

WELLINGTON CIVIC TRUST

Supplementary Submission on Resource Consent Application : Construction of a Hotel on the Outer-T, Queens Wharf

STATEMENT OF EVIDENCE BY WILLIAM TOOMATH

My name is William Toomath. I am an architect with the qualifications of Master in Architecture from Harvard University, Bachelor of Architecture from Auckland University, and a Fellow of the N.Z Institute of Architects. Until retirement I was a director of the Wellington architectural firm of Toomath Wilson Irvine Anderson Ltd.

From my student days about 60 years ago I have been an advocate for opening up the neglected asset of the harbour front of this city. I have taken part in numerous projects with that aim, from the Architectural Centre's 1948 *Te Aro Replanned* exhibition, through my thesis design for a harbourside National Museum, then a 1960s City Council project for a Civic Centre Theatre, to acting as a judge in the public ideas section of the 1982 Harbour City Design Competition. I am a member of the Wellington Civic Trust and served many years on its Board, often involved with waterfront matters.

I have been asked to speak for the Trust on the qualities of the building proposed by the applicant, with particular attention to 'iconic' issues in its design.

Within the last decade the word 'iconic' has become commonly used as a superlative in our world of hyperbole. In advertising, it is applied to anything from household products to houses themselves. Often it is used to describe a object which typifies a certain period, or one claiming to be a superior product of its kind. It has been brought close to jargon and become hackneyed by over-use.

The time-honoured meaning of the word ICON given by the Shorter Oxford Dictionary of 1944, however, is that of an image in the solid, such as a statue or portrait; and, specifically in the Eastern Orthodox Church, an *icon* is a representation of some sacred personage, with the painting or object itself being regarded as sacred and honoured by worship.

In the *New Penguin Compact Dictionary* of 2000 the current everyday usage of our word ICON is given an extended meaning as “. . . an object of uncritical devotion; an idol”. In the early 2000s the Waterfront Leadership Group, charged with developing the *Wellington Waterfront Framework* policy statement, deliberated in s.4.3 on the future of the Queens Wharf area. The Group's definitive choice of the word *iconic* as their performance term to describe a possible structure on the outer-T can be taken to be based on this extended meaning at that time. Along with the word's traditional connotations this idea of earning “uncritical devotion”, applied here to the design of a structure, indicates the Group's expectation of some *exceptional* image, something held in the highest respect and expressing deep significance within our cultures, our heritage or our beliefs.

The essence of an icon lies in its power to involve people, through their identifying with its meaning and significance in such a way that they share and, as it were, 'own' it. There is a factor of common property and participation inherent in the term.

A hotel building is not iconic by its nature alone. Its purpose arises from tourism, social activity and commercial enterprise. It *could* possibly become iconic through an exceptional design image capable of being idolised by the public. Examples of this nature are the Sydney Opera House - relating to culture and national image - and the Taj Mahal - telling of faith and devoted love. Both of these structures are aided by their superb settings; but their iconic status is not given by their setting alone. Nor are the grandeur and splendour of Opera House or Taj needed here to achieve iconic standing. As an example among local buildings, John Scott's modestly-scaled Futuna Chapel in Karori has attained that status despite its humble materials, and wholly due to its design quality in its symbolic role.

Iconic structures hold intrinsic meanings which *transcend the everyday*, and which achieve a special stature in the public eye and mind.

What does the hotel proposed for the outer-T offer to the general public in order to earn the title of iconic? What does it provide that our city's people might relate to, enjoy and respect, in return for the privilege of occupying one of the finest public sites in the world?

In itself the building is primarily a hotel providing transient accommodation for visitors, as do several others in the vicinity. In its nature and purpose this hotel would not possess iconic qualities any more than do its neighbours (apart from the kudos associated with its brand name).

The proposed Hilton would undoubtedly be distinguished from others by its proposed location. The unique and commanding site on the water's edge suggests that iconic qualities, perhaps recalling our maritime history, could be developed in this project. But does the proposal as presented offer more than just another commercial building added to the existing panorama of the CBD's harbour frontage?

Its prominence is assured by its open location; but, although entirely freestanding, its design adheres to straight lines and routine glazed grids, akin to existing buildings along the Quays. The opportunity to exploit three-dimensional forms and sculptural spaces is a given, but is here taken up only by adding architectural features of projecting roof planes and fin walls at both ends of a relatively low-keyed flat body. The whole site area is occupied by a tidy but uninspiring building form, failing to lift one's spirit to heights which might warrant the term 'iconic'.

Disappointingly, the proposed building occupies the entire footprint of the existing Shed 1 as if it were a city block of real estate. The apparent aim has been to use to maximum capacity the site volume available, so as to provide for a maximum number of guests. This has resulted in an unrelieved block form, a rigid rectangle at ground level. Little is given up for public benefit by way of additional open spaces, other than recessed porticoes at each corner of the building's straight flanks. The public are offered no more space than already exists around three sides of Shed 1 - long, streetlike and unchanged. No discovery of courts to pause in; no exhilarating opening

up of fresh vistas or inviting spaces in celebration of the superb position on the harbour edge; no feeling of interaction with the volumes of the building above. Little, in fact, that the general public might call its own and find such delights in the experience that the building's qualities are felt as 'iconic'.

The hotel's form does not express outstanding ideas and virtues which might move us as a memorable symbol, or win our "uncritical devotion" as an icon in its occupation of this treasured site. How does it seek to inspire us or strike chords of recognition which derive from our cultures, our past, or our beliefs? It does not acknowledge the history of its surroundings, makes no visual reference to maritime connections, and offers few welcoming gestures to the public in tune with our liberal community.

Potential conflicts between desirable iconic qualities and the commercial basis of hotel operations deserve some thought. The quality of being iconic carries with it an ability to evoke people's feelings of sharing in the object's distinction. Consider for a moment a local example. When one walks along Customhouse Quay past the InterContinental hotel's glass-walled restaurant the passer-by scarcely feels it is a public space into which one might casually stroll. Nor would it be any different were it placed on the outer-T. The public would not feel that sense of 'possession' evoked by iconic structures because the evident commercial bias of a restaurant obstructs the unreserved adoration and respect that would be bestowed on an icon.

Further, it is observed that the inescapable 'exclusiveness' of the Hilton to the eyes and pockets of most people would, by the same token, run counter to the Waterfront Framework's policy aim of open public access to ground floor spaces adjoining the water's edge.

The belief stated by the promoters that in replacing the wharf shed the new building "will open up views across the harbour through the glassed ground floor" is probably illusory. The implied ideal of transparency across the building's considerable width is unlikely to be achieved in the event, due to obstruction by ranks of sizeable columns, partitions, furnishings, screens, service areas, tinted glass and external reflections.

In conclusion the question must be asked: Is the proposed hotel worthy of this "special and unique site" (as described in the Waterfront Framework); and is it suitable to act as an iconic structure at the symbolic heart of the waterfront?

We find that its design expresses no connection with the shipping and mercantile history of the site, and that it does not exhibit truly iconic qualities able to be appreciated by the public. In our view the appropriation of this location for a private development, resulting in its domination of the focal point not only of the city's waterfront project but also of the whole inner harbour amphitheatre, is not justified.

We believe that use of the outer-T site for the proposed hotel would amount to a lost opportunity for the future, an unnecessary sacrifice of an important public site without benefit to the waterfront project's primary aim of the citizens' enjoyment.