

Gallery's opening on shifting ground

Linda Morris

Some of Australia's leading architects have expressed scepticism that Sydney Modern can be built within budget and by its planned 2021 opening date.

The \$344 million Sydney Modern has yet to name a builder a year after the government first went out to tender.

Infrastructure NSW, which is managing the project on behalf of the Art Gallery of NSW and the government, did not respond to claims the four bidders were only locked in last month, citing "commercial in confidence".

The project's drift has drawn strong criticism from Andrew Andersons, architect of two previous successful expansions to the Art Gallery of NSW building.

"It reflects poorly on that management process that several years since the international design competition we still don't have a successful tenderer," Mr Andersons said.

Mr Andersons was among several high-profile Sydneysiders to have argued for changes to Sydney Modern to limit the impact on the Royal Botanic Gardens.

The government would have made better use of taxpayers' money and brought new audiences to the gallery, they said, if it had followed the example of Tate Modern and built satellite campuses.

A less intrusive and more cost-effective alternative would have been to place Sydney Modern on the riverside site of the new Powerhouse Museum or fit-out The Cutaway, at Barangaroo, Mr Andersons said.

The art gallery's new home of contemporary art received planning approval in November 2018 with construction due to start in early 2019 and completed in time for the gallery's 150th anniversary in 2021.

Mr Andersons said he suspected an unexpected "cost overrun" had forced the government to reopen the tender.

The complex design by Pritzker Prize Laureates Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, of Japanese practice SANAA, would need developers to build in possible delays and other design-related risks into a lump-sum, fixed-price contract.

"In conventional designs, several levels are built on top of each building and there is a lot of repetition," Mr Andersons said. "In this building, there are square boxes floating in space with tenuous junctions. Every level is slightly angled; it's difficult to do formwork and waterproofing. A million junctions have to be sealed off and there may be unusual settlement issues."

The need to partly build over the expressway and refurbish naval oil tankers would likely bump up costs.

Renowned architect and City of Sydney councillor Philip Thalys said the risk of any blowout was that Sydney would get undersized and undervalued public buildings for its major institutions.