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War weariness casts a pall over memorial plan

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WHEN does a war memorial stop commemorating those who died and start glorifying war itself? Just how many war memorials does one town need? And should people be reminded of death when they are just out for a walk with the dog?

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These are the issues igniting debate in our nation's capital, where a proposed monument to honour the dead from the two world wars - to be built on the bank of Lake Burley Griffin in front of the existing Australian War Memorial - has provoked a flurry of local activism.

The Lake War Memorials design consists of two monolithic granite towers.

Proponents of the project, for which the Governor-General, Quentin Bryce, and her husband, Michael Bryce, are the patrons-in-chief, say it is about time world war veterans had a memorial of their own.

The Australian War Memorial, which faces a crippling budget squeeze, commemorates the dead from all wars generally and other conflicts have their own memorials.

"There are dedicated memorials on Anzac Parade [Canberra] to Korea and Vietnam - 520 died in Vietnam and 339 in Korea," says Mike Buick, the chairman of the Memorials Development Committee.

"Our argument is that if you have national memorials for those conflicts, it's not unreasonable to want one for the 101,000 dead in the world wars."

But the project's detractors - an unlikely coalition of peace activists, war historians and cultural conservationists - say it is an ugly glorification of war which is sapping funds from the ailing Australian War Memorial.

"Australia has war memorials on every street corner," says Dr Peter Stanley, a war historian and activist in the Lake War Memorials Forum, which is opposed to the project.

"How can we sensibly claim that the world wars are neglected or forgotten?"

Dr Stanley, who was historian to the Australian War Memorial for 27 years, says the new memorial will continue the erosion of its standing. "How is it sensible to direct funding to a new memorial while the existing national memorial is in dire trouble?"

The project has been in the works since 2005, and was endorsed by Kevin Rudd when he was prime minister, and by a former deputy prime minister, Tim Fischer.

Its cost has been estimated at \$21 million, and it has won seed funding of \$250,000 from the Department of Veterans Affairs. The rest must be raised through donations.

Its opponents accuse the project committee of fund-raising from arms companies, a claim Mr Buick denies.

Dr Sue Wareham, from the Medical Association for the Prevention of War, says the project committee is a "self-appointed group" which operates behind closed doors.

Mr Buick says the design for the project was decided by an independent jury and the site approval came through normal planning channels.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/war-weariness-casts-a-pall-over-memorial-plan-20110218-1azmm.html>