



7 March 2014

The General Manager
Willoughby City Council

Attention: Julie Whitfield

Dear Ms Whitfield,

Re: The Haven Amphitheatre Committee's proposal for stage and associated works for the Haven Amphitheatre

The Walter Burley Griffin Society thanks the Council for the opportunity to comment on the Haven Amphitheatre Management Committee's concept plans for a new stage and associated works. The Society also thanks the Council for engaging independent consultants to prepare a structural report and a hydraulic report.

The Haven Amphitheatre Management Committee's (HAC's) work regarding organising and managing performances at the Haven Amphitheatre is greatly appreciated by the Society and the community at large. These continuing performances are an important part of the Haven Amphitheatre's cultural and social heritage that was initiated by the Griffins.

The Society however does not support HAC's proposal to demolish the existing timber stage of the Haven Amphitheatre and replace it with a concrete stage 18% larger than the existing stage with a concrete lower floor for changing rooms and storage, a culvert to take the creek water, and other proposed works of a large folding awning that would pivot on two large concrete buttresses, and six rows of seating that would span the creek near the stage.

The Society is very pleased that the independent engineer's structural report on the existing timber stage has revealed that the existing timber structure is generally in a sound condition. The Society notes that the report also reveals that the structural members of the stage are undersized and need strengthening/rebuilding to achieve Australian Standards load rating for the stage capacity.

The Walter Burley Griffin Society's concerns about the proposed new concrete stage design are as follows:

1. A concrete construction would not respect, and will be very detrimental to Haven and its Griffin legacy. As Marion Mahony Griffin describes in *The Magic of America* (page 430):
"No man-made imitation of indoor theatre here but every fairy creation carefully, religiously safeguarded; wattles, different kinds, so golden blossoms for each month in the year. ...
"The rest of the valley is the stage, trees and bush and blossoms and rocks to meet any dramatic requirement. To the North a steep rock wall with a long terrace - a road in fact above the eye running East and West. Above it terrace on terrace of spectacular rocks and shrubbery and grand trees. To the East a

flat terrace above the eye so scenes can appear and disappear across it, mysterious or spectacular. Then the little stream flowing down to the sea, its head and its further bank offering a rich range of settings - terraces, huge boulders, exquisite varied shrubbery - dainty Lily of the Valley trees and majestic Angophoras ..."

2. A concrete construction would not respect the site's heritage significance. The Haven Amphitheatre, as detailed in the State Heritage Inventory, has historical, aesthetic, social, cultural significance, along with the significance of rarity and the significance of association of prominent architects Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin.
3. A concrete construction would not respect Marion Mahony Griffin's Deed of Gift to the Council for the preservation of the natural open air amphitheatre. Marion Mahony Griffin gifted the title deeds to Willoughby Council on 12/10/1943 for the people. The Deed states "*The Council shall take all reasonable steps to prevent interference with or the destruction or removal of any native flora, fauna, birdlife or natural features in the reserves to the intent that the native flora, fauna, birdlife and natural features therein or thereon shall be preserved and developed for the health recreation and enjoyment of the persons referred to in Clause Three hereof*". (people residing in Castlecrag and "the general public").
4. The timber stage designed by local architect Robert Sheldon built by the community in 1976 received a Royal Australian Institute of Architect NSW Chapter Commendation Award in 1977 and is thus significant in itself. This timber stage has been retained and was extended in 1992 again to a design by Robert Sheldon.
5. The HAC proposal would result in excessive excavation of the significant natural gully terrain for the creation of a 'green room' and storage under the stage.
6. The HAC proposal would result in the destruction of heritage features of the site such as large sandstone boulders that were iconic 'stage' elements within the 1930's use of the amphitheatre.
7. The HAC proposal would result in the covering of the natural creek line through the construction of a culvert and additional seating. The creek is a significant heritage feature of the site that should be celebrated and made visible, not covered.
8. It is the unconventionality of the Haven Amphitheatre that makes it so special. The grouping of tree ferns, located where these seats are proposed, is an important element of the amphitheatre, its amenity and ambience. The two distinct groups of tiered sandstone seats are part of the historic heritage of the site. Joining them together with new seats would confuse the heritage and understanding of the original 1930s seating on the western side and the group of 1970s and 1990s seating on the northern side. The HAC proposal does not present a rationale for increasing the number of seats. Increasing the seating would change the whole visual character of the amphitheatre and impact on its heritage. In particular, the creek is a particularly important element and needs to be respected in its natural state.
9. The impact of the enlarged stage and additional excavation on a very significant *Angophora costata*, Sydney Red Gum. The proposed stage protrudes into the root zone of this historic tree (see attached photograph of the tree beside the creek with its roots very close to the existing stage).
10. The visual impact of the enlarged stage and rain awning. These structures would dominate the very small bushland reserve / glen. The thin linear bushland around this site is what gives the amphitheatre its special heritage value. One of the concrete buttresses for the proposed awning would destroy one of the significant rock formations in the glen.
11. A stage made of concrete is not suited to many theatrical performances.
12. The large building apron necessary for concrete construction and associated concrete formwork and lay-area for sheets of steel reinforcing would also detrimentally impact the trees, bush and rocks of the steeply sloping glen. The building apron would likely be a 2 to 5 metre construction zone outside of the footprint of the concrete slab to be constructed and its scaffolding. As the adjoining roads are very narrow, it is unlikely that building materials would be able to be stored on either of the two roads, and the site drops steeply from the roads so there is no flat nature strip on which building materials can be stored either.
13. The high risk of concrete slurry run-off down the steep slope into the bushland below during construction which could have a detrimental impact on the bushland in the foreshore reserve below.
14. Concrete is not an environmentally sound building material. However timber is a renewable resource, has a

low embodied energy, requires smaller amounts of energy, and wood products store carbon dioxide for their entire service life.

15. The need to think long term beyond the next generation and use building materials and processes that are sustainable, have minimal environmental impact, and can be manually taken in to the site and, later when they decay, manually removed and/or replaced.
16. Concrete may appear to be a permanent material but actually decays with time and ultimately comes to the end of its workable life. At such a time, the removal of a reinforced concrete structure would be very detrimental to the steep bushland glen.
17. Removing the existing timber structure, the majority of which is in good condition, and replacing it all with concrete would be a great deal more expensive than repairing the existing timber structure. Much less money would need to be raised to repair and renovate the existing stage.
18. A new structure may have to be considered as a Development Application for a building (rather than the current landscape works) and comply to all current Australian Standards including accessibility. The current low gradient levels for ramps to enable performers to access the stage in a wheel chair would result in a large part of the glen being taken up with such a ramp. A lift could be an alternative but an extremely expensive one.

Conclusion

While the Society fully supports the concept of an open air theatre in this historical location within the foreshore reserve, we also believe it is a community resource that should remain understated, in keeping with the original aims of the Griffins. The heritage significance of the site is its unique setting in a natural glen. Any construction needs to touch the earth lightly. The existing timber structure does that but the proposed insitu concrete would not. Achieving the HAC's objective requires a solution that 'more lightly touches the landscape', so a less damaging option is required.

The Society supports the structural engineer's recommendation of strengthening to achieve the required load rating, but not rebuilding.

We thank Willoughby City Council for the opportunity to comment on the Haven Amphitheatre Management Committee's concept plans for a new stage.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kerry McKillop'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kerry McKillop
Secretary



The Haven Amphitheatre, 2013 with tree ferns growing at the creek and the original stone seating beyond. The tree ferns contribute significantly to the beautiful ambience of the Haven amphitheatre but the HAC proposal for six rows of seating to span the creek would eliminate them.



Angophora costata (Sydney Red Gum) growing beside the existing timber structure and beside the creek, 2013.
If a concrete structure were to be built as proposed by HAC it would cause the demise of this now large and healthy Angophora.