

New ground found with nobility, grace and budgetary restraint

Elizabeth Farrelly

THE new Government Architect, Peter Poulet, is right; architecture is as much social and political as aesthetic. A high-minded brief can be badly executed and a rotten brief brilliantly.

Certainly, it's arguable that noble buildings are harder to do well, especially if under-budgeted. But there is dreadful public housing, just as there are masterful palaces for the rich.

So, the question here is not which building has the noblest purpose but which one fulfills its purpose most nobly and with grace.

The three buildings short-listed by Mr Poulet and forwarded by the Premier all have social content: an outdoor education space for Aboriginal culture, a community centre in a new western Sydney estate and an apartment building for long-term homeless people.

The Aboriginal education space is designed by Fisher Design + Architecture and Mackenzie Pronk Architects, at Mutton Bird Island, Coffs Harbour. The community centre, on the old Defence site at St Marys, is designed for Delfin



Lend Lease by husband-wife architect team Lahz Nimmo (who did the handsome Centennial Park toilet blocks in similar dialect). And the apartment building, Common Ground, is designed by Hassell, with Grocon, on Pyrmont Bridge Road in Camperdown.

On the surface, all three look quite similar, using the light-weight timber and steel, earth tones aesthetic much favoured by Sydney architects just now. In fact, though, the first two –

smaller, lighter and vastly simpler – have much more in common than the third, which has a much greater degree of difficulty.

I have not visited Giidany Miirlarl Education Space, but early sketches clearly show the idea: to nestle a story-telling space into the hillside in a way that provides a haven for performance while maintaining connectivity to landscape.

It is not simply an Aboriginal space but one to connect indig-



In contention ... clockwise from left, the Common Ground apartment building, Ropes Crossing Community Centre and the Giidany Miirlarl Education Space.



enous and other cultures, much as it connects land and sea. This it does with elegance, if not a lot of protection from wind and weather.

Ropes Crossing Community Centre is also focused on a communal outdoor space formed, in this case, by the shed-like buildings around it. This, to my mind, is the least effective of the three works since, although the architecture is adequate, it adds little in the way of enchantment.

Common Ground is immensely more complex. Many of the consultants, including Hassell, worked pro bono or at cost to produce this 104-unit, fully-accessible, 5-green star-targeted residence for some of Australia's 15,000 to 20,000 chronically homeless. Based on Rosanne Haggerty's "street-to-home" model from New York, it includes a 24-hour concierge, deliberate social mix and health and other services for residents.

The building makes a point

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of looking like any other smart, contemporary architecture while also juggling complex urban issues of heritage, streetscape and solar access. With assisted natural ventilation to all rooms, solar hot water, bike parking and grey-water recycling it also actively encourages ground-level pedestrian movement and connection with the street.

It's not easy, especially on a restricted budget – so this'd be my pick.