

10 September 2006

Re: 50 Customhouse Quay Notified Resource Consent (SRN: 148140)

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 design of the 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.

Opposition for the Proposal

The Architectural Centre opposes the proposed addition to the Government Life Building (1931). While we acknowledge that the proposed addition is sufficient in its height and bulk, and its engagement with context, we consider that it is unimaginatively designed. The design is hesitant, bland and watered-down. The stepping back appears to be about hiding the addition rather than being proud of Wellington's current production of architectural heritage. There are also instances, such as the atrium, which demonstrate lost opportunities to create really wonderful spaces within the building.

We acknowledge that the design is attempting to "respect" the existing building, but given the result this effort has clearly been misplaced. This "respect" has been at the cost of the ability of the new architecture to contribute positively to its own status as architectural heritage. We also consider that this "respect" has in numerous instances been misguided. The addition crudely replicates the top of the existing building creating a non-sensical building with three layers of "top" (i.e. the building is composed as having a base – middle – top – top – top). The building's overall composition is hence illogical and weak. Is the mistake of the Prudential Building addition to be iterated over the city with varying degrees of blandness?

This deficiency in design is difficult to believe as the architects have proven ability. We consider that this addition sadly does not match up to the quality and strength of the architecture exhibited by the 1931 Government Life Building. The design of the addition does not give anything special to Wellington architecture. We would point to the State Insurance Building as the classic example in Wellington of an addition to an existing building which does inventively extend an existing building, and which positively contributes to Wellington's contemporary cityscape. This should be the example the council ought to point the architects toward.

Conclusion

It is time that architects are allowed to truly design additions to heritage buildings, rather than present hesitant schemes which appear to be the work of an obedient and unimaginative draftsman. The Heritage Provisions astutely note that additions of significance and/or by a significant architect should be considered as important as any original heritage fabric. Why is it then that there appears to be no active encouragement by the council to encourage today's additions to heritage buildings to be significant, and to add to the vibrancy of the city and our new architectural heritage? We must stop the current trend of apologetic hiding and hesitancy when adding to heritage buildings. These buildings do not deserve the mediocre architectural additions they are currently getting for their future.

Yours sincerely

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