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Architectural twist sees Aussie Adam Haddow step into breach at Barangaroo

EXCLUSIVE

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One of the world's longest running architectural soap operas, Sydney's Barangaroo urban renewal project, has delivered a late plot twist with the removal of prominent British architect Sir David Chipperfield from the project's final stage and the appointment of Sydney's Adam Haddow to redesign the precinct.

Sir David was appointed in 2021 by developer Aqualand to build a 20-storey, 73m-high tower at Barangaroo Central on the harbourside precinct's northwestern corner. That tower has since been dumped and Sir David, winner of the 2023 Pritzker Prize – architecture's equivalent of a Nobel laurel – has been dismissed.

Mr Haddow, director at Sydney architectural practice SJB, told The Australian he had been appointed to develop a masterplan that was more responsive to the community. "The developers genuinely want a project the community will love," he said. "Expect to see a cross between Crown Street, Surry Hills, and the Opera Bar. Somewhere Sydneysiders really want to be."

Earlier plans had involved Sir David and three Australian firms – Durbach Block Jagers, Smart Design Studio and John Wardle Architects – working in loose collaboration on separate buildings.

The site lies between the 6ha headland park to the north and Barangaroo South: a high-end commercial and residential precinct dominated by the WilkinsonEyre-designed 270m- One Barangaroo tower, a Crown resorts development combining a casino, a hotel and luxury apartments.

The last piece of the development puzzle on the old East Darling Harbour dockland, Barangaroo Central was conceived as the smiling public face of an urban renewal project dominated by commercial towers and public controversy. The development's website promises an "open space for recreation, events and entertainment" at Barangaroo Central and a "mixed-use development zone with residential, retail, and commercial buildings, as well as community and cultural - spaces".

Late last year the Perrottet government rejected a bid by Infrastructure NSW, on behalf of Aqualand, to raise height limits at Barangaroo Central to accommodate Sir David's tower and a cluster of medium-rise towers around 40m high.

The then planning minister, Anthony Roberts, said the tower, which had been harshly criticised when the proposed height modifications were exhibited, served no public benefit and would impact public space. Aqualand's Rod McCoy, the project's director, later conceded: "It is clear that the proposal lacks the necessary support to continue in its current form."

John Carfi, Aqualand's Barangaroo chair, told The Australian the developer was "eager to work with the new government to deliver an exceptional outcome for Central Barangaroo."

In addition to the former government's rejection of the proposed height modifications, he said there had been much community debate about the scale of the development, and some clear advice from government architect Abbie Galvin.

"I think there is a clear expectation now from the public that we need to get on with it," he said.

“Aqualand is attracted to Adam’s formidable capacity to take complex briefs and to collaborate with a range of diverse stakeholders to deliver exceptional outcomes.

“The expectations on this project are exacting – justifiably so, and we think Adam and the SJB team are the ideal choice for the complex and dynamic brief. Aqualand is confident that Adam will bring clarity and purpose to the masterplan development process and will be a persuasive and compelling advocate for the project. It is our experience that local insight and expertise is important for these high-profile, city-shaping projects.”

At the time of Sir David’s appointment, Mr McCoy of Aqualand said: “We feel incredibly fortunate to have secured one of the finest architects in the world for his first project in Australia. We want the buildings to reflect a deep understanding of context, respectful of the close relationship to Nawi Cove, Barangaroo Reserve and the historical precincts of Walsh Bay and Millers Point.”

Sir David, whose proposed 20-storey luxury residential tower stood on the edge of the sandstone-fringed Nawi Cove, said after his appointment that he aimed to “make an architectural project which belongs there, enjoys its site and climate, and we’ll endeavour to make a building that seems to be right for the site. To one side of [our tower] is the more robust commercial development, and on the other side is the slightly lower density and more cultural and social part of the site, and we’ve been seen as a bridge between those two things.”

Sir David did not respond to a request for comment.

In October last year former prime minister Paul Keating appeared at a press conference with then premier Dominic Perrottet to laud the government’s decision to limit the height and floor space of buildings at Barangaroo Central.

Mr Keating said Mr Perrottet had shown a “civic conscience”, and he hit out at architects who criticised the Crown tower, which he described as “probably the most beautiful in Australia, easily. And at 75 storeys it’s one of the most important of its kind in the world”.

He described architects who criticised the tower as “fruitcakes”.