", artefacts described as "relics", the notion that Australians all must make a "pilgrimage". Certainly, Commonwealth governments of both stripes have recognised the benefits of marrying religious and civil sentiments around the Anzac legacy. In light of the proposed redevelopment, though, the question is whether such religiosity is being manipulated to political ends. After all, architecture is especially useful in materialising political ideology.

When I was trawling around on the AWM website, I clicked on a video flythrough of the redevelopment's design and listened in incredulity to the soundtrack. A solo piano playing *Waltzing Matilda*, starting slow and plaintive as the video zoomed us through the projected new spaces, it gradually swelled to full orchestral mode, accompanied by marching drums. This apparent call to action is also, pretty transparently, an appeal to jingoistic nationalism. The use of forced emotion as a political instrument should always be a warning. Still, if you can steel yourself – or put it on mute – the fly-through gives a good impression of what the extensions will be like: luxurious, cavernous and pretty bland.

The origins of the AWM's main building, way back in the beginning, were themselves not particularly auspicious. When the architectural competition was judged in 1926, no winner was selected. Instead two entrants, Emil Sodersten – whose scheme was admired for its Art Deco flair and Byzantine dome, but was too expensive – and John

Crust – whose cloistered courtyard scheme was one of very few to meet the budget – were encouraged to mash their two entries together and try again. This is usually a very bad idea, and sure enough, Sodersten left the project long before the building finally opened in 1941. But the collaboration led to an austere and beautiful building, cruciform in plan – the transept wings were added in 1971 – with a symmetrical and strongly vertical composition culminating in the high, domed edifice of the Hall of Memory.

The original AWM building is actually quite small and perhaps inevitably, since it opened in 1941 it has been constantly in flux – as the 2011 Heritage Management Plan (by Godden Mackay Logan) explains, there have been many extensions, additions, and refurbishments over the years, their lavishness increasing from the mid-1990s onwards. Many of these works were individual gallery refurbishments, including of the original Aircraft Hall, and the creation of new internal spaces including an Orientation gallery and a Discovery Zone. There have also been significant changes to the grounds and gardens, with the Sculpture Garden and Western Courtyard completed in 1999, the Parade ground in 2004, and the award-winning Eastern Precinct by JPW in 2011. Then there were the whole new buildings, including Anzac Hall (2001) and the CW Bean building (2006). But the proposed new changes will dwarf anything that has gone before.

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Brendan Nelson was the director of the AWM between 2012 and 2019 and the driving force behind the redevelopment, hence its nickname among some wags: the BrendanBunker. On the face of it, the justifications for redevelopment seem reasonable – space to exhibit recent military and peacekeeping operations, space to show their associated large military hardware, better facilities to manage the million-plus visitors a year, and better equity of access. But if you scratch the surface there is genuine cause for concern here. It's half a *billion* dollars, on top of the other \$600 million expended on commemorations for the Centenary of World War I from 2014-18. And all this in the middle of a budget crisis brought on by the pandemic, plus a human crisis in the form of widespread mental trauma and suicide among returned veterans. Various federal ministers have strenuously asserted that not one dollar of the redevelopment budget will be diverted from veterans' programs but it's not a great look.

It's hard to imagine the Commonwealth investing half a billion dollars on any other cultural institution. Organisations such as the National Library of Australia, the National Archives of Australia, the National Portrait Gallery, the National Gallery of Australia, the National Museum of Australia, the Museum of Australian Democracy and the National Film and Sound Archive have been starved by the efficiency dividend and successive funding cuts. Many have been forced to cut staff, collections and core services. Some have leaking roofs and are unable to provide equitable access,

and have scant hope of capital works funding to fix the problems. They must look upon the largesse of the AWM redevelopment and weep.

The AWM has structured the new works into four subprojects, all to be completed by 2027. Two of these have caused most of the fuss. First is a major new southern entry located under the existing forecourt, facing Parliament House, at the termination of the Griffins' Land Axis. This was won in competition by Scott Carver, with a low-profile solution retaining the all-important direct approach to the AWM's commemorative spaces along the central axis, tucking the new entry and other new spaces under the main building's forecourt and stair to either side.

The most contested part of the redevelopment is Cox Architecture's new exhibition space and "glazed link", which provides significantly expanded space for the display (some say glorification) of war machines. Controversially, it will necessitate the demolition of what's there now: Anzac Hall, an acclaimed building only 20 years old. Designed by Denton Corker Marshall and completed in 2001, Anzac Hall has won several major architecture awards, and is a still fully functional public building, recognised as part of the heritage value of the AWM ensemble. Knocking it over rather than retaining and adapting it seems needlessly wasteful.

The original Anzac Hall is elegantly resolved and also quite modest – large enough to accommodate the display of "LTOs" (large technology objects) as its brief required, but recessive and respectful to its site. How ironic that this very humility seems to have sealed its fate – not bold enough, not big enough, not conspicuous enough to symbolise government investment in the Anzac tradition.

The demolition is subject to the National Capital Authority's approval of an "early works" package – itself the cause of controversy because the main building works have yet to be approved, and won't be considered until May or June. This means that, as Sue Wareham put it, the capital authority would "subsequently be considering whether an institution whose partial demolition it has authorised should be rebuilt". Critics have called this "ludicrous".

Cox's new exhibition hall is effectively a knock-down rebuild of the original: a vast two-storey black-box exhibition hall embedded into the ground behind the main building. Because of its size and bulk it can't help but be rather lumpen – there's really not much you can do with a hangar. The earlier Anzac Hall – lower, narrower and shallower – appears sleek and streamlined in comparison.

The brief called for a "glazed link" between the new exhibition space and the main building. In this, Cox's scheme appears to nod to the Great Court at the British Museum, an expansive space ideal for functions, making for a great cafe and useful in easing "museum fatigue" among visitors. Such light-filled spaces are, however, generally unsuitable for the display and interpretation of actual museum artefacts. This belies the main justification for the whole redevelopment, to provide additional exhibition space.

Cox Architecture has found itself at odds with the Australian Institute of Architects – usually a sober and reticent body – which has complained vigorously about a lack of due process through the whole redevelopment, including the original competition brief having mandated the demolition of Anzac Hall (though this condition was later loosened). The institute’s #HandsOffAnzacHall petition currently has more than 2200 signatures. But while Cox likely feels it has copped a drubbing from its peers, really the fault lies less with the architects and more with the briefing and conception of the project per se.

There has been much unrest on these issues, with the controversy uniting diverse groups and individuals in opposition, including two former directors, other longstanding staff of the AWM, heritage and history experts, and the government’s own Australian Heritage Council.

These and other groups worry the redevelopment is excessive and unnecessary. They argue it changes the nature of the AWM from a place of commemoration to one that glorifies war; that the redevelopment’s vast funding is an “ambit claim” representing poor value for money; that it’s like a theme park, where superannuated military hardware (planes, helicopters and armoured vehicles) are set up as props without real opportunity for interpretation or engagement; that there will be many mature trees lost, damaging the sense of a monument within a landscape setting; and that the redevelopment is too big and will dwarf and ruin the character of the place and impugn Bean’s vision that it should be “a gem of its kind” and “not colossal in scale”.

The Heritage Guardians’ contribution, signed by 82 distinguished Australians, argues that the redevelopment represents an “excessive veneration” of the Anzac story, to the detriment of a more rich and inclusive account of Australian history. Finally, one of the most trenchant critiques of the AWM is its failure to properly acknowledge the suffering and sacrifice occasioned by that *other* catastrophic conflict, much closer to home – the Frontier Wars. Nelson has ventured a strong opinion that the AWM is not the place for that, and it would be better accommodated at other museums.

Nelson has suggested other reasons for why the redevelopment might be needed: that the museum is able to display only a tiny proportion of its collection, and that the new display of military hardware and vehicles would form a “therapeutic milieu” to offer comfort and succour to veterans. The first argument is the problem of every museum; the second is contested.

Despite hundreds of pages of other objections, submitted to the two parliamentary inquiries – those to the parliamentary standing committee on public works were 80 per cent opposed – AWM chair Kerry Stokes dismissed them as merely those of “special interest groups” from Canberra. So, incredibly, it all seems certain to go ahead. Anzac Hall recently closed to the public, in preparation for its demolition.

Despite its name, the AWM has always been more than a monument. As articulated by Bean, its purpose was to be equally a shrine to the memory of the soldiers killed in war, a museum “to house their relics”, and an archive “to preserve the record of their

thoughts and deeds”. The memorial function calls for a quasi-sacred space of elegy and celebration; indeed, since the interment of the Unknown Australian Soldier in 1993, the AWM has been literally a mausoleum.

To my eye the central challenge for the AWM has always been to balance its role as a memorial with that as a museum. John Denton, founding director at DCM, told me that back when they were designing the original Anzac Hall, “what was made abundantly clear all the time under previous directors was that it was a war *memorial* - the *museum* function was an adjunct to that”.

This stands in contrast and perhaps increasingly in *conflict* with the AWM's responsibility as a museum to be critical and to offer what Margaret Anderson and Andrew Reeves once described as “a balanced account of the less acceptable acts of war, which Australians visiting the War Memorial could be forgiven for thinking were committed only by the other side”. On top of all this, a museum needs to reflect the changing techniques of contemporary museum display, which get bigger and less solemn by the minute.

It doesn't have to be this way. Extensions to major war memorials can be excellent *and* modest. Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance was extended (largely underground) in two stages by Ashton Raggatt McDougall in 2002 and 2014. This is some of their best work – uncharacteristically restrained, poignant without being bombastic, its raw materiality suiting its subject. More recently, in 2018, Sydney's Anzac Memorial was also extended, in a finely wrought project by architects Johnson Pilton Walker in collaboration with the NSW Government Architect's Office. These new spaces are also tucked discreetly underground, accentuating rather than compromising the beauty and grandeur of the original memorial.

Both the Melbourne and the Sydney war memorial extensions earned their architects the Sir Zelman Cowan award - the highest national award for public architecture bestowed by the Australian Institute of Architecture. This award was also awarded to DCM's Anzac Hall.

Since the funding for the AWM redevelopment was announced, the Brereton report has unveiled damning revelations about war crimes by Australian soldiers in Afghanistan. This is complicated by Stokes' funding of Ben Roberts-Smith's defamation case about his alleged involvement in these crimes.

Then there is the ethical conflict raised by corporate sponsorship of the AWM by at least four prominent international arms manufacturers. Some see the whole redevelopment as a means of shoring up public support for future military campaigns.

In Morrison's words, the AWM “transcends politics”. But does it also transcend accountability? Does it transcend fiscal responsibility and due process? Because that's how it's looking. If the War Memorial truly is our nation's most sacred site – which is arguable – then it's irreligious to overpower it with a cavernous, wasteful and scandalously expensive new development.

I'd add that the redevelopment also makes a mockery of consultation and heritage protections, building a giant boondoggle right next to one of our most revered monuments. The process has damaged public faith in our bureaucratic structures, our proper checks and balances, our good governance and our democracy. If this can get through, what next?

A shorter version of this review was published in the print edition.