

# Just for fun or will we miss a working harbour

Some Sydney architects are cheering the demise of Sydney Harbour as a container port while others fear the end of an era, MARK SKELSEY reports

**S**YDNEY Harbour's glory days as an industrial port began in 1807 — when the first ship of wool sailed out of the famous waterway bound for England. That was followed by a decision in 1832 by the British Admiralty to declare Sydney a "free port", allowing any trade with foreign nations.

Since then, industry and the Harbour have gone hand in hand.

We've come to expect container vessels in the Harbour with the ferries, yachts and all manner of speed and charter boats.

Not any more — over the next nine years container ships will be given the same respect as the "diseased boats" which used to dock at North Head quarantine station.

They will be forced out of the Harbour to boost the economies of Newcastle and Wollongong.

On the 33ha of redundant port land, we'll get mix of housing, offices, entertainment, maritime uses and open space. It seems almost certain that the inner-west light rail line could be extended into White Bay and Glebe Island land.

This elaborate property development is likely to boost the State Government's coffers by tens of millions of dollars in land sales.

It's understood commercial office development is being planned on Darling Harbour wharves 3-8 — site of the famed maritime industrial relations battles of the late 1990s.

Another piece of the jigsaw is the gigantic former White Bay power station, which now lies vacant.

The decision to evict container ships was effectively made by the "kitchen cabinet" of Ports Minister Michael Costa, Premier Bob Carr and Treasurer Michael Egan without wider Cabinet consultation and contravenes the working Harbour championed by former planning minister Andrew Refshauge and former ports minister Carl Scully.

Prominent Sydney architect Richard Francis-Jones supported pushing container ships out of the Harbour. "I'm not sad to lose the container vessels — they have alienated people from the Harbour for long enough," he said.

"I don't perceive any romance with them, although there is a certain theatre in having big ships moving in and out of the Harbour. "Container terminals are in no way public — they are there for private commercial return."

Mr Francis-Jones also said Mr Carr's idea of an "iconic" building at Millers Point was exciting. "It could be related to the power of the Harbour landscape," he said.



Working day ... a Panama-registered freighter under the Harbour Bridge yesterday.

Picture: MATTHEW VASILESCU

"When we built the Opera House we were saying something about the art culture of the city and raising it to that level.

"We have now got to ask what is important to us as a community."

Defenders of Sydney Harbour Foreshores spokesman Phil Jenkyn was disturbed by the eviction of container terminals.

"Most people will think it is a mistake to close our ports down," he said. "There should remain a balance of open space, working Harbour and residential.

"When this Government develops foreshore land, it tends to allow a token 10m-wide foreshore strip and then puts a large development behind it."

Royal Australian Institute of Architects NSW president Caroline Pidcock was sad about the loss of a working Harbour but suspected it was inevitable. "The issue of what now goes on this land, instead of ports, should have more engage-

ment with the community," she said. "It's public land and belongs to the people of NSW."

In his late teens, Opposition Leader John Brogden lived near Balmain's docklands and doesn't seem impressed with the scheme.

"One of the features of Sydney Harbour is to see large container ships coming and going," he said.

"If the Government does clear the docks, then the pressure to replace them with high-rise housing will be enormous."

**M**R Brogden said an "iconic" building was a case of the Government having the wrong priorities.

"We're still waiting for the iconic train to get on the tracks," he said, in reference to the botched Millennium Train scheme.

What is clear, however, is that the ports of Newcastle and Wollongong are celebrating the move, which could see thousands of new jobs coming their way.

For instance, an extra 250 ships a year could visit Port Kembla — creating up to 2000 jobs.

Newcastle, meanwhile, will be expanded so that it can support one million containers.

Stevedoring company P & O Ports Australia and New Zealand — now based at White Bay — welcomed the decision, saying it would be happy to move to Port Kembla in the long-term.

The former Royal Australian Institute of Architects president Graham Jahn, a former Sydney councillor, also agreed with removing the docks.

"I feel the container terminals don't deliver an interesting working harbour phenomena," he said. "Container terminals are carparks and asphalt — covered with containers."

Mr Jahn said he would be happy to wait up to 50 years for the right idea and right building at the Millers Point site.

He said that planning for the Harbour Bridge started in 1880 but construction didn't commence until 1924.

"I wouldn't want a manufactured use — it must be something deep-hearted and of enormous substance," he said.

What is likely to disappoint many people living around Botany Bay is that Mr Carr appears to have given his support to yet another expansion of Port Botany. He said on Sunday that the ports plan would allow an "expansion of Port Botany — but strictly in line with the environmental constraints laid down by a Commission of Inquiry".

While many people believe that container ships provide an important balance to the recreational qualities of Sydney Harbour, there are also clear concerns that Port Botany has already become too industrialised.