

Lives of first European Sydneysiders exposed at Cumberland St development

The lives of Sydney's earliest European residents will soon be exposed for all to see, as the remains of their homes and workplaces undergo preservation as an integral feature of a state-of-the-art YHA and archaeology education centre, nearing completion in Cumberland St, The Rocks.

According to Dr Wayne Johnson, Archaeologist for the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority (SHFA), this development is of immense significance for Australia. "This is the only time that we have been able to excavate such a densely populated, rich site and preserve it.

"It is an extremely sensitive development which incorporates the old soul of the site with development. It is not removing the past, it is incorporating the heritage into the future development. Eighty per cent of the excavated site will be visible to visitors," Dr Johnson said.

YHA is constructing a 106 bedroom youth hostel, Sydney Harbour YHA and The Big Dig Archaeology Education Centre after winning a strongly contested open tender process to develop the SHFA owned site in 2006.

The site, bordered by Cumberland St and Gloucester St in The Rocks, was previously excavated in 1994 in what was then named The Big Dig. During those and subsequent excavations during 2008, the remains of more than 40 buildings and in excess of 1 million artefacts have been unearthed, evidence that more than 300 people lived on the site. The only foundations of a house built by a member of the First Fleet have been uncovered on the site and will be displayed as part of the new development.

YHA has partnered with heritage consultants, Godden Mackay Logan, SHFA's education unit, Sydney Learning Adventures and the Historic Houses Trust to create an engaging heritage experience for visitors. The building's design is integral to this, with all bedrooms leading to an open corridor that allows guests to look down onto archaeological remains. On site interpretation will include artefacts placed within interpretive screens adjoining the streets and an audio tour available for download onto MP3 players. Experiential learning through hands-on activities including a simulated dig, will be provided for groups.

This will be the largest archaeological urban development ever completed in Australia. Construction has involved innovative building techniques designed to preserve what lies beneath. The new buildings are suspended over the excavations on an intricate steel frame directly contacting the site in about 50 places. Two laneways dating back nearly 200 years have been uncovered and will be reinstated.

"People will be able to stand in a laneway that existed 150 years ago and look at real objects that were used in the daily life of their predecessors. To stand where things actually happened and imagine, while looking at physical links to the past, is rare with early colonial settlement in Australia," Dr Johnson said.

YHA is part of the world's largest budget accommodation network, Hostelling International, which provides more than 4,000 YHA/Hi hostels in more than 60 countries. Renowned for its unique properties, YHA hostels include heritage castles, log cabins and beach houses. A membership based organisation, YHA provides travellers with quality accommodation and the opportunity for personal growth through travel, fostering cross cultural understanding and environmental responsibility. YHA is a not for profit organisation, with profits invested in the accommodation network and the experience it provides.

Media note: To interview h Dr Johnson or to request images, please contact Kate Bromley Indigo Ink PR on (02) 9489 9783 or 0408 407 847.

