

17th November 2003

Resource Consents Team
Environmental Control Business Unit
Wellington City Council

Re: Resource Consent Application – Herd Street Post & Telegraph Building

This submission is from the Wellington Architectural Centre, a group which represents both professional and non-professionals interested in architecture and design, and in the promotion of good design in Wellington.

Members of the Architectural Centre who are associated with the Herd Street Post & Telegraph Building proposal, or who are associated with firms involved in the design (and hence may be seen to have a conflict of interest), have had no input into the writing of this submission.

The Architectural Centre supports the application for sub-division consent.

However, while we recognise the potential for such a project, and recognise there are positive aspects to the proposal, we believe that there are serious issues which need to be addressed before the current proposal for land use will contribute positively to Wellington. Therefore the Architectural Centre cannot support this land use consent application.

Our main concerns are as follows:

- The current proposal is too close to a conventional development and does not meet its public obligations of a civic architecture that contributes positively to Wellington's cultural landscape.
- The Architectural Centre are concerned that the current scheme will not provide Wellington city with a successful public space both within and around its edges.
- The Architectural Centre is not in favour of the proposed proportion of mixed use which is currently too biased towards residential space.
- The proposed design is hesitant and needs to be stronger to validate the removal of heritage fabric in the existing building.

Background

The 1939 Post and Telegraph Building, more commonly known as the Herd St Post Office, is a significant building in Wellington's architectural history.

The Herd St Post Office has recently been a contentious site. It has been, along with the waterfront, one of the few architectural sites which has engaged public interest and active debate in architectural issues. We see this as a positive aspect of the building and the site. In addition this development has obligations as a piece of civic and public architecture due to its location on the public waterfront and its public ownership and management. This has bearing on both its architectural form and the public access rights once the building is developed.

Heritage

There is little dispute that the Herd St Post Office is a building with significant heritage value. Rather than questioning the significance of the building, the issue this proposal raises is how can a heritage building be re-used for functions it was not originally



the architectural centre inc.
PO Box 24178 Wellington

designed to accommodate in an architecturally appropriate way. This raises both design and heritage issues.

We see the heritage value of the building as established in several important ways. The building is an example of the work of an important New Zealand architect, Edmund Anscombe, and forms part of a precinct of Anscombe's 1930s art deco work in the Oriental Bay area. These include the 1937 Olympus Apartments (280 Oriental Parade), the 1936-37 Anscombe Flats (formerly Linfield, 212 Oriental Parade), and the 1939 Wekutawai (90 Oriental Parade). In addition the building is a rare and confident example of art deco public service architecture in Wellington and demonstrates several of the ideas Anscombe developed following research in America on commercial and factory buildings.

The building is also one of the few remaining remnants of the site's history as an international shipping port. Its scale, as read from Waitangi Park, is an important reminder of the physical scale of the ships which used to occupy this part of the harbour. That the building faces away from the port recalls a past public understanding of the waterfront as an undesirable working port area and is in contrast to the sought after public recreational space we understand the waterfront to be today.

These aspects give greater heritage significance to the west and south facades of the building. As such we strongly recommend listing four historically important parts of the building in the Heritage Schedule of the WCC District Plan: the interior of the lift lobby, the "waterfall" on the south-west exterior corner, the south facade, and the west facade.

As stated above, the heritage issues in this project are inherently architectural, and require an explicit architectural strategy regarding the relationships between the existing fabric of Anscombe's building and the architectural interventions that will enable a successful reuse of the building. As such, the existing building needs respect and interpretation rather than the more restrained response that this proposed scheme currently represents. The adaptation of the building should not negate but should enhance its historical importance. A building that survives and adapts is historically rich, not stagnant.

The current proposal makes a valid attempt to increase aspects of the heritage value of the south and west facades with the reinstatement of windows in the original design, the use of the original striped colour scheme and the earthquake strengthening. The strategy of developing on the art deco ideas of movement in the proposal is applauded but its current form appears hesitant in the context of Anscombe's stronger architecture.

The alterations to the south façade in particular do not give adequate consideration to the art deco nature of the building. The apex at the south-west corner philosophically suggests an accelerating movement along the southern facade rather than the static order of a pseudo neo-classical symmetry which is proposed.

We believe that, in order to validate changes to such an important heritage building, changes need to have a strength of architectural value equal to or in excess of the heritage value of the existing building. We have elaborated what we consider to be key architectural design issues in other sections of this submission.

As such the Architectural Centre:

- Recommends that alterations to the south facade be reconsidered to reinforce rather than undermine the Art Deco design of the building.
- Supports the NZHPT request to document the Annex building fully prior to its demolition
- Supports the NZHPT request for heritage fabric which is removed to be stored
- Supports the listing of the building in the Heritage Schedule of the WCC District Plan
- Commends the reinstatement of windows in the original design

- Commends the re-use of the original colour scheme
- Commends the proposed earthquake strengthening

Public Access & Land Use

Whilst The Architectural Centre supports the reoccupation of the Herd Street building and the consequential financial ability for refurbishment, we have concerns about the proposed uses. While the lower levels of the building are designated as public interior space, the current proposal appears to limit public access to designated public areas during limited times. The proposed scheme does not allow for 24 hour use and conveys the sense of 'public' associated with a shopping mall rather than a truly civic space.

The vast majority of the building's space is proposed as residential. We agree with the continued introduction of residential uses to the Waterfront however we believe there should be a more balanced proportion of commercial/office/studio space than currently proposed for this building. Just as there is a collective agreement that residential use will bring after hours life, and indirect security to the waterfront, the predominance of residential space risks the building being silent from 9 to 5. We acknowledge that there are economic pressures driving the desire for more residential space however, as this is first and foremost a public building, there needs to be more consideration to providing the public with more than just financial returns. A better balance of commercial space will bring a wider occupation and visitation to the building. A good example of a successful balance between commercial and residential is OXO Tower in London. This "*wide range of activities*" is explicitly referred to as being a requirement in 12.2.1.2 of the District plan.

The public viewing platform is clearly intended as a positive move but the Architectural Centre is concerned that, other than a harbour view, there is little motivation to ascend to the top floor. This roof space is an ideal location to mix a public destination and commercial space. The public access to the 'Heritage Gallery' stair must be obvious, with appropriate signage, and provide for a purpose other than generic 'viewing'. Without an adjacent occupant the viewing platform is in danger of becoming unsafe and/or getting little actual use. Again OXO Tower is a good example of the mix of a truly public space with commercial use on the highest and most valuable floor space.

The opening of the view shaft thru the building from the Park (south) side is a positive and generous gesture however at Level 01 this shaft is cut by a strip of studio/office space consequently narrowing the shaft down to only the ground level. If this was a bridge or link across the view shaft then the shaft would have dominance rather than at present it stopping at an occupied section of floor plate. This view shaft must also be secured at consent stage to ensure that it is not lost to future economic considerations or returns.

The location of basement carparking is a positive strategy for the public use of the area.

As such the Architectural Centre:

- Strongly recommends that the designated public space be reconsidered as civic public space and available to the public at all times.
- Strongly recommends that the amount of residential use be reduced and that the amount of commercial use be increased.
- Strongly recommends the reconsideration of the public viewing platform to incorporate commercial space to strengthen this public destination.
- Strongly recommends strengthening the viewing shaft by removing the proposed strip of studio/office space at Level 01, and securing this view at the consent stage.
- Commends the position of the car parking

Architectural Design

The Architectural Centre supports a strong architectural response to the existing Herd Street building however the architectural intention of the proposed scheme is not clear enough to provide the strength of architecture needed to meet the site's public obligations. While the intention is clearly to develop the site for revenue generation this cannot be at the scale of return of a conventional development and still acknowledge public architectural obligations. The Architectural Centre believes the financial returns have compromised the potential of this proposal to contribute positively to this important public site. We have discussed some of these issues in the previous section. In a similar vein, the current proposal appears to be tentative in its response to the existing building. Examples of this include the cutting down of the spandrels on the west facade. We believe that if undertaken such a move should be done so with confidence rather than in a tentative or disguised manner.

The retention of three solid bays at the south east ground level does not match either the new architecture's intent nor the existing building's design of acceleration away from the 'waterfall' corner. The symmetry imposed on the south elevation is irrelevant as the original building is neither symmetrical nor of a style that supports this symmetry. It is contra to the speed and flow of the elevation. The provision of public toilets on the ground level is a good provision of amenity however their location on the SE corner is in opposition to the building's intention to become lighter towards this corner. The current proposal appears too static.

The Architectural Centre supports the introduction of the ground level colonnade on the south facade, however at present it is unsatisfactory. The colonnade needs a destination and reason at both ends to ensure a flow thru it and this flow should be possible 24 hours, not at the discretion of tenants. We believe that in the current proposal the colonnade will create an undesirable and unsafe space for both tenants and the public after hours. In addition, in our opinion, this edge of the building does not adequately mesh with the proposed new Waitangi Park. The truly public nature of Waitangi Park needs to dovetail with the Herd Street building and the south colonnade is where this should take place.

The Architectural Centre supports the greater degree of alteration on the internal corner facades of the building, facing the north and east, to read as more open and new in contrast to the more conservative south and west. This is historically the back of the building and as such should express the shifted public engagement with the Waterfront.

The new annex structure on the NE corner must also be a high quality in recognition of the fact it is in such a significant public location. The '*movable glass screens*' noted in the Architect's Design Statement are ambiguous and could result in anything from an enlivened and flexible façade to a few token add ons. The Architectural Centre is in support of the former and would like to see this emphasised in the detailed design. Whilst financial considerations will be part of the mix of decision making at detailed design phase, the prominence and public importance of the new work needs to be reflected in the final product. The quality of these facades will directly reflect on the perceived quality of the public promenade space which it helps to form and strengthen.

The sculptural nature of the new addition is, in our view, a successful approach. The intention to allow the new work to read as just that – new and contemporary architecture – is applauded. This will distinguish the historic and solid architecture of the existing building. Measures to reduce the impact or presence of the new work in reverence to the existing building do neither the new or existing architecture any favours. If there is any building in Wellington that will relish and be enlivened by the interaction with new forms and materials it is Anscombe's Post & Telegraph building.

The additional floor of residential space proposed is not bold enough. As noted above the Herd Street building is aesthetically a very strong building and the addition as proposed appears tentative about being there. The precedent of the Tate Modern has

been mentioned however, as currently described, the new roof top level does not follow that lead in that it is apologetic about its location. Granted there are issues with shading on the park, and respect for the historically important south and west facades, however the new roof top could be more explicit on the northern façade. As viewed from both ground level and afar (eg. Mt Victoria) the new level does not reflect its status as the cap to the heavy block onto which it has landed and as such should express the lightness and elegance of its construction.

As such the Architectural Centre:

- Believes that a tentative architectural engagement with the existing building does not respect the strength of the existing architecture.
- Strongly recommends further development of the interface between Waitangi Park and the Herd Street building.
- Recommends that the decision to cut down the spandrels be confidently articulated.
- Recommends the extension of the colonnade on the south facade
- Recommends reconsideration of the design of the roof top level on the northern façade.
- Supports the greater degree of architectural intervention on the northern side of the building.
- Supports the sculptural approach to the new annex building.

Conclusion

In conclusion, The Architectural Centre supports the subdivision consent application however we cannot at this stage support the current proposal's application for a land use consent.

Yours sincerely,

Nick Mouat
Co-president
The Architectural Centre