

# UTAS PANEL PROVED TO BE LITTLE MORE THAN A PUBLICITY EXERCISE

## LOCAL ARCHITECT PETER BICEVSKIS JOINED THE UTAS SHAKE UP PANEL TO HAVE A SAY, BUT HE HAS BEEN LESS THAN IMPRESSED BY THE PROCESS

RECENTLY I resigned as a member of the UTAS Shake Up panel, the 80-person group established with the stated intent of involving the community in the development of the university's CBD move.

It became clear the panel was just a public relations exercise. Participants were refused the information and time needed to properly analyse a complex project worth about \$1 billion.

In the limited time permitted by UTAS for discussion, panellists could only talk about the sort of vague goals and aspirations that apply to any project, nothing that would make any useful contribution to a CBD move. The plans for its main administration building, the \$100m refurbishment of the former Forestry Building in Melville St, had already been submitted to the Hobart City Council, so there was no chance of the panel contributing there.

The panel was told that all our questions would be answered. That never occurred.

We asked to see the latest versions of the CBD Masterplan, and plans of the various precincts. None were supplied, even though they must exist because the university has spent millions on planning and design consultant fees.

We asked what UTAS's contingency plans were if the application to have the Sandy Bay campus rezoned was refused and there were no funds for developments in the CBD. There was no answer.

We were told there was a need to actively engage with all three levels of government with regard to improvements to public transport, the greening of the city, and overall urban strategies. However, panel discussions did not include a single government representative, not even the Hobart City Council.

The university's planners and architects who were supposed to benefit from our input were never seen in panel discussions, only a UTAS public relations team.

But as a former architect my concerns about the UTAS project run much deeper than the lack of consultation.

In 2019, as justification for relocating the university, UTAS claimed two-thirds of the Sandy Bay buildings were due for replacement and it would cost much more to refurbish them than to move to new CBD facilities. Yet this is directly contradicted by a 2018 UTAS internal report, which identified that 65 per cent of the buildings were actually in relatively good condition, the rest could easily be refurbished, and the cost of refurbishment was much less than building new facilities.

The report also said the uni had not properly maintained its Sandy Bay buildings, with a maintenance backlog of more than \$100m. These costs could have easily been met if UTAS had not diverted funds to CBD real estate purchases, design and management fees, and an expensive PR and marketing campaign.

The 2018 report identified a number of significant buildings on the Sandy Bay campus that are in good condition, yet the university's Sandy Bay Masterplan shows that most of these will be demolished, including the award-winning Centenary Building, the Law Faculty, Administration, the "Old IMAS Building", Pharmacy, the new glasshouse research complex, and the Uni Gym.

UTAS recently revealed it uses less than 20 per cent of its Sandy Bay facilities, but this is partly because it is leasing space in the CBD while perfectly good teaching spaces remain vacant at Sandy Bay.

The proposed new facilities in the CBD won't be "fit for purpose", as claimed by UTAS. Staff and students have not been involved in the design of the new buildings.

Already the Forestry Building completed design has been damned by law students and staff as being unfit for purpose, offering about one third the space of the recently refurbished Law Faculty building at Sandy Bay.

Similarly, the proposed STEM building on the former K&D site, to replace the existing science, chemistry, geology and engineering facilities, appears to be less than half the size of the existing Sandy Bay buildings. The staff who will use these complex and highly specialised facilities have not been properly consulted, and some question whether graduates will qualify for professional accreditation.

These STEM facilities are planned to be built on and around ordinary CBD commercial and community facilities, but this means trying to site industrial-scale workshops, destructive materials testing, chemical laboratories, massive water

tanks, storage of hazardous materials, fume extraction systems, and delicate instrumentation on floors directly above active community uses.

UTAS management has made poor architectural decisions, admitting that its recently constructed CBD accommodation buildings have not worked well and do not contribute to the city streetscape.

The other consequence of relocation from Sandy Bay is the loss of space for expansion, the capacity to co-locate with industry partners, and the potential for new and innovative approaches to education.

In my 40 years' experience with major projects, I have never encountered one like the proposed UTAS move to the CBD, where the user requirements are ignored, the users have little involvement in the design, and the users don't get to see the design until it is finished.

A total \$1 billion of public money will be spent with no detailed rationale or examination of alternate options, costings appear to be manipulated to suit a public-relations campaign, and there is no accountability or independent scrutiny of how the money is being spent.

**Peter Bicevskis is an award-winning architect and urban designer with more than 40 years' experience in university planning and design. He was a member of the UTAS Shake Up panel until his resignation on September 29.**