

History of the Alliance Française de Sydney Building project

The transformation of the Alliance into a financially stable company took place with an improvement in productivity and a reduction in expenditure. This was a lengthy process which required an important restructure of the organisation and its board. To this end, two former Presidents joined the board, Bruce Bland in August 2003 and Brian Hillman several months later.

Bruce Bland had a solid background in construction and project management and his presence enabled the project to proceed. A sub-committee of Bruce Bland, Philip de Boos Smith and Joël Hakim was established to bring the project to fruition.

Bruce Bland's first contribution was to convince Harry Seidler to participate in the project. A famous Australian architect, Seidler was known for his design of the Australian Embassy in Paris.

At the beginning of the years 2000, the construction industry was growing very rapidly and it proved difficult to find a builder or entrepreneur for a project of this size (400 m²).

As a result, in 2005 the decision was made to risk applying for the DA ourselves with a view to finding a builder afterwards. For a not-for-profit entity, this was a calculated risk at the time, but the progressive improvement in our financial results made this possible.

Harry Seidler's office produced the initial plans and reports which showed that the project was feasible. In order to make the project viable, it was necessary to overcome the constraint of the floor space ratio whereby it would not be possible to build more than 8 floors.

Harry Seidler produced a plan which showed that the appearance of Clarence Street could be enhanced with a building of 12-13 storeys, taking advantage of the last building in the street which also benefited from a Market St floor space ratio.

The City of Sydney approved a 13-storey building to make Clarence Street (at that time non-residential) more dynamic. Supplying energy to the building proved to be another challenge with Energy Australia insisting that the basement space be completely given over to a transformer to distribute electricity in the neighbourhood.

Joël Hakim, who in his previous role at Pechiney, knew the Chair of Energy Australia, convinced them to search for an alternative solution which consisted in installing an underground cable in Kent Street going under Market and Clarence Streets. This resulted in additional costs but meant that the Alliance was able to make use of the basement space.

Finding a builder proved to be difficult until Bruce Bland noticed a building being constructed by Lucas Stuart who, after protracted negotiations, responded favourably to our approach.

The Chairman of Lucas Stuart agreed to construct a 13-storey building and in exchange for its contribution, provided the Alliance with three floors, the basement, ground floor and first floor. At the same time, the Alliance agreed to purchase the second floor at a later stage with the builder selling levels 4 to 12. Initially intended as a technical space, the 13th floor was able to be transformed into a half floor with a mezzanine thereby enabling the Alliance to add a half floor.

Chris Rumore's experience and assistance in drafting and negotiating the contract meant that he could overcome the legal obstacles of the project. Construction took place under the close to full-time supervision by Bruce Bland who worked in collaboration with Harry Seidler.

As Harry Seidler died in March 2008, he did not live to see the building completed. Peter Hirst who was an architect at Seidlers, was in charge of the work site and Hiromi Shiraishi, a Japanese architect, was responsible for the decoration of the café and the choice of other items such as toilets, locks, lighting and floor coverings in the common areas.

The floors were supplied bare, with all other fitout items such as floor coverings and lighting being paid for by the Alliance including air conditioning. The latter was an expensive item as it needed to be adapted to each classroom with individual temperature controls resulting in an additional expense of \$400,000.

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On November 5, 2009, the building was inaugurated by the Governor of New South Wales, Marie Bashir and the Ambassador of France Michel Filhol. In between time, the real estate market had entered into a downturn with there being as surplus of properties available in Sydney.

In less than 8 years, the loan had practically been reimbursed, thanks to rigorous management by successive teams lead by my successors, David Kent and Lyn Tuit. It had been a beautiful adventure. Perhaps we would have renounced the project had we known what lay ahead and the time we had to devote to the project. Given the positive outcome, we can be grateful that we did not know this at the time.

Many Alliances from around the world have contacted us since to seek our advice as they too would like to embark on a similar project. Our response has always been: We were able to do this because we owned a valuable asset in the 1970's. Without this, it would not have been possible for us to go ahead.

Joël Hakim

President of the board of directors, l'Alliance Française de Sydney (2001-2013)