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# Try Harder, Darling!

Rarely revered among critics, Darling Harbour is still a crowd favourite

**Peter Wilson**

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For over ten years the Darling Harbour precinct has been a well-worn whipping boy for many architectural and social commentators.

Since its opening in 1988, it has been an easy and juicy target for anyone who has felt the need to take a pot shot at Sydney's pre-millennial civic development. 'Why can't it be like Venice's Piazza San Marco?' seems to be the cry.

Cultural and historical impossibilities aside, the criticism of Darling Harbour is justified to some extent. The political and financial controversy that surrounded its conception is still fodder for many of its detractors and the design aspects of the precinct – a concreted space peppered with different leisure attractions nestled under the Western Distributor flyover at one of the less spectacular quarters of Sydney Harbour – has hardly set the world on fire.

The Centre for Visitor Studies has been closely monitoring the goings-on at the leisure precinct and can offer an alternative perspective on Sydney's Bicentennial birthday present. Our focus has not so much been on what it looks like, but on *who* goes there.

Some simple stats first.

- When you ask Sydneysiders about the places they can visit for "pleasure, entertainment and interest in and around Sydney," Darling Harbour consistently tops the list (ahead of the cinema, theatres, parks, beaches and The Rocks).
- Since 1991, around half the Sydney adult population (1.5 million people) have made at least one visit to Darling Harbour for pleasure in a given six month period – again topping the list of Sydney's major leisure and cultural venues.
- On average we make 5 visits per year.
- Of the 14 million visits made each year, Sydneysiders account for around 60%.

When you probe more deeply into the minds of Sydneysiders, the appeal of Darling Harbour begins to make sense.

As a destination for a family or a group of friends the 'negotiability' of the precinct becomes apparent. When the dreaded question of "what are we going to do today?" is tabled, catering to the specific needs and tastes of the group becomes one of the prime factors in the decision-making process. When we go out we like to make sure that those who tag along are having a good time as well. For many, a visit to Darling Harbour is a guarantee that there will be something for everyone.



Of course, it hasn't always been the way. A few years after its opening there was a perception that 'once you had been to Darling Harbour there was not much else to bring you back.' Visitor numbers fluctuated. The facilities started to look tired and the stuffed koalas in the souvenir shops didn't quite have the same appeal as they once did. Tourists bumped into it as they stumbled out of their hotels. Locals dragged out-of-town visitors to it as part of the Sydney sightseeing circuit. But it seemed Darling Harbour had to try harder.

The 'been there done that' feel of the place has been countered by the aggressive marketing of a wide array of event programmes for the precinct.

Although the criticism has continued, for the majority of Sydneysiders Darling Harbour has become known as 'a place where there is always something happening.'

This is a fact borne out by recent research conducted by the Centre where 60% of Sydneysiders said that "the Darling Harbour area is a more interesting place than it was five years ago."

Events ranging from the Bacardi Festival de Cuba to the Travel Expo and the Motor and Boat Shows punctuate the Darling Harbour calendar along with a constant programme of entertainment every weekend. According to the Darling Harbour Authority, the precinct hosts over 450 events per year.

Attractions such as the IMAX cinema, Sega World, Star City and the most recent addition, Cockle Bay Wharf, have also helped to maintain this vibrancy and variety.

The 'leisure precinct industry' has become a sophisticated animal over the last 10 years. Even The Rocks has re-invented itself to focus on attracting Sydney residents: the rationale being, if you can snare the locals then the tourists will follow. It has worked at The Rocks and has been the main feature of Darling Harbour's success.

With the Olympics bearing down on Sydney it may seem that all our attention is on ensuring the Olympic torch does not go out in the year 2000. But the smart operators are thinking further ahead.

By listening to the local residents Sydney's venue managers are realising that their future successes depend on satisfying the increasingly discerning leisure demands of Sydneysiders.

This '1.5-million-people-can't-be-wrong' argument is not meant to silence the criticism and debate which continues throughout the city's media houses, academic circles and more important dinner parties. But, whether it be the Piazza San Marco, Trafalgar Square or Darling Harbour, any debate about public space must incorporate the reason why that space was conceived in the first place – the public.

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