

Committee for North Sydney

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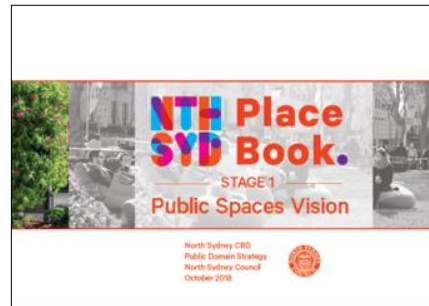
Is this the future of the North Sydney city centre?

During 2018 the North Sydney Council continued work on significant planning projects for the North Sydney city centre. Leading consultant firms had been commissioned to investigate major long-term improvements for the city centre, based on both a strategic approach and taking advantage of opportunities as they arise.

In August the Council published the **Ward Street precinct master plan stage 2** – the full report by Hassell and the Council's summary brochure. Submissions were received until 8 October 2018. The report remains on the Council's website. A more comprehensive work is the **CBD public domain strategy**. The report by Aspect Studios (and others) is also summarised in a Council brochure. The report is on exhibition until 8 February 2019.



[Ward Street master plan stage 2](#)



[Public domain strategy stage 1](#)

The Committee for North Sydney has analysed both reports, appreciative of the Council's strategic approach, but alarmed at what the reports omit and ignore. Both of these reports provide compelling evidence that the focus of the Councillors and planners for the last two crucial years *should* have been on – and now *must* be on – the Victoria Cross Metro site as the heart for the city centre.

The Committee for North Sydney has examined in detail the information in these strategies and the proposed actions. The findings of the Committee include the following.

- All of the opportunities, gains and benefits hoped for in the Ward Street 'precinct' can be achieved many times over, and much better and faster, around a wide, sunny, sheltered, level central civic space on *public land* acquired for the entrance to the Victoria Cross metro station.
- The largest civic space in the Ward Street block seems to be about 500 m². That's a mere 10% of the site acquired for the entrance to the Victoria Cross metro station. Better and more accessible space can be provided at the metro station, on public land, much more generously.
- The major civic function proposed for the (peripheral) Ward Street block is the branch library (floor space: 1200 m²). Obviously, it would make a greater contribution to the city centre if co-located with the Victoria Cross metro station, fronting onto level, sunny, sheltered public space.
- The misplaced goal of constructing new pedestrian routes and spaces, and locating a 'multifaceted destination experience' near the Ward Street block, can only be achieved with massive redevelopment incentives, resulting in buildings of up to 57 storeys! This block – being uphill, and to the north – is the last place where tall buildings should be encouraged. For most of the day their shadows stretch across the rest of the city centre, downhill and to the south.
- The strongest elements of the Ward Street report are at its promotion of civic life, and its focus on future opportunities. These are city-centre-wide values, yet the exclusive focus on the Ward Street 'precinct' seems to have been at the expense of planning for the whole city centre.
- Likewise, the proposed planning initiatives and tools, commendable in themselves, should be used across the city centre, yet seem to be intended only for the Ward Street block.

So it is likely that the *Ward Street precinct master plan* actually retards and diminishes the changes that are needed to make the North Sydney city centre a place where people want to be, and the centre of civic life in the region. Wait – perhaps the *CBD public domain strategy* will make all the difference. Despite many pages of ideas based on good contemporary practice, and many fine renderings, unfortunately, it won't.

The Committee for North Sydney has described the North Sydney city centre as an 'office park with through traffic'. The *public domain strategy* seems to agree. It lists four core issues:

- 'a general undersupply of plazas and parks';
- public domain lacking 'delight and warmth';
- peak hour traffic; and
- 'lack of after hour activities' (brochure p. 6).

That list *precisely* describes the problems of an *office park with through traffic*, not the core issues that the Committee for North Sydney has called for: improvements in the quality of the city's public domain, *to support public life in the city centre* (SMH 12 July 2018), and the recovery of places lost in the past two or three decades: cinemas, galleries, places for nature, and human-scale places of activity, sunlight and shade that people enjoy (like Tower Square!).

This limitation in the planning approach is *built in*. The public domain strategy is for the *CBD*; it is confined to areas zoned for business; it prioritises growth in the office workforce; it addresses 'workers, residents, students, visitors and investors', not citizens relating to the most significant central and cultural place for community, government and civil society in the region. The primary aspirations of the public domain strategy are measured in square metres of raw public space.

Even with this very limited focus on public space, does it address the real problems of wind tunnels between towers? Slopes making spaces and routes deficient and difficult? Pervasive overshadowing? Astonishingly, apart from a few euphemisms like those used in describing the four core issues above, and minor allusions, it does not consider shadows, or shelter, or slope.

Unlike the *Ward Street precinct master plan*, the public domain strategy does not have *shadow diagrams*, or *contours* to show the topography (so critical to understanding the challenges and opportunities of the North Sydney city centre), or indications of the southerly *winds* to which the city centre is exposed. Worse – and again unlike the *Ward Street precinct master plan* – it rotates the maps through 90 degrees, preventing the non-technical reader from understanding the critical impacts of shadows, slopes and winds.

Whatever it was that limited the vision and ambition, whatever distorted the priorities, the Council still can show to the community that important and critical insights have been gained from these planning projects. In some ways it is the gaps and omissions in the two strategies, taken together, that point to the real challenges and immediate opportunities.

- Incredibly, the public domain strategy has nothing to say about the enormous office tower over the metro station, leaning out towards Miller Street.
- The public domain strategy raises no expectations of public benefit from the metro, as if all public benefits have to be gained in the *Ward Street* block – or even worse, new civic functions are discounted because they will compete with the proposals for the *Ward Street* 'precinct'.
- The public domain strategy has nothing to say about the catastrophe that will occur in *Berry Street* – and beyond – if the *Western Harbour Tunnel* and *Beaches Link* are built as planned. Meanwhile, the proposed buildings near *Ward Street* overshadow the proposed *Berry Square*.
- The public domain strategy does not discuss alternatives, does not explain why some projects have been chosen over others, and does not address the difficulties of achieving its objectives. This lack, and its silence on the most important factors for public space – sunlight, shade, wind and slope – renders it largely irrelevant as a strategy document.
- If both reports were explicit about sunlight, shade, wind and slope, it would be obvious that the *Victoria Cross Metro* site is the one site where a large, level, sunny and sheltered central public space is possible – and that it is possible *now*, not in the distant future.

Despite the unexpected results from this investment of financial and intellectual resources, there is still time. *Sydney Metro* has not let contracts for the *Victoria Cross* site, although it is poised to do so.

This is the moment for a re-set – apparently the Premier thinks so, too – and for the Council to fight for the interests of all who use the city centre, now and into the future.

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