



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS.

R E P O R T

Relating to the Proposed

Erection of .

ACCOMMODATION FOR LOCAL ADMINISTRATION STAFF

at

DARWIN, NORTHERN TERRITORY.

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS.

R E P O R T.

COMMONWEALTH OFFICES, DARWIN, N. T.

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COMMONWEALTH OFFICES,

DARWIN, N.T.

R E P O R T .

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, to which His Excellency the Governor-General in Council referred, for investigation and Report thereon to the House of Representatives, the question of accommodation available for local Administrative Staff in the Northern Territory, has the honour to report as follows:-

S E C T I O N I.

I N T R O D U C T O R Y.

Early History.

1. A proposal to erect Administrative Offices in Darwin was investigated by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works in 1939. The site then proposed was an area of 8 acres bounded by the Esplanade, M Lachlan, Mitchell and Peel streets, Darwin. The design of the building at that time suggested, provided for a usable office area of approximately 18,700 sq. ft., in a two-storeyed building designed on an "H" shaped plan. It was planned to accommodate 187 persons, but the intervention of the war resulted in the project being abandoned.
2. Since the war conditions in Darwin have altered very considerably ^{from} ~~to~~ those obtaining at the time of the Committee's earlier inquiry on this matter, and the land in question has been used for other purposes.
3. As temporary office buildings, pressed into service during the war years, are entirely unsuited to their present purposes under tropical conditions, and more recent growth of various activities in the Northern Territory has resulted in considerable expansion of Government staffs, it is becoming increasingly urgent for permanent office accommodation to be considered.

SECTION II.

THE PRESENT PROPOSAL

The Buildings.

4. It is now proposed that an Administrative Office centre be established to house all Commonwealth Departments in the one area of the town in modern office buildings. It is suggested that the new Administrative centre shall be on land adjoining the Legislative Council Chamber, and accommodation shall be provided by means of a number of identical office units. Each unit would be air-conditioned, and would comprise two floors of office space, housing 160 officers at a density of 80 sq.ft. per person. At the present time it is estimated that four units will be required, and the plans set out designs for two of them on each side of the Legislative Council building, between the Esplanade and Mitchell street. It is proposed to construct the buildings with reinforced concrete frame and infill panels of cement bricks. Each unit would have an open area underneath at ground level to provide shelter in wet weather and storage space where required.

Estimated Cost.

5. The estimated cost of each unit in accordance with the plans submitted would be £155,000, or £620,000 for the four units, exclusive of the colonaded links between the units, roadworks, external paving etc..

SECTION III.

THE COMMITTEE'S INVESTIGATIONS.

GENERAL.

6. The Committee took evidence in regard to the proposal from officials of the Department of Works and the Attorney-General's Department before proceeding to Darwin. In the Northern Territory evidence was taken from departmental officials concerned with the construction of the building, staff representatives, planning authorities, a representative of the Navy, and others interested in the proposal.

NEED FOR THE BUILDINGS.

Altered conditions.

7. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, in its 1939 inquiry stressed the necessity for the early construction of suitable office accommodation in Darwin, and the present Committee considered the matter in the light of circumstances which have operated from that time until now.

8. Since the findings of the 1939 Committee were published certain significant factors have emerged which necessitate an entirely new approach to the proposal to provide Government Administrative offices. These factors fall into four main sections, as follows:-

9. Augmented staffs:- In 1939 provision was made to accommodate 187 officers of the Northern Territory Administration; today, there are nearly 300 to be accommodated, and in addition, there are staffs of other Commonwealth Departments numbering some 400 people who occupy unsuitable and sub-standard buildings. This makes it desirable to plan for a comprehensive administrative centre rather than for a building to house one department.

10. Alteration of Site:- The site previously selected has been allocated in the meantime for various other purposes. Some vacant lots have been disposed of by public auction for residential development, and the Darwin Club has been granted a 25 years lease over a portion of the land, where it has arranged to construct new permanent club premises.

11. Administrative Centre:- The Administrator's decision to use the central portion of the area occupied by the war-damaged Post Office buildings for the Legislative Council building, and to incorporate in it a section of the old walls to commemorate the part played by Darwin in the historic changes wrought by the war, has accentuated this area as desirable for development into a complete administrative centre. The Legislative Council building has been constructed, and the vacant land adjoining it will have to be developed at an early date.

12. Present sub-standard accommodation:- After the war many ex-service hutments of various kinds were pressed into use to alleviate the urgent need for office accommodation. Such buildings are still being used and, almost without exception, they are entirely unsuited to their present purposes under tropical conditions. It has been stressed that the problem of recruiting staff is particularly difficult in Darwin, where the turnover of staff is very high, and it is contended that greater attention to working conditions would improve efficiency, would ultimately reduce operating costs, and would encourage staff to remain in Darwin for longer periods.

13. Apart from the uncomfortable and unsuitable types of buildings being used, an important factor to be considered is the wide dispersal of the different activities in various parts of the town, and some even in a converted mess hut at Larrakeyah, over a mile away.

14. The Committee therefore has no hesitation in confirming the recommendation made by the previous Committee, that office accommodation is urgently necessary, and emphasises that present-day conditions and important developments taking place make it all the more imperative to construct the buildings without delay.

Future needs.

15. It is estimated that the area adjacent to the Legislative Council building will provide space for four office unit buildings, and they are calculated to be sufficient to house all the present Commonwealth departments in that area. It is foreseen, however, that the present rapid development of the town and surrounding districts, largely as a result of important mineral activities and expansion of some promising agricultural ventures, will result in further increases in staff as time goes by. Provision of a further area for additional office units in the future was studied, and will be dealt with in a later section of this Report.

THE PROPOSED NEW OFFICES.

Standard Units.

16. A comprehensive survey of present Commonwealth department establishments in Darwin was made, and full details of the individual staffs,

together with description of the type of buildings in which they are housed, were submitted in evidence to the Committee. The total number of staff at present in all departments in Darwin is approximately 710. An analysis submitted by the Administrator in evidence shows that, of these the number of officials intended to be housed in new buildings is 411, and under the estimated establishment at 1958, 674. With an average allocation of 80 sq.ft. per person it should be possible to accommodate this staff in four units and the Committee recommends that the four units proposed shall be constructed as soon as possible.

17. The Administrator recommends that, in addition, 25% more floor area to that estimated for 1958 should be planned in the first stage of this proposal, and also an extra amount for special requirements listed in connection with the several departments. The total requirement is stated to be 84,000 sq. ft. instead of 75,200 sq.ft. provided in the four units planned.

The Customs House.

18. It was pointed out that part of the site selected for the new buildings was to have been used for a new Customs House and residence, and the Customs Department had expressed opposition to the inclusion of the Customs activities in the general Administrative Office scheme, on the ground that they should remain a separate entity and have a residence for the Sub-Collector, who should be in a position to give immediate attention to urgent important matters at any time. However, as the Sub-Collector has for many years resided with other Government officials at Myilly Point, away from his office, it was submitted that there does not appear to be any real or pressing need for him to reside on the job at this stage.

19. The Committee made inquiries regarding the possibility of including the special requirements of the Customs Department in the four units proposed and it was stated that it would be possible to place a Bond Store and Long Room conveniently at ground level in the units proposed. Evidence was also taken from the Customs Department, and it is recognised that for a fully developed port their suggestions would be appropriate. It is recommended, however, that present circumstances justify incorporation in No.1 block of suitable official accommodation, with separate entrance specially treated to give the required individuality to the Customs building.

Office Space.

20. It appears that, if space is to be required by 1958, to the extent indicated by the Administrator, and if provision is also to be made for the Customs House and areas for special activities not included in normal office space at 80 sq.ft. per person, there will be insufficient usable space in the four units proposed. The question of further land for future use will have to be answered without delay, but it does not appear likely that construction of additional units can be approved at this stage. Consideration was given, however, to the ground floor area under each building shown in the plans as open space for shelter in the wet weather, for parking purposes, & as a factor in maintaining cool conditions in the tropical climate. Some doubt was expressed as to the desirability of the Government providing extensive parking space for employees' cars, and, as the proposal includes air-conditioning for the building, the necessity for a cooling space under the structure is reduced.

21. The Committee considered the possibility of enclosing the space under the buildings and making use of it for office accommodation. The Administrator's estimate of space requirements, totalling 84,000 sq.ft., included 16,754 sq.ft. for special purposes in the various departments he listed. Study of that list indicates that a good deal of the special space should normally be included in the average of 80sq.ft., per person.

Only 6,364 sq.ft., should be allowed for as special space, and the architects suggest that this could be provided economically in some sub-basement space, which could be constructed for the purpose, and that two of the units could have ground floor areas enclosed for office space, leaving the area under the remaining two units for car parking.

The Committee is of opinion that it is desirable to provide for the 1958 staff with 54,000 sq.ft., 25% expansion with 13,500 sq.ft., and the reduced special space of 6,364 sq.ft. - a total of 73,864 sq.ft. The Committee does not favour the construction of basements, but recommends that the Ground Floor areas of each of the four units should be enclosed, thus providing a total space of 75,200 sq. ft., which will comfortably provide for requirements for some time to come.

THE SITE.

Administration Area.

22. Reference has been made, in the Report of the Committee concerning the proposed Court House, Darwin, to the urgent necessity for an officially accepted Master Plan for Darwin, in order to stabilise development of the town areas, and to engender confidence in commercial and official organisations responsible for establishing the growing needs of the Northern Territory. It was pointed out in that Report that the construction of the Legislative Council Building on the site between the Esplanade and Mitchell street committed that area as an important public

place, and it was agreed that the locality was a good one for the Court House, and for an administrative centre generally. The Committee, therefore, concurs in the selection of land adjoining the Legislative Council Building for the establishment of an administrative centre.

The Offices Site.

23. The site chosen for the four office units, two of which are to be erected on each side of the Legislative Council building, comprises a total area of $3\frac{1}{2}$ acres, including the ground on which the Legislative Council Building now stands. The land is bounded on two sides by the Esplanade, and on the other two sides by Mitchell and Bennett streets. After the closing of the end of Bennett street, for the purpose of constructing the new Court House, the western side of the site will join the Court House site.

24. It was pointed out that the use of this area as an administrative centre will not only have the advantage of placing the official activities in close proximity to each other, on an appropriate and prominent site, but it will release a number of important sites, with an aggregate of $7\frac{1}{2}$ acres in the commercial and residential areas of the town.

The offices will be situated away from the commercial area, and yet close enough to meet the convenience of the public. The Committee recommends that the site chosen for the four office units be adopted.

Future Expansion.

25. If the four office units are constructed as recommended by the Committee, the needs of Darwin should be met for some years to come. At the present time, however, there is a great deal of optimism regarding the development of the Northern Territory, and very comprehensive and detailed evidence submitted by the Administrator and other witnesses indicates the distinct possibility of rapid expansion of a great many activities in the near future.

26. The Members of the Committee were very impressed with what they saw during ~~their~~ inspection ⁱⁿ Darwin, as well as in various parts of the Northern Territory during their visit. There is no doubt

that progress in recent times has been rapid and extensive, and there appears to be an air of confidence in the possibility of sustained progress in the future. At this stage the confidence seems to be amply justified, but some little time will have to elapse before reliable and substantial results are obtained to prove beyond doubt that the extra-ordinary promise of mineral possibilities, and interest in agricultural activities are more than brilliant expectations for the future. It appears likely that the intensive work going on at the present time will demonstrate very soon whether the resources of the Northern Territory are sufficient to justify a strong faith in the area, and promote substantial development over the years to come. If the spirit of optimism, and the careful estimates of future development submitted to the Committee are actually realised, the new suburbs being constructed will continue to grow, and it will not be long before serious consideration will have to be given to space for further office units.

27. The Navy area. - It is suggested in evidence that one advantage of using the proposed site for the office buildings is that some of the extensive area now occupied by unsightly Navy hutments, on the opposite side of Mitchell Street to the offices, could be used as it becomes essential to provide more accommodation. This suggestion would result in an excellent arrangement of offices in an administrative centre, but it would make use of land for which other plans have already been developed by the Navy. The Committee was informed that plans have been prepared for a large permanent building for the Navy on portion of the Navy land facing Mitchell Street, and the uncertainty about the Navy's title to the land has already delayed building operations. Considerable opposition was therefore expressed to any proposal which would postpone their work.

28. While expressing every desire to co-operate to the fullest extent in proposals to develop the town of Darwin, the Navy does not concur in any suggestion involving the use of any of the land they occupy, unless suitable alternatives are provided immediately. It was explained that there would be some difficulty in selecting an alternative site for the Navy, giving sufficient level ground for recreational and parade ground activities, as well as for permanent buildings and residential accommodation at present proposed.

29. The Committee is of opinion that it is incongruous that the Navy living quarters should be allowed to exist in their present position opposite the Legislative Council Chambers and proposed administrative centre. It is recommended that a portion of the Navy land fronting Mitchell Street should be allocated for future extensions to the administrative centre. It is also recommended that the question of the definite allocation of land for Navy purposes should be resolved without delay, and that it be treated as a matter of urgency, to be considered as soon as possible in conjunction with the preparation of the Master Plan for Darwin.

THE DESIGN.

30. The unit buildings have been planned to have an internal width of 50 feet with central columns across the width of the building. This will allow a longitudinal corridor, with provision of suitable office space 19 ft. deep on one side and 25ft. deep on the other, in accordance with the particular requirements of departments concerned.

31. The arrangement of the buildings on the site is in accordance with modern concepts of planning for tropical areas, and open planning affords an opportunity to make gardens and lawns between the blocks, counteracting sun glare, assisting temperature control and alleviating the dust nuisance.

32. The perspectives submitted indicate buildings of somewhat modern type, with vertical lines which enhance the appearance to Mitchell street. The units appear to be as economically conceived as practicable for such an important location, but are of a type which should harmonise with the Legislative Council Building on the same site. The Committee agrees that the design is appropriate and should be adopted for the standard units to be constructed.

AIR-CONDITIONING.

33. The question of air-conditioning, dealt with in the Court House Report, has a similar application to these office buildings. There appears no doubt that, in the Darwin climate, air-conditioning will provide standards of working comfort which will achieve substantially more reliable and efficient work, and the maintenance of a differential of 12° with the outside temperature will offer more attractive conditions from the point of view of comfort of the staff. The Committee is also convinced that preservation of records and documents, added to the more sustained and reliable efforts possible from the staff, will ensure that the installation of air-conditioning is an economically desirable proposition. In addition it is pointed out that the proposed planning is made on the assumption that

air-conditioning is to be adopted, thus making it possible to provide the necessary accommodation at 80sq.ft. per person instead of 120 sq.ft. per person where natural ventilation is relied upon, so that the saving in capital cost will be considerable. It is therefore recommended that air-conditioning be included in the building as planned.

AMENITIES.

34. No provision has been made for a lunch room and amenities space, as it is stated that the majority of officers travel to their homes. However, with the development of residential areas, now proceeding and becoming more remote from the planned Administration Centre, the necessity to plan for amenities is becoming more urgent. The Committee recommends that facilities on a suitable but economical scale, such as lunch room, drying room, and women's rest room, be included in the proposed buildings when space will be made available by the provision of the additional areas on the ground floor level, recommended by the Committee elsewhere in this Report.

CONSTRUCTION.

35. The structural frame will be of reinforced concrete with infill panels of cement brickwork for solid walls, and spandrills and windows would be of factory made non-ferrous metal units requiring only site fixing. The roof would be sheeted with copper or aluminium, and dry construction would be utilised as far as practicable to minimise on-site work.

COST.

36. The estimated cost as submitted by the Minister to Executive Council, when the matter was referred to the Committee in December, 1954, was set down at approximately £70,000 per unit, each providing 6,000 sq.ft. of office space. At that stage the proposal had not been properly discussed with the client department, and the amount of space required was not determined, thus making it impossible to put forward anything but tentative figures. The plans were not ready to submit to the Committee until May, 1955, when the more detailed project was outlined in evidence taken in Melbourne. As shown in the earlier paragraphs of this Report, it is now proposed to erect 4 standard unit buildings providing 18,800

sq. ft. in each, at an estimated cost of £155,000 each. It is pointed out that the buildings now proposed, being larger, are likely to be provided at a slightly lower cost per sq.ft. than the figure originally suggested. The costs are stated to be at present rates calculated by the Darwin Branch of the Department of Works. The cost of enclosing the Ground Floor areas under the four units, to provide the additional accommodation recommended, is estimated at £15,700, plus £6,000 for air-conditioning, making £21,700, and the Committee recommends the expenditure of this extra sum as necessary for the purpose.

SECTION IV.

THE COMMITTEE'S CONCLUSIONS.

Summary of Recommendations.

37. The following is a list of the Committee's conclusions in summary form only, arrived at after study of the evidence and the questions involved. The recommendations are contained in the paragraphs referred to herein:-

- (1) There is an urgent need for suitable office accommodation in Darwin. (Paragraph 14.)
- (2) Four unit buildings as proposed should be constructed as soon as possible. (Paragraph 16.)
- (3) Accommodation for the Customs Department should be included in the present scheme, with separate entrance suitably treated to emphasize Customs needs. (Paragraph 19.)
- (4) The open spaces at Ground Floor level should be enclosed to provide the additional space required, but basements are not recommended. (Paragraph 21.)
- (5) Land adjoining the Legislative Council building provides suitable sites for the establishment of an administrative centre. (Paragraph 22.)
- (6) The site proposed for the four units should be adopted. (Paragraph 24.)
- (7) The Master Plan of Darwin should be determined without delay, and land allocated for Navy purposes. Portion of present Navy land should be reserved for future extension of the administrative centre. (Paragraph 29.)
- (8) The design submitted is appropriate, and should be adopted for the standard units. (Paragraph 32.)
- (9) Air-conditioning should be included in the buildings as planned. (Paragraph 33.)
- (10) Amenities should be provided when the additional space is made available by enclosing the open Ground Floor areas. (Paragraph 34.)
- (11) The estimated amount of £21,700 to close in the Ground Floor space in the four units is recommended.

J. O. CRAMER.
Chairman.

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