

## HARBOUR CITY COMPETITION - A BLUEPRINT FOR THE FUTURE 1983

*If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water.* Anthropologist Loren Easley.

In March 1983 the Wellington Civic Trust (WCT), with the support of the Wellington City Council (WCC), the Wellington Harbour Board (WHB), the Wellington Regional Council (WRC), the *Evening Post* (EP), the Department of Internal Affairs and numerous commercial organs and individuals promoted a “competition for ideas for the development of the interface between Wellington harbour and the city” – Harbour City Competition: a Blueprint for the Future. The idea for such a competition had grown from a discussion about two years earlier between a small group headed by the chairman of the WCT, Rex Nicholls, and the mayor, Sir Michael Fowler.

The competition occurred at a critical stage in Wellington’s development when decisions were essential on the proper functioning of this harbour/city ‘interface’. Cast your minds further afield to those cities around the world which are situated on harbours and I think you’ll agree that there are not too many that enjoy such magnificent conjunctions as does Wellington.

The competition was preceded by a ‘public ideas’ section which enabled citizens to present their hopes for their waterfront and added an extra dimension as these ideas formed part of the brief for the professional entrants. The professional section attracted over 90 registrations with 54 entries being finally presented, including eight from Australia. A total of \$25,000 was offered as prize money with \$15,000 being offered as first prize. Although it was made clear that no commission would be offered to the winner or any other competitor, the WCT chairman, Rex Nicholls emphasised that the ideas put forward would produce a reservoir of facilities for the benefit and enjoyment of all the region’s citizens. Planning errors had been made in the past; a reliable framework would surely minimise these.

The following objectives formed the basis of entry:

- Enhance the unique character of Wellington and its beautiful harbour.
- Encourage awareness of a variety of water-based activities.
- Maintain and encourage the economic and social viability of this part of the port and city.
- Create a lively and vital environment for those who live, work, visit or seek entertainment in the city.
- Provide for a range of activities and facilities that will ensure the attractiveness of the area day and night and at weekends.
- Make adequate provision for traffic flows and traffic generation to encourage pedestrian satisfaction and facilitate the movement of people. In particular, ensure that the site and the harbour are not isolated from the rest of the city by the traffic flow in Jervois Quay and Wakefield Street.
- Encourage appropriate development, in particular for the Southern end of the site, to stimulate the revitalisation of the site and adjoining areas.
- Provide an identity to complement, rather than compete with, the shopping streets and business areas of the city.
- Maintain and ensure the viable use of the historic buildings in the area.
- Recognise the relationship of the site to existing residential areas (Mt Victoria, Oriental Parade) and to the commercial and other activities in adjoining parts of the city.
- Take Wellington’s winds into account.
- Phase development to the best economic, social and aesthetic advantage.

A Wellington group named Paperchase made up of three firms and three individuals had come together early in the year on an informal basis. All members had a long standing interest in and concern for the harbour and city as well as a common desire to participate fully as a team rather than as individuals.

Insert photograph of the group – Evening Post 23 August 1983.

Paperchase from left to right.

John Gray; architect, Senior Lecturer in Communications, School of Architecture, Victoria University; Grahame Anderson; architect, Toomath Wilson Irvine Anderson; David Reed, architect and planner, Senior Lecturer in Urban Design, School of Architecture, Victoria University; Alister Aburn, planner; Colin Bennett, architect, JASMaD Group Ltd; Frank Boffa, landscape architect, Boffa Jackson Miskell and Partners; Derek Wilson, architect, Toomath Wilson Irvine Anderson. Valuable assistance was

received from Keith Huntington, architect Donald Irvine, structural engineer and Elizabeth Lennox (all from TWIA), Brian Paul and Philip Porritt (both from JASMaD) and Gavin Woodward, photographer.

Dominant among the ideas section and the competition entries was the overriding theme that the waterfront “was for people – a public asset which should be regarded in much the same way as Wellingtonians regard their town belt.” Ideas had been put forward before - notably by the Architectural Centre and the New Zealand Institute of Architects - before for the improvement of city and harbour relationship, but this was the first officially sponsored competition of such magnitude dealing with this whole area in an urban sense and laying down a sound strategy for further design exploration.

A major difference between past schemes and the competition proposals was that the latter did not present grand plans but entirely feasible frameworks for immediate and future implementation. A five-member panel, appointed by the WCT, judged the competition. It was chaired by Professor Alan Wild, dean of architecture and town planning at the Auckland School of Architecture. Other judges included Professor Helen Tippett, Victoria School of Architecture, Mr John King, chairman WHB, Wellington mayor Sir Michael Fowler and Australian architect Daryl Jackson. The judges commented as follows on the Paperchase proposal:

This scheme successfully develops a planning framework on which to build. It does this better than any other scheme, presenting a coherent whole as well as carefully considered parts.

One of their most important contributions is the way they have maintained the open views along the short East-West city streets to the waterfront, structuring their development framework on these basic links.

They have proposed imaginative access to and re-use of existing historic and other structures, and a variety of approaches to re-shaping the water’s edge, to enable it once more to lap the base of the city.

New developments such as marinas, medium density housing, low rise offices and civic spaces are included, together with a range of facilities of interest to residents, city workers and visitors.

The scheme provides a sound strategy for further design exploration. The analysis presented by the team identifies the principal issues, and resolves them with an inspired and thoroughly professional approach.

Professor Wild was reported as saying that “several schemes are commended and the winning entry was outstanding and worth further study as the strategy for the development of the harbour city interface.” Significant parts of the most successful schemes required careful consideration of the Jervois Quay alignment (an almost impossible obstacle to a real harbour-city relationship) and of the ultimate removal of the roll-on roll-off ferry facility from the Taranaki Street terminal. “These two factors are critical and require firm decisions to be taken by the appropriate authorities before any real progress can be made.” Mayor Sir Michael Fowler said it had always been his desire to see the essence of the best submissions incorporated into the district scheme. At the same time he would be happy to see the Paperchase group engaged as consultants to oversee work on the waterfront development.

The Paperchase group was essentially concerned with the implementation and ongoing management of the harbour-city interface. The scheme was conceived as being practical and achievable in stages by establishing a framework for development. One of the main focal points of the Paperchase proposal was the creation of a large town square on the water’s edge approached by a broad plaza over a lowered Jervois Quay to the east of the Michael Fowler Centre. This linked and extended the existing Civic Centre into a generous and invigorating public space. Unfortunately, the present over-bridge is a very poor apology for what might have been.

As the *Evening Post* summed up on 23 August 1983:

A decade ago many thought an upstart architect had badly outreached himself when he said Wellington could have a town hall the envy of the nation. Sure, some of the Paperchase proposals involve greater cost than that paid for the Michael Centre, but the real problems are neither physical nor financial. What would inhibit Harbour City the most would be a negative state of mind: oh no, we cannot have that, it would cost too much...

If we let that happen the desolate minds who see the harbour in terms only of car parking and container storage will win out.

The *Evening Post* sponsored the competition because our readers, the people of Wellington, are the owners of the harbour and they “want it back”.

Perhaps no single entry in Harbour City will provide the final blueprint for development; all entries contain elements which could be incorporated in it. But perhaps more than this, the high number of entries and the widespread public interest serves notice on those who have a say over harbour development – notably the Wellington Harbour Board and the Wellington City Council – that the time is past when they can make decisions in isolation.

Only the coming years were to show to what extent the *Post's* advice was heeded

Derek J Wilson

(As I said, the *Evening Post* published the Paperchase group photo. I have a set of the four drawings black and white 430 x 600. Will post A4 copies of the last three – don't have an A4 sized one of drawing no 1)