

Is this the future city centre?

In 2018 the North Sydney Council continued work on a significant planning project.

The planners envisage ambitious outcomes. They want major long-term improvements for the city centre. They have adopted a strategic approach, and at the same time are ready to take advantage of opportunities as they arise – as planners should.

In August the Council published their work for public comment. It's called the **Ward Street precinct master plan stage 2**. Submissions were received until 8 October 2018. The report remains on the Council's website, and so everyone can decide for themselves on the state of planning for the city centre. There's the full report by Hassell and a summary brochure (the page numbers given below are from the brochure).

Here's the link: [Ward Street master plan stage 2](#)



And – once you've thought about the planning for the city centre as a whole – here are some findings you might agree with.

- The focus on the Ward Street 'precinct' seems to be seriously misplaced.
- Investing such hopes in the Ward Street 'precinct' seems to have been at the expense of planning for the whole city centre.
- Goals and strategies *that should apply to the city* are expected to be achieved in this one city block, while the rest is relatively neglected.
- Initiatives and planning tools *that should be in use everywhere* seem to be deployed only in this city block.
- The Ward Street precinct master plan highlights the inadequacies of the current planning project, the *CBD public domain strategy*.

What is it about Ward Street?

Stage 1 of the *Ward Street precinct master plan* was published in early 2017. Thirty submissions were received. Stage 2 is said to be a response to those comments, and to more recent events:

- Sydney Metro's decision to add a second station entry at McLaren Street;
- The Greater Sydney Commission's North District plan, with job targets for the North Sydney LGA (15,600 to 21,100 additional jobs by 2016); and
- The North Sydney Council's land use and capacity study, which increased FSR and heights across the city centre, and which apparently noted that similar increases would be considered in the Ward Street precinct master plan (p. 6).

The planners seem to have chosen the Ward Street block to be the 'heart' of the North Sydney city centre because the council owns a car park (leased to Wilson Parking until 2020) on two adjoining lots in the middle of the block, with an area of 0.4 ha (p. 8). (According to the report, the two dead-end streets and the lane add a further 0.24 ha to the stock of public land – though there is no intention to build on the streets).

Is public ownership of a site enough to make this the heart of the city centre? The 'master plan' document seems convinced that this is the key location in the city centre. The document argues that this 'precinct' will:

- integrate with the metro;
- complete the pedestrian core;
- enhance the public space journey;
- establish a hub for public life;
- strengthen the commercial centre (p. 7).

To support this case, this 'precinct' has been chosen as the location for the planned CBD branch of the library, a new kind of 'people place' to serve the CBD workforce, occupying about 1000 m² (about the size of a small supermarket).

The document expects that a 'multifaceted destination experience' will result from the presence of the branch library, an eat street and an unspecified cultural facility (p. 18). On the other hand, Hassell's advice to the Council is that the block is on the fringe of the city core, with 'tenuous' connections (pp. 13, 29, 143, 147).

Despite an emphasis on two options for a public plaza, the dimensions of the spaces are only indicated in the aggregate. Judging by the size of the human figures in the sketches, a public space might be a miniscule 100 m² or 200 m², or from the maps and figures it might be 500 m². One dimension is clear: extremely tall buildings (one of them up to 57 storeys!) are contemplated on this street block. All day, the shadows of such buildings will cover most of the proposed Berry Street Square, and reach across the entire city centre.

Achieving the aims of the plan will require active and opportunistic interventions by the Council. It is good to learn of this, since there has been no sign of such strategic and tactical interventions in the past few years when the opportunities for achieving public benefits were most critical, and most available. The document refers to a variety of implementation mechanisms including 'selling Council land, entering into planning agreements with businesses, or leveraging value capture' (p. 5): this is encouraging. (Unfortunately, the document makes no mention of past North Sydney skills in innovative development rights, levies, partnerships, negotiations, and old fashioned local muscle in the interests of the community.)

We learn from the Ward Street precinct master plan that there is something referred to as the 'North Sydney CBD vision'. We learn that the vision is of 'a resilient, vibrant and globally relevant commercial centre' that grows 'to accommodate forecasted demand for additional employment floor space'.

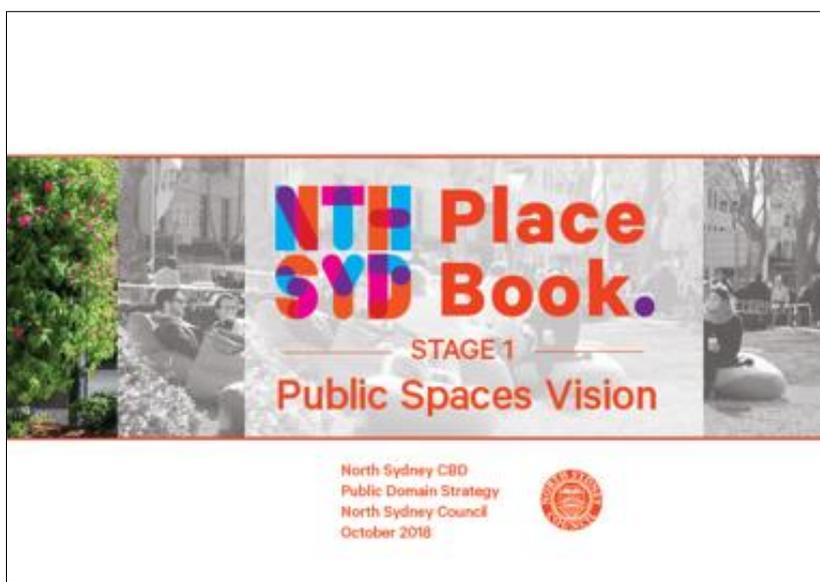
In short, planning is about North Sydney as a central business district (CBD), and is mainly confined within a zigzagging boundary largely determined by the business zoning of the LEP – not by functions, connections, traditions, opportunities, character, or the other attributes of a city centre.

Finally, we learn that the 'North Sydney CBD vision' seems to mean little more than the following collection of projects:

- a public domain strategy; stage 1 (ideas) is on exhibition until 8 February; stage 2 (strategy) will be developed later;
- a transport master plan (remarkably, since 'the Western Harbour Tunnel and Beaches Link projects ... were not included in the development of Masterplan modelling' (p. 3) the 'masterplan' has little relevance to present planning issues);
- a CBD laneways project (around the office tower being built in Denison Street);
- the Victoria Cross metro station (though the council's unanimous resolutions calling for reconsideration and consultation have not been acted on); and
- amendments to the LEP to encourage much larger and taller buildings in the CBD (p. 22).

What about the rest of the city centre?

The *Ward Street precinct master plan* is a great guide to understanding the Council's current planning project, the *CBD public domain strategy*. The latter report by Aspect Studios is also summarised in a Council brochure.



Here's the link: [Public domain strategy stage 1](#)

We have just seen that the *public domain strategy* is the main component of the 'North Sydney CBD vision' announced in the *Ward Street precinct master plan*. Is it therefore a comprehensive strategy for a city centre, or just concerned with square metres of public space, or even just concerned to support commercial development in the CBD?

Despite pages of ideas based on good contemporary practice, it seems to be the latter. It states its vision in terms of growth in the CBD being complemented by public spaces that appeal to 'workers, residents, students, visitors and investors'. There's little in that to suggest that the goal is for a significant place for community and civil society in the region. Thus, the public domain strategy remains ambiguous: is it about square metres of public space, or is it about the making of a city centre?

The Committee for North Sydney has described the North Sydney city centre as an 'office park with through traffic'. The issues identified in the public domain strategy are

- '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).

Look at that list! It precisely describes the problems of an *office park with through traffic*, without mentioning what is lacking if this is to be a city centre. The Committee for North Sydney has consistently 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 for the recovery of places lost in the past two or three decades: cinemas, galleries, places for nature, and places where people want to be (like Tower Square!)

In its submission to Sydney Metro on 28 July 2018, the Committee for North Sydney said that 'Transport for NSW, and Sydney Metro in particular, *must show how* the building of a Metro station...adds to public facilities, community life, social opportunities, environmental sustainability and long term strategic objectives. It is incredible that such a major public project has so far ignored these obligations.'

Lessons from the Council's planning projects

- There seems to be a deliberate restriction of vision, and limitation of ambition, in the Council's planning projects.
- The Council chooses to focus on office towers and on the 'CBD' (even confining their plans within the zoning boundaries), rather than on the future of North Sydney as **a city centre for the regional community**.
- Good ideas for the Ward Street block (which is not a precinct, and not central) actually make sense applied to the city centre as a whole – but the public domain strategy does not incorporate them.
- Implementation mechanisms proposed for the Ward Street block have not been applied (and do not look like being applied) throughout the city centre.
- The public domain strategy does not face up to the real challenges facing North Sydney as a city centre. Most of the public domain is in wind tunnels, is overshadowed most of the time, and is exposed to cold SE winds. The two major consultant reports avoid the subject, at best using the occasional euphemism. Shockingly, **the big public domain report ignores the subject of overshadowing**, mentioning overshadowing solely to make the case for upper level podiums and rooftops (p. 74), street walls (p. 92) and setbacks (p. 93).
- As a general observation, the documents (in particular the brochures) read not like planning reports – with challenges acknowledged, difficulties faced, aims set out in detail and options considered – but like marketing documents promoting plans already adopted; or like the glossies of landscape and urban designers promoting their drawings and designs, as an end in themselves.
- 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 not wanted because they will compete with the proposals for the so-called 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 projects are built.

- **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.
- **The public domain strategy does not show, demonstrate or discuss the most important factors for public space: *sunlight, shade, wind and slope*. There is not a single shadow diagram in the entire document, rendering it virtually useless as a strategy document.**
- Exemplifying this last point, the maps are rotated from the normal orientation, as if sun and topography do not matter – preventing the non-technical reader from understanding the critical impacts of shadows, winds and slopes.
- If the reports were explicit in words and graphics 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.

Perhaps the Mayor, Councillors and/or the planners will explain the oversights or misinterpretations that led to the above findings. Or perhaps they will explain why such a large investment in financial and intellectual resources has produced so little.

Absent those explanations, one of two possible conclusions seems inescapable.

- 1 In adopting these flawed strategies, the Council is unaware of a the limitations of the advice they have received – the focus on office jobs in the ‘CBD’; the refusal to acknowledge serious deficiencies in the city centre and therefore an inability to find solutions; the refusal to acknowledge the threats from the metro and the tunnels, and therefore an inability to look for alternatives and the opportunities arising from them – and simply believes the rhetoric, and likes the pretty pictures.
- 2 Alternatively, the consultants and the planners know what good practice is, understand the challenges, can take a long-term strategic view, and can take advantage of opportunities as they arise – but have been instructed not to stray from narrow paths, not to get into contested issues, not to mention the realities of the city centre, but to paint a euphemistic picture – the more glossy renderings and coloured maps the better.

It has to be No 2. There may be elements of both factors operating, but it seems that there is no point in just being nice about the documents and supportive of the planners: the Council needs to be told by the community that playing politics with the future of the city centre is unacceptable, and it is time they got real and fought for the interests of all who use the city centre, now and into the future.

December 2018