

Now the needling is over, everyone loves Centrepont

A plan to redevelop the tower has stirred passions in some surprising places, writes Claire O'Rourke.

Centrepont Tower, once the poor cousin of the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House, is fast becoming one of the city's most loved buildings as a campaign to stop a proposed redevelopment of the site gathers momentum.

The plan to build two towers, 500 underground car parking spaces and a pedestrian tunnel under Pitt Street Mall is before the City of Sydney council.

It has become one of the most controversial issues residents will consider when they vote in council elections today.

Retailers, residents, architects, heritage groups and council candidates have aired concerns about the \$600 million development.

The Labor candidate, Michael Lee, said the "tired and dated" shopping centre needed

refurbishing, but the current plan was too large. The independent candidate Clover Moore also finds the proposal unacceptable, and the Greens candidate, Chris Harris, wants further analysis.

The Liberal candidate, Shayne Mallard, said more negotiations were needed.

The independent candidate, Matt Laffan, said environmental and economic impact studies were needed.

The developer, Westfield, has dropped one of the three towers originally planned for the site,

but ferocious opposition, which began with the site neighbour David Jones and residents of the Tower Apartments, remains.

Mr Lee alleges David Jones is leading the charge to extract maximum compensation for disruption to its flagship stores on Elizabeth and Market streets during the estimated three-year construction period. David Jones denies this.

David Jones is one of 75 members of a new group, the Concerned Residents and Businesses Against Centrepont Overdevelopment. The group

has placed full-page newspaper advertisements calling for a "vote against overdevelopment" in today's election.

A public meeting held this month was attended by 200 people, who heard council candidates speak on the issue.

Architects and heritage bodies are concerned that the two proposed "bookend" buildings will obstruct views of the cable-stayed tower, and will spoil the skyline.

"The original proposal - and even with the two towers - really obscures that view and distracts

significantly from its iconic nature," said Caroline Pidcock, the NSW president of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects.

The conservation director of the National Trust, Jacqui Goddard, believes that although the tower is not listed by the organisation, it "is an important icon in the Sydney streetscape".

"The Centrepont Tower represents the aspirations of the late 1960s, when Sydney was striving for recognition as an international city," she wrote in a submission to the council.

The Heritage Council will hear

submissions from David Jones and Westfield next month. The Heritage Council is considering listing the building on the State Heritage Register.

The Pedestrian Council of Australia has told the council the proposal will not improve conditions or access for pedestrians.

However, all does not depend on the election. Approval for the the stage one application would be determined by the seven-member Central Sydney Planning Committee, which has a NSW Government-appointed majority.

Westfield believes the building is crying out for redevelopment. Mark Ryan, the company's director of corporate affairs, said the plan complied with planning guidelines for the area.

"We recognise that it's a significant building . . . but we don't think the significance of Centrepont necessarily means that our development shouldn't go ahead."

He did not rule out legal action if the development was refused. "Our position is we intend to exercise our rights . . . [but] this is a step in a very long process."