

# THE BIG DIG



Above Artist's impression looking south to the new Sydney Harbour YHA (right) and The Big Dig Archaeology Education Centre (centre).

A new YHA hostel and archaeology education centre to be built in The Rocks will set new standards for adaptive reuse and green building design, writes **David Smedley**.

If a building suspended approximately one-storey above the ground seems more science fiction than architectural fact, visitors to The Rocks are in for an incredible journey to the future—via the past.

When work began in 1994 to excavate an archaeological site between Cumberland and Gloucester streets, adjacent to The Australian Heritage Hotel, in The Rocks, it didn't take long before it became known as The Big Dig, and big it was.

The project unearthed rare surviving remnants of Australia's first European settlement from the late 18th century, including more than 750,000 artefacts—from children's toys and decorative jewellery to Chinese ceramics—and sandstone and brick features and footings from about 30 historic buildings.

While many of the artefacts are on display at The Rocks Discovery Museum, the actual site has been closed to the public for several years. However, that is set to change when

the 106-room Sydney Harbour YHA and The Big Dig Archaeology Education Centre open next year.

In what will be the largest archaeological urban development ever completed in Australia, the project is designed to adaptively reuse the site by preserving and showcasing the archaeological remains. Two historic laneways running through the site, Carahers and Cribbs lanes, will be also be re-established.

Public access to the site will include a large open area on Gloucester Street where the most significant remains are located and observation points will allow public viewing. The two buildings, which will be joined by a glass bridge, will also have a central void allowing visual access to the remnants from the central corridors.

While the average person may find it hard to visualise such an innovative building, artist's impressions of the hostel and education centre help bring the design to life.

"The building only directly impacts the remnants in 39 places," explains YHA NSW development manager Ross Lardner. "The excavation for the footings for these pillars has been done by hand, under archaeological supervision."

The group has also committed \$1 from every guest, every night, to the ongoing preservation and interpretation of the site.

Specialist lighting, signage, artefact displays, murals, props, simulated digs, audio guides and multimedia displays will assist in the interpretation of the site and remnants.

The buildings will also be inherently 'green' thanks to a range of environmentally-friendly initiatives, Lardner says.

These include a reliance on solar hot water, use of a rain water detention tank, key-card activated lighting and natural ventilation. Restrictions on the use of airconditioning will see it automatically turned off when windows are opened and after 10 am each day. The building will also include movable shade screens, energy efficient lighting and storage for up to 10 bicycles.

Sydney Harbour YHA and The Big Dig Archaeology Education Centre are expected to open in late 2009. ●