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Brutal but beautiful: Stokes' list of Sydney's architectural gems

By [Julie Power](#)

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Far from agreeing that the Brutalist style Sirius building should be slated for the wrecking ball as Treasurer Dominic Perrottet suggested this week, NSW Planning Minister Rob Stokes has put the love-it or hate-it apartment block on his competing list of 10 hidden architectural gems in Sydney.

Explaining his list, Mr Stokes said, "One of the beautiful things about Sydney is that it isn't consistent and there's a contradiction of styles."

[Architect Angelo Candalepas has reinvented the traditional wedding cake mosque in Punchbowl. *CREDIT: STEVEN SIEWERT*]

His list reflects that. The oldest is The Mint on Macquarie Street, a former hospital funded by rum sales. It was known as the Sydney slaughterhouse because so many died from dysentery there. Mr Stokes admires the wide verandahs of the 1816 building as a major Australian contribution to international architecture. It also includes Elizabeth Bay House, called the finest home in the colony after the house and grotto were finished in 1839.

He moves on to John James' 1968 Reader's Digest Building in Surry Hills built on the site of the Tooheys' stables, and then Bungan Castle, a Northern Beaches home that once hosted artist Norman Lindsay.

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Stokes' list also includes the 2018 award-winning Punchbowl Mosque, described as architect Angelo Candalepas' "modern masterpiece" and features more than 100 domes. Mr Perrottet's mischievous suggestion of taking a wrecking ball to iconic buildings like the MLC Centre, which he described as a hate crime, and Greenway Apartments, may be counterproductive.

According to NSW's state architect Abbie Galvin, "awesome" public debates like these have actually saved buildings from destruction. The most recent example was the Sirius. Other examples included the Finger Wharves, the State Theatre and public housing in Woolloomooloo. The Queen Victoria Building, now much loved, was described as a "monstrosity" in the late 1950s. Sydney's then Lord

Mayor Harry Jensen had wanted to turn the location into a public park. Much of Paddington and McMahons Point's terraces would be history if it weren't for public debate.

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Far from thinking the Treasurer should keep his nose out of architecture, Ms Galvin said "we should be thanking" him for encouraging public debate. "Design is everyone's business," she said. Yet making decisions about what to save and what to keep should be more than about aesthetics, she said.

Ms Galvin agreed with Mr Stokes' view of the Cahill Expressway. "We shouldn't just continue to hate it. We ultimately need a better vision of the Circular Quay and the harbour," Ms Galvin said. Many architects challenged Mr Perrottet to "put his money where his mouth is" and fund the removal of the Cahill Expressway, long considered a blight on Sydney. "I challenge the Treasurer to pursue his quest for beauty and fund the next round of great public architecture and domain," wrote [architect Shaun Carter in an opinion piece on Wednesday](#). Creating a city of architectural beauty, particularly with our public domain and public buildings, required a financial commitment from the state, he wrote.

Rob Stokes' 11 hidden architectural gems

1. Sirius
2. Elizabeth Bay House
3. Bungan Castle
4. Punchbowl Mosque
5. The Mint
6. EY Building
7. St James' Church - Macquarie Street
8. Reader's Digest Building, Surry Hills
9. Marrickville Library
10. Union Street Terraces, Pyrmont, and
11. Eryldene

"What a gift to the city it would be. He could start with one of his top 10 constructions to be demolished, the Cahill Expressway." It would be expensive, as much as \$3 billion, Mr Carter told the *Herald*. But it would be worth it if it resulted in an amazing public square in an area that already generates billions in tourist dollars. Another equally attractive proposal was to turn it into a New York-style elevated high line running between the Domain and Barangaroo. "Imagine having a family picnic right above Circular Quay. Just sitting there going, 'wow, this is public'," he said.

Mr Stokes said Sydney had been the most intact Victorian city in the world in the 1960s. "We consciously tore it to bits, we wanted to shed off our image as a staid, colonial outpost. We wanted to embrace modernity." Now we can look back and realise we lost a lot but we also gained a lot. Some of the buildings on Dom Perrottet's list that he regards as eyesores are now celebrated places like Australia Square and the MLC Centre. "I don't for one moment discount the loss of what they replaced, but without some destruction you never get progress," said Mr Stokes. He said the idea of knocking everything down was as repugnant as the idea of saving everything. "We need to consider whether buildings are useful and beautiful and can be adapted to a new use."