

MEDIA STATEMENT

The Bell Tower – Perth deserves more

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It's arguably Perth's most controversial building. From the moment the announcement was made about it being built, to the ongoing debate that it's too small, too quiet and doesn't pay for itself, the 82.5 metre monument has never been far from the headlines.

"Right from its conception, the die was cast for the Bell Tower. It really wasn't allowed to reach its full potential. Sadly though, the big losers from public opposition to the project were the public themselves," said Committee for Perth CEO Marion Fulker.

In the latest case study of its 'What we thought would kill us' series, the Committee for Perth has examined the community's concerns about the Bell Tower; how this concern impacted on the final design and outcome of the project; why as a community we undervalue investment in landmark places and spaces; and the difficulty governments face in investing in assets that do not have an immediate measurable benefit.

"The original vision was unfairly branded grandiose, outrageously extravagant, a waste of money that should be spent on hospitals, policing or schools. Critics claimed it was former Premier Richard Court building a monument in his honour and passion ran so high that some motorists abused workers on the construction site as they drove by."

The government approved concept behind Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the Bell Tower was for Perth to have a landmark building which would make an iconic statement, connect the city and the Swan River, create a pedestrian link to Barrack Square and provide public and commercial spaces as part of the redeveloped Barrack Square.

Stage 1 construction of the tower began in 1999, and was opened on December 10th, 2000 at a cost of just over \$6.8 million.

"To put that figure into perspective, in 1999-2000 the state government predicted a budget surplus of \$171.3 million and that included spending an extra \$251 million, mostly in the areas of education, health and law and order.

Widespread community backlash caused the \$3.5 million, Stage 2 of the Bell Tower project to be cancelled. As a result of this, many of the original projects objectives which were supported by the community never happened. For example, the Bell Tower did not link or bond the city to the river, a pedestrian link to the city wasn't created and while it improved the Barrack Square precinct, it did not energise Barrack Square or the surrounding waterfront.

"Looking back, there is no doubt that this was a missed opportunity for Perth," added Mrs Fulker.

"It is hard to ignore the possibility that the Bell Tower and its surrounds could have been Perth's major attraction and a truly iconic focal point if the public and the government had

only got behind and supported a more comprehensive redevelopment project for the Barrack Square precinct.

“What was lost in any balanced debate about the Bell Tower was that this wasn’t just about housing some second hand bells but a historically significant project that contained one of only a few sets of royal bells in existence and the only ones known to have left England. “Even today, the Bell Tower is the world’s largest musical instrument and attracts around 62,000 visitors a year. It is rated as one of the best bell ringing facilities in the world and was ranked as one of British Airways 10 Best in the World – Millennium Projects for 2000.”

Mrs Fulker said while community backlash to the Bell Tower centred on a lack of community consultation or input prior to its announcement, there were also a number of other factors working against it. These included Perth’s ongoing issue of inadequate value being placed on funding for arts and cultural infrastructure.

Last year’s ABS figures put Western Australia fourth in total state arts funding and third in state cultural funding on a per capita basis.

“In 2009-10, state government subsidies to the Swan Bells Foundation totalled \$350,000. This is a relatively small figure to support one of the city’s premier tourist attractions. However the Bell Tower continues to consistently receive annual negative media attention for the shortfall.”

“Arts and cultural organisations world-wide are publically funded and most civilised societies strongly encourage their governments to support culture, arts and heritage.”

Mrs Fulker said that Melbourne’s Southbank was redeveloped in the early 1990s and Brisbane’s South Bank and Sydney’s Darling Harbour were undertaken in the 1980s and while these projects were not without controversy, they were delivered.

“If history is to have taught us anything, hopefully it’s that getting these projects across the line requires strong leadership, commitment, and an effective and inclusive strategy for early public participation and input, especially when it comes to waterfront locations.”

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Media contact: Tony Monaghan, The Brand Agency 0428 280 593