Sydney's Anzac Memorial: more than a Shrine?

DON ELLSMORE

Broadly speaking, memorials are monuments to conservatism. Seldom do their designers stray from the familiar classical models in their work. Rarely does any competition-winning design in an 'avant-garde' style ever reach completion without radical re-shaping to bring it into line with community expectations.

This is as true today in the run-up to the bicentenary as it was 50 years ago when the Anzac Memorial was erected in Sydney's Hyde Park.

Alec Tzannes' competition-winning design for the bicentennial monument conforms admirably, being a no-nonsense classical rotunda in the best tradition of Bramante, in a landscape setting which owes much to Capability Brown. Peter Weber's competition-winning design for Queen's Square has a strong urban Italian quality; strong enough to make it acceptable to the competition jury if not a little too expensive to proceed.

C Bruce Dellit's Anzac Memorial design might appear to be an exception to the unwritten rule, but this is just an illustration brought on by the Art-Deco elements which camouflage its classical antecedents. Furthermore, it is not a new design as it was closely modelled on Bertram G. Goodhue's competition design for the Kansas City memorial, (Figure 1) published shortly before the Anzac Memorial design competition was announced. However this should not detract from the success of such a powerful and well-controlled piece of architecture.

The Anzac Memorial was built at a time when memorials of all types were appearing in the cities and towns of Australia and, indeed, in the many other nations which sacrificed the cream of their manhood during the mad years of the Great War. However, unlike the columns, shafts, cenotaphs, tablets and arches of Antiquity, which were the preferred models for the majority of memorials, it represents a new type of structure; a memorial building.

It is true that many utilitarian buildings were dedicated as memorials; (a civic library which was on the drawing boards at the time of the Great War would logically become a memorial library, with a plaque erected in the foyer to proclaim this), but generally speaking no memorial, if it were to be considered a real memorial, could serve any useful purpose. The aim in design was to achieve permanency and a clear expression of the commemorative idea. The memorial trees and groves, the halls and libraries, fell short of this objective both in terms of permanence and in the expression of the commemorative idea.

There are of course some stunning exceptions to this rule, like the Place Vendome, or the Place de la Concorde in Paris, built to commemorate two kings (Louis XIV and Louis XV respectively), and like the fountains in Rome built by the Popes. These have provision for public utility and enjoyment which does not interfere with the essential requirements of the work of memorial architecture. But if it is to perpetuate the memory of a great person or event, the prime aim is to create a memorial which will withstand changes and perhaps draw attention through its lack of utility.

How many people over the years must have wondered at the function of the Anzac Memorial? Only a small number of Sydneysiders today would be aware of the great power and emotion this building engenders and a still smaller number would be aware of the offices (and now the exhibition room)(1) which co-exist with the hall of memory. The Anzac Memorial is a good example of the 'memorial building' type which cleverly combines commemoration and function.

The 'memorial building' type evolved in the United States where, in the immediate post-war period, a great deal of attention was focused on efforts to perpetuate the memory of those who served in the Great War. The Elks' National Memorial, Chicago, 1926(2) is a building similar in function to the Anzac
Figure 1: Kansas City War Memorial by Bertram G. Goodhue, published in 'Architecture', 1 April 1929.
Memorial. The design discreetly incorporates permanent offices in one wing. It is not known how the functional design was arrived at but the published views of the author of the design suggest that it was the subject of some debate; a fact which compelled him to make his views known publicly. The background to the Anzac Memorial design is quite well documented and it is interesting to recount the key arguments which led to its erection in Hyde Park.

The decision to erect a memorial building arose from the distillation of ideas presented during the 14 years of debate which preceded the announcement of the competition to choose a suitable design. The fund for building was opened on the Day of Remembrance; the first anniversary of the landing of the Australians at Anzac Cove in 1915. By the end of the war the fund had swelled to 60,000 pounds.

The original proposal was for a Hall of Memories dedicated to the use of those who had returned from the War and their dependents. Then in 1921 the women of the state presented sketch plans for a cenotaph, where sorrowing relatives and friends could place their tributes on national memorial days and other suitable occasions. It is said to have been ironical in 1986 that the women still have no memorial.

Dame Nellie Melba proposed that the memorial should take the form of a carillon, and plans were prepared for a structure 240 feet tall in Centennial Park. The carillon idea was taken up at Sydney University some years later.

It was the Institute of Architects which urged upon the Government the advantages of erecting the Memorial in Hyde Park on the site where it now stands. The enabling Act passed both Houses of the N.S.W. Parliament in 1923, and trustees were appointed to proceed with the erection of the building to serve as a memorial of the achievements of the Australian Imperial Forces and to provide returned soldiers and sailors with a place of rest and recreation. The architectural fraternity then waited for six years for the announcement of the competition to find a suitable design.

The design submitted by C Bruce Dellit (Figure 2) was proclaimed by the assessors to have the attributes of sentiment, commemorative character and aesthetic quality above and beyond those of the other 116 competition designs. At the time of the award Dellit acknowledged that he was inspired by thoughts of endurance, courage and sacrifice. But it was the human instinct for self-sacrifice in the name of duty which mostly inspired Dellit, and his collaborator, Raynor Hoff, to produce such a powerful architectural statement.

Recently published enthusiasm for the Art Deco quality of the Anzac Memorial (a masterpiece of Art Deco) should not disguise the true architectural intent which transcends any such labels of style. For although Dellit deliberately retreated from the classical models of the arches of triumph, which were monuments of martial greatness glorifying a subject which appalled him, this is exactly what the design is - a masculine monument in the classical style, if also purely contemporary in style (Figure 3). But the great virtue of the finished memorial - which for many outweighs the architectural value - is the sculpture, a triumph for both architect and sculptor.

A revival in the use of architectural sculpture was experienced in the 1920s and 1930s. Sculptural representations were then usually based upon either classical mythology or upon Christian iconography, both frequently interpreted from Renaissance models. In the 1920s it became acceptable to dispense with any precise ideas, in favour of pure aesthetics. The Dellit/Hoff sculpture of the Anzac Memorial falls into two distinct groups.

First there is the architectural sculpture; or the colossal figures which have as much three-dimensional architectural quality as they have artistic excellence. Then there is the pair of sculptural bas-reliefs over the entrance doors which, with the bronze centrepiece, 'sacrifice' forms the second group. The latter bronze was the centre of both building and artistic debate when it was installed. In terms of subject and execution, this statue in the centre of the Hall of Silence is one of the most moving
Figure 2: Design sketch for the Anzac Memorial by C Bruce Dellit, 1930, with pool of reflection in the foreground.

Figure 3: First model of Anzac Memorial by C Bruce Dellit, 1930.
Figure 4: 'Sacrifice' in the Hall of Silence.
pieces of public sculpture anywhere (Figure 4). It stands also as a mute reminder of the two suppressed works by Raynor Hoff, which were prevented from proceeding by the sheer weight of conservatism and outcry by the 'establishment'. Photographs of Hoff's models for the two sculptural groups show them to be outstanding works of art which would have further enhanced the artistic quality of the memorial.

'Victory after Sacrifice' and 'The Crucifixion of Civilisation', which Raynor Hoff conceived while on active service in France in 1916, were cast in plaster and forwarded to England to be re-cast in bronze. Their loss (literally and symbolically) is too great to assess, but the controversy which led to the suppression of the sculptures remains topical. (8)

The last question to consider is the issue of conservation. Obviously the maintenance of the memorial is a day-to-day issue which is greatly influenced by the fact that it is also a building. The users of the building impose constraints which sometimes work against the aims of normal memorial conservation. There is also the crucial issue of visual curtilage. Both the intensive use of the park, and the attendant park maintenance issues, often conflict with conservation issues.

The concept which would have placed the memorial at the intersection of the axis of Oxford Street and the north-south axis of Hyde Park was never fulfilled. The cost to complete Dellit's concept is very high - but still under discussion (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Planning concept for the Anzac Memorial in Hyde Park south. The concept was never completed but it is again under consideration for implementation in part.
REFERENCES

1. In 1985 a permanent exhibition, 'Australians at War' was opened in the memorial in rooms formerly occupied by the Returned Soldiers League (NSL). The exhibition was designed by the N.S.W. Public Works Department in conjunction with Sydney designer, David Spode.


3. Construction of the Sydney Underground Railway had created a barren tract of land in Hyde Park suitable for this purpose.


