

## City's narrative inspires dramatic design

By Shannon Tonkin  
Oct. 2, 2014, 4:16 p.m.

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Rising to the challenges: GPT's new West Keira development reflects Wollongong's transformation.

Not a nook or cranny, twist or turn, shape or contour proposed for both inside and outside GPT's West Keira development has happened by accident.

Likewise, every building material, fabric and finish has been hand-picked to serve a purpose beyond simple aesthetics.

At its most basic level, the West Keira complex tells a story: Wollongong's story.

"Our aim is to get the right space for the community - a building that speaks to Wollongong residents about the city they live in and reflects how they feel about living here," GPT development manager Amanda Pieriboni said.



Team effort: Architect Susanne Pini and Blue Mountains writer Carol Major collaborated. Photo: ROBERT PEET

Enter two passionate, gifted professionals: Blue Mountains writer Carol Major, who was charged with unearthing Wollongong's narrative story, and Wollongong-born architect Susanne Pini, responsible for turning Mrs Major's poetic words into the built form.

Mrs Major spent countless hours researching Wollongong's history, before visiting the city itself to discover people's personal attachments to the region.

Mrs Major said establishing connections, or reoccurring themes, was the key to unearthing the city's storyline, which she believed centred around the notion of transformation.

She said Wollongong was considered a sacred place among Aboriginal tribes, and a Garden of Eden-type find by some of the early settlers.

"Enter farming, mining, then the steel industry, bringing its thousands of migrants," she said.

"It created a pressure cooker situation where people rise to the challenges and are transformed as a result. This process can be compared to the process of making steel, where iron ore, coke and limestone are fired in close confines.

"We get the sense of a steely people, living in a place that became a blast furnace of sorts.

"These were people who took part in transforming a nation's economy and who, in turn, transformed themselves."

Mrs Major also drew on the region's natural landscape to form part of the story, saying the escarpment mimicked an amphitheatre, with Wollongong centre stage.

"As we researched the history of Wollongong we discovered that some of the most dramatic chapters in Australia's industrial history were played out here," she said, referring in part to the eight-fold increase in migrants who came to the steelworks post World War II.

"All of these ingredients are akin to dramatic moments in a play," she said. "Wollongong is where Australia's move into the modern era was played out to full effect."

After three months of researching, interviewing, collating and writing, Mrs Major handed the 34-page booklet over to four architectural firms to interpret.

Among the group was Ms Pini's company, Rice Daubney.

Ms Pini, who was born and raised in Wollongong but moved to Sydney to pursue her career, admitted to becoming emotional when she read the narrative.

"It's often hard to express how we feel about our home, but I thought Carol had managed to capture how I felt about Wollongong perfectly," she said.

"I became very emotional when I read it."

Ms Pini, who retains strong ties with the area through family connections, including visiting her parents every fortnight with her young family, said she drew inspiration for the exterior design of the building from Mrs Major's interpretation of the City of Wollongong as a stage.

"It had to be a dramatic design that reflected transformation," she said.

"The idea was the outside of the building would represent the fractured form of the escarpment, particularly in the concrete pre-casts along the top of the Keira St side of the building.

"Juxtaposed against the craggy form of the escarpment is the delicacy of the Illawarra Flametree, which is embossed in the concrete."

Ms Pini said the brown, steel ribs shaping the centre's main entrance took the form of tree trunks in the jungle that was the escarpment.

"As we researched the history of Wollongong, we discovered that some of the most dramatic chapters in Australia's industrial history were played out here."

"The brown colour represents the look of aged steel," she said.

The blast furnace theme identified by Mrs Major has been interpreted through the contrast of the hard outside shell of the building with the warmth of the interior.

The jutting out of window bays on the third floor food court to overlook Keira St also reflects the theme of escarpment as an amphitheatre.

Although GPT has not yet released many details of the building's interior design, Ms Pini said the themes of corridors and connections featured prominently.

"You can move through the building, entering and exiting at multiple points. The use of glass as a facade also allows the penetration of natural light and for people walking along Keira St to see into all three floors of the building," she said.

Ms Pini's interpretation of the narrative document has won praise from its creator.

"Just like Susanne became emotional when she read the narrative, I cried when I saw what she'd done with it," Mrs Major said.

"I thought 'yes, she's done it'. She's been brave and gone for it."

