

UQ Vice-Chancellor, Professor Deborah Terry and UQ Student Union President, Emily Searle joint message on the Union Complex redevelopment
29 March 2022

We are writing to provide you with an update on the redevelopment of the [Union Complex at the St Lucia campus](#). While planning for the redevelopment has been underway for a number of years, the University acknowledges that previous design and usage principles did not have wide support from our diverse community.

As a result, the University announced last year that it was going back to first principles on the project to consider what the future revival of the complex should encompass.

As part of this reset, the elected UQ Student Union (UQU) President joined the Union Complex Executive Steering Committee – the body responsible for guiding the development.

While it is too early to pre-empt the outcome, we want to share some updates and commitments about its future.

Union Complex design returns to first principles

Over the past nine months, the University and UQU have been working together on the Union Complex redevelopment and are continuing to make progress on the design approach, inclusions and governance.

One of the recent decisions the Committee made was to change direction from previous concepts to embrace a village-style approach to the design. It was agreed that this would better reflect the original intent and nature of the complex.

Acknowledging the past

The new complex will retain the Union Complex name, in recognition of UQU's deep connection with the location and will maintain its legacy as a safe space for students, as well as being a home for debate and activism on campus.

To understand how we best acknowledge the past, the Committee engaged architecture and design practice, Conrad Gargett, to meet with staff, students and alumni. They listened to the stories of what the complex means to our community and what experiences from the past should be reflected in the redevelopment for future generations of students.

The Committee was also briefed on work undertaken by School of Architecture students and Dr Don Watson to look at possible ways to adapt and re-use elements of the current complex in the future redevelopment.

Based on Conrad Gargett discussions with stakeholder groups, the following principles acknowledging the past will be included in briefing documents that will be shared with architects tendering for the project:

- The new complex must reflect the history and voices of past student generations
- It must remain true to its original intent – a space for students to connect and belong
- It must be a safe place that stands for democracy and free speech.

The briefing documents will also include the cultural and historical environments and aspects of the complex, such as the Schonell Theatre, Forum and Union Building (building 21A), that will be retained and incorporated into the new design concepts unless there are major cost or accessibility impediments to doing so.

Key timing for the project

The aim is to have tender documentation in market in the second half of 2022, with site preparation works commencing in 2023.

During the coming months, the University and UQU will be working on plans to temporarily relocate the essential services and facilities provided by UQU to students, in preparation for site works next year.

Schonell Theatre update

As you may recall, the Schonell Theatre and Geoffrey Rush Drama Studio were temporarily closed in May 2021 for asbestos dust removal and essential electrical and fire-safety assessments.

After considering the comprehensive assessment reports, the University and UQU have agreed that it would not be viable to reopen the theatre and studio without significant safety works being completed.

Given that the redevelopment of the Union Complex is scheduled to commence in 2023, the University and UQU have agreed not to reopen the theatre prior to the redevelopment works. As noted above, the preference is to retain the current theatre as part of the new design and redevelopment works.

As previously confirmed, we will work hard to ensure that the Schonell Theatre will be a central part of the redeveloped Union Complex. The theatre will continue to provide a space free from censorship for student-led performances and community use.

Temporary theatre to support student-led performances and student space

The University and UQU will maintain its support for student-led performances while the Schonell Theatre remains closed. We will be working with student clubs and societies to find suitable alternative performance spaces and provide support with associated costs.

This includes the restoration of the Avalon Theatre for use as a teaching and performance space for students and the community.

We will continue [to keep our community updated](#) and seek input as we progress through the various phases of the project.

In the meantime, we want to assure staff, students and alumni that the University and UQU are working together to ensure that the decisions and investments we make will deliver a space where students can connect and feel safe and supported, in an environment that also reflects the cultural and historical significance of the complex.

Best wishes,



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