

MAKING GREAT PLACES DENSITY DONE WELL

A COMMITTEE FOR SYDNEY
DISCUSSION PAPER | SEPTEMBER 2016



On current trends, Sydney's population will double in size in just over 40 years. We will be a city of 8 million, the same as London is today.

The key question is: where and how will Sydney's inhabitants live? Will we live in a city that's 40% of London's density and maintain Sydney's sprawl model? Or will we take another path that is essentially more 'up' - higher density living - than 'out'? Can we, at the same time, make Sydney a city where we all live in great places?

On the basis of its own research and the evidence from other global cities, the Committee for Sydney takes the view that in future decades Sydney will have no choice but to densify. Indeed every city we have reviewed is either in the process of intensifying and agglomerating or planning to do so: this is as true of Dallas or Denver as it is of

Beijing or Bangalore. The key choice for Sydney is thus between good and bad urban density. The challenge for Sydney is not about whether to densify but how. This should not be a cause for anxiety, and indeed we shouldn't take a fatalist view of population growth. 'Density done well' means that in growing our population significantly over the next generation, we can make Sydney a city of great places.

There is a tendency in some quarters to marginalise urban design and placemaking as 'nice-to-haves'. This is not the Committee view. Although the Committee believes that transport infrastructure is a key cityshaper and that the successful Sydney of the

future must have a world class public transport network to underpin economic dynamism, we know fundamentally that great urban design and integrated planning are in the DNA of the best cities. Crucially, we believe that a credible and deep commitment to great placemaking is vital if those who embrace Sydney's growth are to enjoy what might be called a social licence to operate. We have to show to Sydneysiders that the future is about quality and not just quantity, and the public benefits which can flow from 'density done well' if we are to secure deeper community support for growth.

For, despite the growing body of evidence that points to improved productivity and sustainability, there has been voluble public resistance from an activist minority and political reticence to increasing urban density across metropolitan Sydney and particularly in areas of high housing demand. The planning reform attempted by the NSW Government in 2012-14 in great part foundered on concerns about the threat of increased density development.



This is despite the fact that Sydney is experiencing a phase in its development where the two largest demographic cohorts in history – the ‘Baby Boomers’ and ‘Gen Y’ – are embracing denser, better connected, more mixed-use city environments in which to live and enjoy life; whether these are infill developments close to CBDs or in the more walkable suburbs. A process is underway where residents are seeking not just the revitalisation of city centres but also more urbanised suburbs as increasingly people want to get to stores, cafes, community services and work by public transport, cycling and walking. The social and economic momentum away from sprawl model – an international phenomenon reflecting new cultural values, smaller families, the greater amenity and convenience of higher density urban living and the job opportunities offered by the deeper labour market it enables – is also strongly supported by the professional consensus of architects, planners and urban designers. And this is where the Committee for Sydney asks: if the attractions of higher density are in

principle so clear, why is there strong opposition to it in Sydney? In asking this question the Committee does not assume the opposition is groundless. While some oppose all development whatever its design, excellence or need, often on grounds of perceived threat to property values or their own amenity, the discussion cannot proceed on the basis that all such opposition is irrational. Unfortunately, there has often been a dialogue of the deaf between promoters of higher density development and those who oppose it in a local community – or where effective communication occurs, it only occurs in response to specific development applications, rather than broader city shaping. If we are to get the housing our communities and our economy need in the places in Sydney in which we need to locate them – close to jobs, transport and services and the mix of uses which make places attractive to residents – we need to take seriously the concerns of the ‘antis’. We can start by being honest that some of what has been built in the name of higher density

development either hasn’t been up to scratch in design quality or hasn’t delivered the community benefits and enhanced amenity upon which it was promoted. In particular, in many cases population has increased without any of the enabling infrastructure promised to help manage the growth. That is to say that the private sector can design and build a beautiful development that conforms fully and imaginatively with the requirements of SEPP 65 – which has raised the quality of development in NSW in comparison within other states – but the place-making around the development falls short of ‘density done well’. The roads outside the building might be jammed with traffic and hostile to pedestrians while public transport links are distant. Provision of schools and GPs often fall way short of demand. Indeed, the Greater Sydney Commission has been formed to achieve cross government coordination of the ‘placemaking’ elements of density. This historical lack of coordination is at the heart of legitimate community discontent about higher density.

Because we recognise this, the Committee, which has in membership diverse organisations from across the public, private and not for profit sectors, has decided to find the best examples of higher density development whether in Sydney, Australia or internationally, so as to learn best practice and how to achieve optimal results in our city. We accept a basic proposition: density can and must be done better. So we need to understand the conditions of success in great placemaking and higher density development to ensure Sydney learns from the best, flourishes as it grows – and becomes the high quality exemplar for other cities. Of course, our research will not be confined to buildings, as high quality density development also means we must plan for high quality public realm (the space between buildings) for best in class infrastructure provision and transport connectivity. This is about successful placemaking after all.

And as we believe that engagement with the public is vital if we are to attain the best development, our initiative will also be finding out what people opposed to dense development don't like about it but also what people already living in it do like about it. In taking this initiative, the Committee is confident that the skills and commitment exist locally to deliver 'density done well' in Sydney. The Committee itself has in membership world class companies working in the built environment whether they be planners, urban designers, architects, engineers, developers or builders. At the same time we have in membership, or are aligned with, public sector partners in local councils and state government agencies who are passionate about the quality of the city we are building and deeply experienced at achieving the best results in partnership with the private and not for profit sectors.

And of course, we have a Planning Minister who is deeply committed to ensuring not just that Sydneysiders have the homes they need but that in doing so we create great places. His goal is not just quantity but quality so that as the city grows so do the amenity, lifestyle, leisure and economic opportunities for

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all. He knows that good urban design and deep collaborations are what makes great cities. This is why he has played a formative role in creating a body with the very purpose of bringing government departments together to plan and deliver a Sydney with great placemaking and enhanced resilience at its heart. We believe the Greater Sydney Commission, which the Committee played its part in initiating, is a game changer in ensuring that we have the integrated land use and transport strategy approach to urban transformation and placemaking values without which a high quality and inclusive environment for a city of 8 million simply cannot be realised. And with the Federal Government now identifying the liveability and accessibility of Australian cities as central to their productivity in a knowledge economy – in which talent can choose to live and work where it likes and is concentrating in places where density is indeed being done well – we have the exciting prospect of all tiers of government agreeing on the centrality of great placemaking to the success of our cities going forward.

What is required now is to provide some key insights, tools and exemplars for turning these shared aspirations into transformation on the ground. The Committee's 'density done well' initiative is intended as a contribution to the toolkit and initiatives required.



Photo: City of Sydney

Clearly, a 20 page document cannot claim to identify all the conditions of success in achieving 'density done well'. It is intended to promote debate and provoke others who are similarly passionate and even more knowledgeable, to make their own contribution. To this end, the Paper forms part of a wider initiative and program which will involve a range of Committee members, stakeholders and indeed, we hope, the public, to bring their ideas to the table and how we make Sydney greater still – and a city in which the benefits of 'density done well' are shared by all.



Photo: LendLease



WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS DISCUSSION PAPER?

We have produced this paper as a conversation starter. It does not contain all, or indeed most, of the answers to this challenge. We intend this to be a launching point for further discussion, findings and reports. We will collect all our findings for publication following this process, but will continually update and reflect back to you our thinking as we go.

What this paper does is collect some initial thoughts on what good density looks like, and why density done well is vital for Sydney. We also consider

some of the reasons why density done well is resisted and often either opposed by community or blocked by public and private sector challenges. However, we have only scratched the surface and unlike a typical Committee for Sydney report, there is a distinct lack of recommendations or policy proposals. Some of those topics to be considered include:

- How the community considers density, and enhancing the public conversation
- What role planning controls play in achieving density done well
- How density done well can achieve lower development costs and/or higher sale prices
- How we can increase the viability of mixed-use development through collaboration and knowledge sharing

Much is still to be written, and this is simply the first foray into the conversation. This requires you, our members and stakeholders, to engage. To encourage this, we hope you will find some aspects of this paper provocative, others just common sense, and some 'not quite right'. That is as it should be – and we want to hear from you. What have we missed, what have we got wrong, and where is further detail required? Your reflections are central to our evolving work on density done well.

So write a report, record a podcast, send us an email or a furiously scrawled note – we want your thoughts!

WHY DENSITY MATTERS

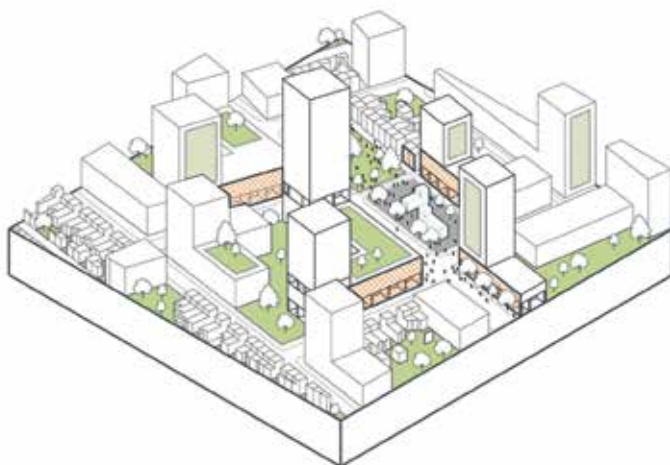
AMENITY INCREASES AS DENSITY INCREASES

Density done well means that we accommodate more people and homes in the space that we have, while at the same time improving liveability. As the images below show, the benefit of higher densities is that they allow us to create communities where more amenities of a more specialised nature are within close access to our homes. Higher densities can also sustain better transport connectivity and high quality public spaces.



LOW-MEDIUM DENSITY

- **Education:** A public school in the suburb
- **Health:** A Local GP
- **Transport:** Primarily car, with some bus access
- **Open space:** Primarily private
- **Employment:** Some main street retail and small business offices



MEDIUM DENSITY

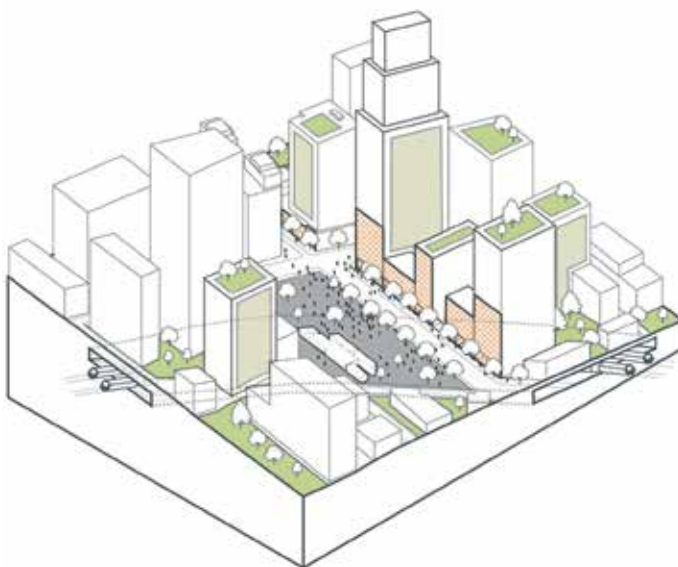
- **Education:** Multiple schools and childcare within the local area
- **Health:** Hospital locally accessible
- **Transport:** Bus or light rail and cycling, with some walking
- **Open space:** Mostly consolidated communal green space
- **Employment:** Ground floor commercial, co-working areas and retail

Sydney sits at a crossroads.

Over the next forty years we will have to accommodate the same number of people as we had to accommodate over the past two hundred plus years.

We took over two centuries to build the Sydney of four million people. It took two centuries to build all the trains, houses, harbour bridges and skyscrapers we have now. We have only forty years to build the equivalent again. Sydney will be a city of over eight million people in our lifetime – a city the size of London today. How we accommodate this growth is both a great challenge and a great opportunity. If we get it right we can preserve all the things we value about our city now, while still ensuring a decent home and job opportunities for all our fellow citizens. If we get it wrong we could ruin one of the world's great cities. One thing is for sure, we can't manage this growth in the same way we have in the past.

Until recently, we've been able to accommodate population growth by simply adding new suburbs next to existing urban areas. Pre-WW2, much of the development of Sydney was in compact, walkable and dense neighbourhoods, however from 1950 to 2000 Sydney spread horizontally. Suburbs rolled across the landscape to the foothills of the Blue Mountains, South beyond Macarthur and North West to Richmond. The result is a very low density city, with a sprawling, car-dependent, population. But we have reached the limit of how far we can sprawl.



HIGH DENSITY

- **Education:** Multiple schools and higher education within the local area
- **Health:** Specialist medical care locally accessible
- **Transport:** Integrated public transport with high cycling and walking use
- **Open space:** Communal, hard and soft with high quality amenities
- **Employment:** Business hub with global reach and supporting services

Source: Arup and Grimshaw Architects

Quite simply, we're out of new land to put houses on. If we are going to house our population and give them a place to work and play, we need to start using our finite land far more efficiently and effectively. In short we need to increase our city's density. We need to go up, because we can't keep going out. And that is what successive Governments have been pursuing over the last two decades. Identifying places within our existing urban areas which can accommodate new residential and commercial development so we can have people and jobs closer to one another.

This program is backed by evidence. Most academics from across a range of disciplines tell us that urban consolidation is a good thing. That the benefits of having a more compact city provides a number of public goods. Health experts tell us that areas with higher density hold healthier and more

active populations. Transport planners tell us that only high density neighbourhoods can support public transport and travel options like cycling and walking. Environmentalists will tell you that higher density neighbourhoods use less energy, produce less greenhouse gases and help protect our precious biodiversity. Economists tell us that high density neighbourhoods are more productive, creative, and efficient. Government bureaucrats will tell you that it's cheaper to provide the necessary services and infrastructure. That our tax dollars go further. Most importantly, behavioural psychologists tell us that we instinctively like high density, 'people' places. That we are essentially social animals and we crave places with lots of other people. That we like to see people, and be seen. And, of course, if you take a moment to think of examples of urban places you love, invariably they are dense and vibrant – great places are generally contingent on density to thrive.

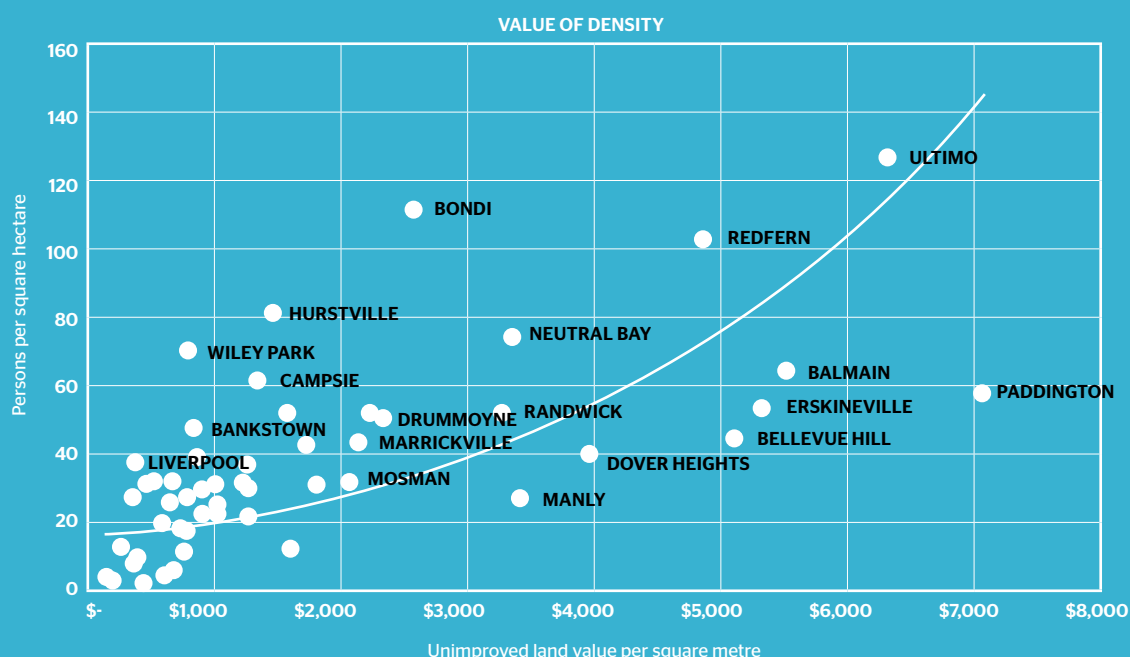
HIGH DENSITY-PRICE CORRELATION

Many instinctively believe that people don't want to live in higher density neighbourhoods and prefer the space and privacy of a large backyard. That dense neighbourhoods are too crowded and will result in ghettos, more crime and anti-social behaviour. That there is insufficient infrastructure to support the extra people and traffic and congestion will worsen. No doubt many people consciously think this is true, but unconsciously

they behave as if it's false. The price of land is a good marker of collective preference and reveals the places most people really prize. Places where people want to live and work have much higher land values than less desirable areas. Even a vague notion of Sydney's property prices will tell you that high density suburbs are more expensive than low density ones. Much more. The fact is, that when given the choice, increasing numbers

of Sydneysiders are choosing higher density living and working, over the alternative. People with choice are literally voting with their feet and their wallets for well-designed places which provide the economic, health and social benefits of walkable higher density. The challenge is to bring these benefits to more of Sydney – and in ways which reinforce the identity and uniqueness of places rather uniformity.

THERE IS A SIGNIFICANT TREND LINKING HIGHER DENSITY WITH HIGHER LAND VALUES IN SYDNEY



WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “DENSITY”?

Urban Density is a term that refers to the relationship between a physical area and the number of people who live in or make use of that area.

Densification often goes under a number of pseudonyms, (including Compact City, Intensification, Agglomeration, Re-urbanisation and Urban Consolidation) all of which refer to much the same thing.

It is often expressed as a ratio of population size or number of residential units' in a square kilometre. For example the Sydney Greater Metropolitan Area

has an average density of 390 persons per square kilometre. This compares with;

- Greater Vancouver at 802/km²
- Greater London at 5,510/km²
- Singapore at 7,697/km²

Yet it is often not just residential population that can determine urban density. Sydney CBD has just 7,683 residents per km² but over 610,000 workers and visitors to the area every day. Other infrastructure, such as airports and universities can also drive an agglomeration of people.

ALL TYPES OF DENSITY, DONE WELL

There is a common misconception of density - that proponents of density only mean high-rise towers, and that they intend to place them across the entirety of Sydney's 12,000+ km². To be clear: from the Committee for Sydney's perspective, density done well doesn't mean high density towers in every suburb across Sydney, although high density is appropriate in many locations of high public transport connectivity and good social infrastructure. In many cases, increased density may mean moving from detached homes to terraces, or terraces to walk up flats.

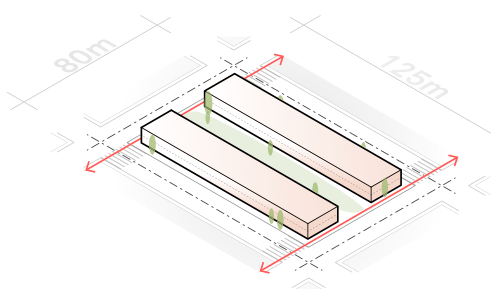
For many areas of Sydney, high density is neither desired nor required. However, we can achieve modest increases in density to better accommodate the population increases our city will experience over the coming decades. This need not be a painful process - where density is done well, the whole community benefits from improved places.

Similarly, there is a second misconception, especially in the community, that density is only important for inner-city in-fill areas.

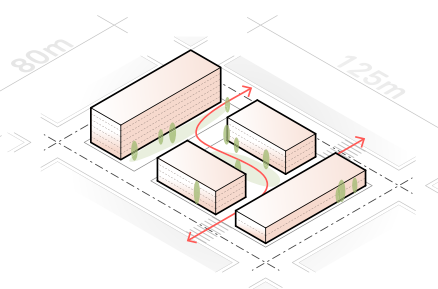
The reality is that density done well has implications for all locations and forms of development - from green-field to brown-field, from major site to single blocks.

There is a final misconception that must be addressed: that density and height produce poorer public spaces. That doesn't have to be the case. As the images below demonstrate, well-designed higher density configurations can deliver not only more dwellings but can also improve accessibility, permeability and open space across a site.

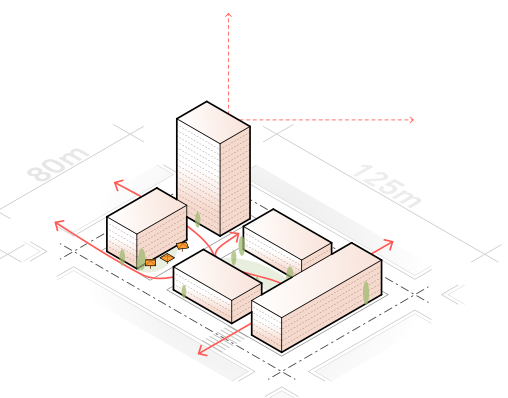
WITH THE RIGHT CONFIGURATION, INCREASED DENSITY CAN ALSO UNLOCK ADDITIONAL OPEN SPACE.



LOWER DENSITY
130 PEOPLE/HA - 50% OPEN SPACE



MEDIUM DENSITY
365 PEOPLE/HA - 55% OPEN SPACE



HIGH DENSITY
600 PEOPLE/HA - 58% OPEN SPACE

WHY IS IT SO OPPOSED?

If we are increasingly voting with our wallets to buy homes in higher density, better connected neighbourhoods and the experts say this is good for us, why then is there such community resistance to further consolidation? The answer to this is complex and varies from person to person. Some people just don't want change, any change. Some have a genuine apprehension it will impact on their lifestyle or property values. Some believe that local services and infrastructure will be overwhelmed by too many people – that traffic will get worse and trains more crowded. Some have a vague collective memory of the high density, disease ridden slums of a century ago. There are many, many reasons, some altruistic and some self-serving. But there is one common reason

cited by most people who oppose urban consolidation. That is that the places we have been building in recent years, the way we've been increasing density, haven't lived up to the great promises of the proponents. That we haven't been doing density well. People look at much of what has been built in recent years and don't like it. As the NSW Minister for Planning, the Hon. Rob Stokes MP, notes "communities want development to give as well as take. Where they don't feel that new development gives back anything to the community, it's perhaps not surprising that they oppose it."

We really need to do density better than we have been, and we can. This Discussion Paper seeks to challenge all of us to rethink the way urban consolidation

This Discussion Paper seeks to challenge all of us to rethink the way urban consolidation is being implemented.

is being implemented. To identify some of the things we may be doing wrong and how we can do it better. Over 2016 we will outline some examples, both locally and internationally, to demonstrate how urban density can deliver on its promise. We will also try and identify some changes to our planning and governance arrangements to ensure it does.

DENSITY DONE WELL

Before we do this, we must deal with one of the biggest barriers stopping us building better places and that is the myth that, when it comes to cities, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Too many people believe that our taste in buildings and places is subjective, much like our taste in food and drink. Some people like white wine, some like red. Some people have a sweet tooth, others don't. We believe we all have different tastes and therefore no one view or opinion is better than another. So if you don't like a new building or appreciate a particular architectural effort, that's just because you have different tastes to the builder or architect. No one, many believe, has the right to determine what is beautiful and what is ugly.

This seems logical, but is quite wrong. We do know a beautiful place from an ugly one, and we generally share the same view. Given the chance, we all take the opportunity to visit those handful of cities that are both beautiful and interesting. Cities like Paris, Venice, New York and Barcelona.

But you don't have to get on a plane to see beautiful or interesting places, we have plenty in Sydney. Think King Street, Newtown, The Spot at Randwick, the bustle of Haldon Street, Lakemba or the Manly Corso. We can all identify those places in Sydney that are beautiful and interesting. They have something in their DNA that makes them nice places to visit and hang out in. And we generally agree with each other on what places are interesting. That's why they're often full of tourists. But we all know parts of Sydney that aren't so lively and interesting. Places and neighbourhoods that aren't full of life and don't attract us (or anyone else) to visit. What is it that makes some parts of Sydney so interesting and other parts not? What attracts millions of tourists to Venice, Barcelona and New York?

There are some basic principles that underpin these beautiful places and rules on how to avoid ugly ones. These principles are not subjective, but objective. They are not just in the eye of the beholder, but are hard-wired into our psychology. Yet these rules are rarely

insisted upon by our Governments and almost never included in our planning codes. When we think of those places and neighbourhoods, whether in Sydney or overseas, that are truly interesting and exciting place to visit, they all have several key features in common. The obvious commonality is that they are high density, mixed-use neighbourhoods or cities. But it is more than just being high density that makes them great. We don't fly half way around the world, or even just across town, to see a crowd. These places do density well. They aren't just defined by the buildings in the precinct, so much as the spaces in-between buildings. They share with each other certain features in common which make them interesting, even beautiful. It is these commonalities that make them place great urban places. Yet it is these commonalities which we usually ignore in our planning policies.

COMMONALITY #1: STREETS NOT ROADS; PEOPLE NOT CARS

The first thing all these places have in common is that they were all built before the widespread use of the private automobile. Whether it's Glebe, Crows Nest or Potts Point; Barcelona, Chicago or New York, these places are inherently pedestrian friendly. Without the car, they had to be. It's almost as if we haven't built a truly beautiful city or neighbourhood in over a century. The Committee is not suggesting that everyone in Sydney will have to forgo owning a car or that we all have to get on our bikes. But we should rethink how much we emphasise accommodating the private vehicle, because the more we plan for cars, the more our public spaces will need to be given over to traffic. Our planners and developers spend a lot of time, effort and money on traffic studies, road widenings and parking codes. But perhaps we are trying to manage traffic by regulating the wrong things. Perhaps our efforts are undermining what we are trying to achieve: density done well.

When we look at these pedestrian friendly neighbourhoods we notice certain features about the way they planned the streets around the buildings. The places in between. The first thing is that the streets are almost universally in a grid pattern, with lots of intersections, close together. Street blocks are short

and there are few, if any, cul-de-sacs and dead ends. The street pattern is critically important because it is on the street where the life of these places is played out, not in the residential or commercial buildings which surround them. Having lots of intersections has a significant impact on how we choose to move through the urban landscape.

Intersections slow down vehicles, improving the amenity of the footpath. Having a grid pattern makes for an easily navigable place. You can walk around but not get too lost. It also provides lots of different directions in which you

can explore. The fine grain network of streets and lanes of Venice, with 577 intersections per square kilometre provides an accessible and pleasant environment for people to explore the city on foot; but impossible to explore by car. By contrast the large city blocks of Los Angeles, with only 58 intersections per square kilometre makes walking and cycling much less attractive. Sightseers in LA do so from the back of a bus. Taken to extreme is Irving California which has only 6 intersections per square kilometre making its residents and visitors completely car dependent.



Photo: Payce Consolidated

STREET MAPS AT THE SAME SCALE

Density of intersections improves the urban fabric of places we love to spend time in.



Venice, Italy
577 intersections/square km



Crows Nest, Sydney
144 intersections/square km



Winston Hills, Sydney
60 intersections/square km



Los Angeles, CA
58 intersections/square km



A shared street in Utrecht.

Photo: aseasyasridingabike.wordpress.com

We can see similar examples in Sydney where higher car dependency is linked to suburb design. Burwood and Strathfield have a grid street pattern, laid out in the 19th Century. You can walk from almost any part of the suburb to a train station or shops and you can take a variety of routes. Castle Hill's street pattern was laid out by developers in the 1960's. It has a spaghetti-like meandering of streets with lots of dead ends and cul-de-sacs. There is often only one or two ways to exit the neighbourhood and this is through a main road. Street blocks can be hundreds of metres long. It is almost impossible to walk or cycle around. In many streets in Castle Hill footpaths aren't even provided.

But, roads can be converted to streets. In Bondi Junction, a Complete Streets project reclaimed 6 Olympic swimming pools worth of vehicle pavement while creating 2.3kms of protected cycle lanes. Re-prioritisation of pedestrians over cars has created a more vibrant town centre.

How we currently manage car parking is also undermining our attempt to increase urban density. Most Local Councils prescribe a minimum amount of parking for each new development, usually expressed as a ratio of parking to bedrooms or parking to shoppers. We try to ensure we can accommodate the

expected demand rather than try and manage that demand. The result is often too much parking in places we are trying to pedestrianise. If we mandate that most everyone can have a dedicated car spot should we be surprised when they all have a car? Objectors to urban consolidation regularly point out that the traffic is worse after a neighbourhood has been densified, and too often they are right. However, this confuses causation. Removing car spots won't increase traffic – rather it will encourage residents to use alternatives forms of travel.

We are at least lucky in Sydney (unlike much of Melbourne or Chicago) that our soft sandstone makes it easier to ensure most parking is below ground and out of sight. However, not only does this come at significant cost, but it can sometimes undermine our efforts at placemaking. When we ask residents of new apartment buildings where they met their neighbours, the majority say they met them in the carpark underground. That suggests that people are entering and leaving their home by car and not walking out on to the street. One of the commonalities of places like Potts Point or Kirribilli, or New York or Paris is that residents, workers and visitors all have to enter and leave their residence,

shop or workplace by walking through the front door. This makes the streets both livelier and safer. Developers and planners always display montages of future developments with lively streets, full of lots of people coming and going. But when the buildings are built the new residents are not on the footpath, but in their car. They drive to and from their homes. One of the criticisms of urban consolidation is that the new residents don't mingle or contribute to the surrounding neighbourhood. That you only ever see them when they are driving away. Sadly there is some truth behind this.

COMMONALITY #1: STREETS, NOT ROADS – QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

- Are there exemplars of this that should be considered in achieving density done well, whether in Sydney or elsewhere?
- What policy changes are needed to achieve this?
- Typically local residents oppose reducing car parking in new developments because they believe it will cause parking/traffic issues. How do we address fears of congestion while encouraging streets, not roads?

COMMONALITY #2: FINE GRAIN AND MIXED-USE

When we think of those places in Sydney or internationally that are interesting or beautiful there's another feature they all have in common: there's lots to see, lots to do and a lot going on. They are busy places. These places aren't just dense with housing or dense with office buildings, there is a mixture of both. There are cafes and restaurants, businesses and workshops, as well as homes.

Most of these places are what planners called mixed use. They are not just dormitory suburbs or just office parks. People can live, work, and play in these precincts. You can shop, buy a coffee, get your car repaired and work in an office all in walking distance of where you live. There are a range of activities catering for a range of tastes and lifestyles. Sydney's Newtown provides a good example. There are several smash repairers, supermarkets, restaurants, four schools, a hospital, night clubs and bars, as well as lots of offices for lawyers and doctors and all within a short walking distance from each other. There is a lot going on and at all times of the day and night. Yet too often when we try and increase urban density we don't plan for a variety of uses. We simply amend the

local Plan from low density residential (R2 zone) to high density residential (R4 zone). The result is often just a high rise dormitory. Even when we do consider rezoning places to mixed-use (B4 zone) this often just results in the same residential flat buildings, but with a string of (often empty) shops and offices on the ground floor. Most people still have to go somewhere else to get a job or access a service. We promise people a lively and interesting neighbourhood but often we deliver a sterile and boring one.

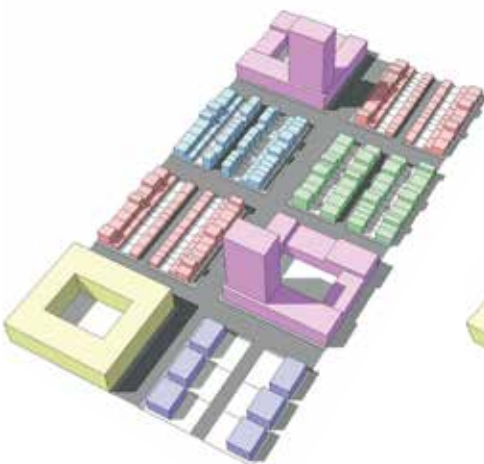
Another commonality of well-designed places is they have a "fine grain" to both the buildings and streetscape. This is more than just the tight street network. Shops and business face the street and have narrow frontages. There are lots of different buildings and lots of different things going on in them. More importantly you see these activities happening. They aren't hidden away behind the reflective glass of an office tower. You can see the chef preparing for the lunchtime rush, people conducting meetings in cafes, deliveries being made and children walking to school. Walking the street you pass a variety businesses and people doing different things. This makes walking the street interesting

and not a chore. The buildings are close together and dense with no empty spaces between them so there are no places where nothing is happening. More importantly, the buildings don't overwhelm the street. There is high density but it is not claustrophobic. We seem to find it difficult to impose a 'fine grain' on new in-fill development and it is because of this that the Committee believes we may need to revamp our planning and approvals system. That our system of land use zoning might not be supporting good development, but might be getting in the way.

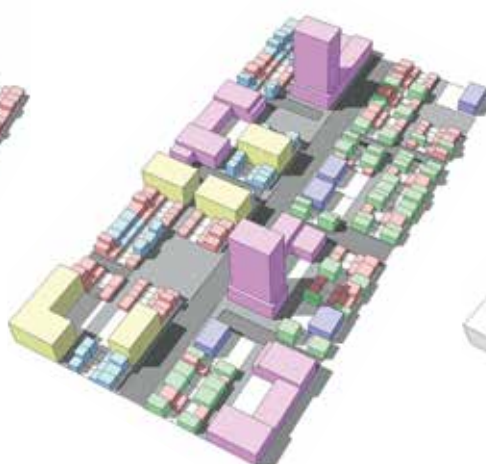
COMMONALITY #2: MIXED-USE AND FINE GRAIN – QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

- Where are we best achieving fine grain mixed use development, whether in Sydney or elsewhere?
- What policy changes are needed to encourage this?
- Mixed use and fine grain requires collaboration between practitioners across industries. How can we reduce the barriers and increase the benefits of achieving this?

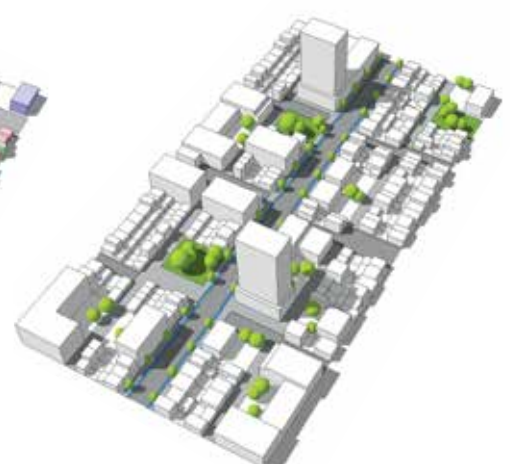
MIXING USES RESULTS IN BETTER PLACES - AND MORE AMENITY



Often we assume that in order to maximise the density of different uses, we have to build in large blocks. In this design, uses are separated, resulting in monotonous spaces, lacking in public realm and vibrancy.



However, it is entirely possible to mix the types of use within each block without any loss of density. In doing so, greater diversity and vibrancy can be achieved.



This method of fine grain, mixed-use spaces also increases the amount of public realm and walking/cycling options.

Source: RobertsDay

People can live, work, and play in these precincts. You can shop, buy a coffee, get your car repaired and work in an office all in walking distance of where you live.



COMMONALITY #3: ORDER AND VARIETY



Paris is well known for an ordered overall design, with variety achieved through individual buildings.

Photo: vistaandvoyages.wordpress.com

Hard wired into our psychology is a desire for both order and variety. This at first seems contradictory. Isn't too much order boring and isn't too much variety, chaotic? The great parts of Sydney, and cities around the world, get the balance right when it comes to these two human wants. In the video [How to Make an Attractive City](#), Alain de Botton argues beauty is vital to belonging. According to de Botton, cities require "order" if they are to be perceived as beautiful. Order is the reason locals and tourists love Paris and New York. However, excessive regularity can be "soul destroying, relentless and harsh." In other words, people love cities offering order and variety. Density done well is realising "beauty is not simply

in the eye of the beholder" but there exists an art and science for making great places.

Paris is a densely populated city but it has few tall buildings. Instead almost all the activities of the city are housed in buildings ranging from 6-8 storeys. Parisian planning codes prescribe strict height limits on buildings but then allow the developer the freedom to fill the building envelope with whatever type of building they chose and as densely as they can. Importantly, no one builder or developer is allowed to develop a whole city block. Instead there is a sub-division pattern to the land which requires different builders and different architects for each building. The result is

a comprehensible order, as prescribed by the planning codes, but a variety of buildings and architecture.

An example closer to home is the terraces of the inner city or the federation houses in suburbs like Haberfield. Think of a Paddington street, where each house is the same width and height, yet each has different fenestration, colour and ornamentation. Each has a different design, but all conform to the same building envelope. Some are Georgian some Victorian; some borrow Italianate fenestration and ornamentation. Furthermore they reflect each other across the street with a nice symmetry, but not a sameness. There is both variety and order, and we instinctively like it.



Balgowlah is a good Sydney example of order and variety

Photo: Stockland

Recent moves by the NSW Planning Minister mean we are starting to see the return of well designed, well located terrace housing in ‘the missing middle’, but more is to be done.

Our modern planning codes struggle to get the balance right between order and variety. We rarely think of the spaces in-between buildings. Good urban design shouldn’t be seen as a “nice to have”, it needs to be part of the DNA of the planning process. Instead we put all our effort into ensuring the buildings are well designed from an internal point of view. We focus on architectural features or the internal layout and design of the buildings. For example, we have detailed design guidelines (SEPP 65) for how each apartment should be built and orientated. We mandate a minimum requirements for solar access and private open space. That’s great for the occupants, but it often has unintended consequences for the neighbours and the neighbourhood. These requirements tend to lead towards taller and thinner buildings. Not all of which fit into the local context and often look out of place.

The Committee is not opposed to tall buildings but we recognise it is not the only way to achieve greater density.

Furthermore SEPP 65 often requires boundary setbacks to allow greater solar access for residents. These guidelines are important to ensure the places where people eat and sleep are nice, but we too often ignore what’s going on around the buildings; where living also happens. SEPP 65 was a revolution in Sydney planning and led to a major improvement in the quality and design of residential flat buildings in Sydney; but perhaps we need to develop another SEPP to guide the design of the spaces in between the buildings. Maybe we need a “placemaking” SEPP.

Critics of consolidation often say the buildings are out of character with the surrounding area. That they are a blot on the landscape or sit at odds with the existing neighbourhood. The Committee is seeking to extend the principles that lead to SEPP 65 to the public realm. We ask the question whether suburbs like Potts Point or Paddington could be built under our current planning codes.

We do, sometimes, try and inject good urban design into the DNA of the planning system. We have several examples where our planners have been able to impose a grid street pattern on new precincts, to insist on genuine mixed use development and include appropriate controls and heights in our masterplans. Yet when an entire area is developed with the same architect, the same building materials, the same tree plantings, the same finishes and even the same paint, the end result is a relentless sameness. There is too much order and not enough variety. Critics of urban consolidation often say the places we are building look like they are out of Lego land.

COMMONALITY #3: ORDER AND VARIETY – QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

- Do we need a new SEPP for ‘placemaking’?
- What other policy or practice changes are needed to achieve this?
- Can order and variety be simultaneously achieved immediately, or do they require long-term adaptability?

COMMONALITY # 4: CONNECTIVITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Great cities and places are well connected and well serviced by infrastructure. In many cases it is this connectivity that makes them such wonderful places. They have a variety of transport choices so you can get to and from them and also get around within them. They are well serviced by the sort of private infrastructure we need to live: cafes and restaurants, chemists and GP's, banks and supermarkets. But they are also supported by public infrastructure: trains and buses, hospitals and schools, well maintained parks and swept footpaths.

In Sydney, providing the private infrastructure needed for more dense neighbourhoods is relatively easy. The market will respond to the increase in local demand and the banks, supermarkets and chemists will follow. We also know that many of the jobs of the future will be located near their workforce. We just need to ensure that there is enough space for them to get established by insisting that the precinct is truly mixed use. Too much residential development will result in a dormitory suburb.

Yet it is providing the public infrastructure which is Sydney's greatest challenge. Even though we will be increasing our density over the next forty years we will still remain a relatively low density city. This makes our public transport expensive to provide as it is stretched across vast distances. Also because we have used our land so inefficiently in the past (i.e. we've wasted it) it is now very expensive. The State Government is finding it very difficult and expensive to accommodate the demand for schools in areas which are consolidating. The new school in Ultimo might well be the most expensive one ever built in

Australia, mainly because of the cost of land. Similarly, when we try to augment our transport systems we often have to do so through expensive tunnelling because going above ground is no longer an option in many parts of the city. New funding mechanisms like value capture may provide some relief, but we are going to have to accept that we are all going to have to pay more to provide the public infrastructure we need to make our city function.

Critics of urban consolidation regularly cite the lack of infrastructure as a reason for opposing further consolidation. That we are putting in the people or the businesses but then not supporting them with transport or services and the result is traffic and congestion. This is their most strident and insistent claim, but is it also where they are on the weakest ground. This argument is more

correct when talking about urban sprawl. It is much harder and more expensive to service a dispersed population. Nevertheless, the Committee recognises that we are not spending enough on public infrastructure and we will need to rectify this.

COMMONALITY #4: CONNECTIVITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE - QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

- What role does infrastructure play in encouraging and leading development, as opposed to following population growth?
- What advantages does density offer in the provision of infrastructure, either through lower costs or improved options?
- How does density encourage the agglomeration of knowledge jobs around hubs?



Photo: Parramatta City Council

COMMONALITY #5: DIVERSITY OF PEOPLE AND EXPERIENCES



Vivid Sydney



Photo: Stockland

The final commonality great cities and places have is that they are not monocultures. There are a lot of things going on and there are a lot of different people doing different things. They have lots of housing, but are not just dormitory suburbs where people sleep but don't work or play. They are employment centres, but not just office parks, full of workers during the day and ghost towns at night. They have lots of entertainment and things to do, not only when the game is on or the show is in town, but all the time and every day. Great cities and places somehow manage to achieve all three of these in one. You can work, rest and play.

But not only do they have a mixture of things happening, they combine this with a mixture of people. They have places for the elderly, but are not retirement villages. They are home to people from different socio-economic statuses and backgrounds, but are neither ghettos nor enclaves. They have affordable homes suitable for people at all stages of life. There are families with kids, single households, shared houses and more.

Think of Surry Hills. While it has a relatively high residential density, 11,500 per square kilometre, much of the suburb has retained office accommodation providing work for designers and start-ups as well as Government Departments. The non-residential buildings provide a diversity of office spaces to accommodate different sized companies and industries, from the large floor plates for multi nationals and small, shared offices for small businesses and start-ups. There are over 4,000 people working there on any given day. So great is the demand for more office space that it is not uncommon now for million dollar terraces to be converted for office space for architects or galleries for artists. It also has a late night economy providing some of Sydney's finest restaurants, bars and live music venues. One quarter of the residential housing stock is owned by Government, providing social housing for those most in need. The private housing stock also comes in many shapes and sizes. There are large four and five bedroom terraces as well as apartments ranging from three bedders, to studios and bed sits. There are also boarding houses, student accommodation and backpacker hostels. There really is a place for everyone.

Yet our planning codes make places like Surry Hills difficult. Too often our zoning system tries to separate land uses, with places set aside for residential, others as entertainment precincts, and still others for employment uses. In some cases this is sensible, we don't want people living next to an oil refinery and airports need buffers. Yet when we seek to increase urban density, too often we only plan for one predominant use; high-rise dormitories or office buildings. The critics of urban consolidation often state that the places we are building are sterile and boring. They're too often right. We can do better than this.

COMMONALITY #5: DIVERSITY OF PEOPLE AND EXPERIENCES - QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

- Can we make good, dense places while maintaining affordability for all?
- How can we best encourage a multitude of uses across day and night for places?
- Can achieving these outcomes also deliver financial benefit to developers and improvements for existing residents?

CALL TO ACTION: GREAT CITIES DON'T HAPPEN BY CHANCE

The critics of urban consolidation and densification are growing louder and gaining more attention and influence. The Committee recognises that some of their claims are, at least partially, grounded in truth. However the critics rarely offer any constructive solutions or alternative ideas for how we can manage the issues Sydney will have to address over the coming decades. Continuing urban sprawl is not an option. Doing nothing is not an option. For all the faults in the way we have been trying to increase our urban density, it is still the best solution to housing our population growth. The Committee believes that even if our population wasn't growing we would still be supporting greater urban density. We just have to ensure we do it better.

It is somewhat surprising that we have built so few places over the past century (in Sydney, or anywhere else) that are

truly beautiful or interesting. In the past century we have made enormous advances in science and technology, we are wealthier and healthier than ever before, we are more educated and organised, yet we seem to be unable to replicate the grand neighbourhoods and precincts which make some cities truly great. It's as if we've forgotten something.

Over the next few months the Committee will be seeking to identify what it is we've forgotten. Why it is that with our wealth of expertise and talent we are not building places and neighbourhoods that live up to the standards of an earlier era. We'll be asking questions about whether we are getting the planning right. Whether our zoning prescriptions, development standards and controls, are even capable of delivering density done well. In doing this we are asking our

citizens and governments to join in a genuine dialogue about how to make Sydney better.

This is because great places are collaborations – they don't happen by chance. Whether it's government, the private sector and communities or planners, transport specialists and social entrepreneurs – great places need everyone contributing to their creation and evolution.

We call on our members, from all walks of life to get involved. This is too big a topic to cover in a single document, or indeed to leave simply to the written word. We will be visiting places of excellent density, hearing from experts, producing policy on specific aspects of density and building a dialogue on how we make Sydney greater still – and a city in which the benefits of density done well are shared by all.



Sydney Festival Summer Sounds in the Domain 2014. Photo: Daniel Boud

THE COMMITTEE FOR SYDNEY'S CALL TO ACTION

We invite you to get involved. Here are a selection of the questions we are considering – how are you and your organisation responding to these challenges?

- What does density done well look like? How can we measure it?
- Are you involved in a project that is doing density well?
- What policy changes are needed to achieve density done well?
- Do the existing governance structures of the city encourage density done well? What needs to change?
- How do we get local communities to demand density done well, rather than opposing all density?

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Stockland

“The Committee for
Sydney is a fantastic body
adding to public debate
in the city. It is exactly the
organisation it needs to
be – engaged, constructive
and challenging.”

THE HON. MIKE BAIRD MP, NSW PREMIER

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