



Australian
Institute of
Architects

Better Placed

**Submission to the Office of the
Government Architect NSW**

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SUBMISSION BY

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PURPOSE

This submission is made by the NSW Chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects (the Institute) to the Office of the Government Architect NSW in response to the draft architecture and design policy, *Better Placed*.

At the time of the submission the office bearers of the NSW Chapter are:

Shaun Carter (President), Joe Agius (Immediate Past-President), Sarah Aldridge, Melonie Bayl-Smith, Callantha Brigham, Jacqui Connor, Steven Donaghey, Ashley Dunn, Monica Edwards, Chris Jenkins, Peter Kemp, Alex Kibble, Phuong Le, Kathlyn Loseby, Andrew Nimmo, Howard Smith, Peter Smith.

The Office Manager of the NSW Chapter is Joshua Morrin. This paper was prepared by Murray Brown (Policy Advisor) and the Chapter's Built Environment Committee for Chapter Council.

INFORMATION

Who is making this submission?

- The Australian Institute of Architects (the Institute) is an independent voluntary subscription-based member organization with approximately 11,553 members who are bound by a Code of Conduct and disciplinary procedures.
- The Institute, incorporated in 1929, is one of the 96 member associations of the International Union of Architects (UIA) and is represented on the International Practice Commission.
- The Institute's New South Wales Chapter has 3,348 members, of which 1,951 are registrable architect members – representing 43% of all registered architects in NSW.

Where does the Institute rank as a professional association?

- At 11,553 members, the RIAA represents the largest group of non-engineer design professionals in Australia.
- Other related organisations by membership size include: The Design Institute of Australia (DIA) - 1,500 members; the Building Designers Association of Australia (BDAA) - 2,200 members; the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) - 1,435 members; and the Australian Academy of Design (AAD) - 150 members.



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NOTE: This submission was prepared by the NSW Chapter Built Environment Committee with the involvement of representatives from AILA, PIA and the City of Sydney.

A. GENERAL COMMENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

The professional design associations welcome the NSW Government's intention to deliver a high level over-arching design excellence policy.

Good design is essential in shaping the built environment that everyone lives in. The audience for such a policy is therefore potentially very broad. The nature of the audience and how it is to be used needs to be clearly spelt out. The policy should be used by:

- policy makers, who determine the development process to a large extent;
- those that actually design; and
- community activists and organisations, who should advocate for a better built environment from a strong knowledge base.

The preamble is too long. It should set the scene succinctly and clearly explain why a design excellence policy is needed.

The draft document is repetitive and confusing, and at times strays into the area of strategic planning. References to design-led planning need to be carefully thought through. What is actually proposed? What is the relationship between strategic planning as set out in the Greater Sydney Commission's district plans and the more detailed plans that will shape the built environment?

2. THE NEED FOR AN ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN POLICY

A key need for this document is that global cities like Sydney are growing rapidly and the pressures of economic development can overwhelm the principles set out in this document. The inherent competition between economics, design and community concern requires a governance framework to achieve a balance between them. There will always be strong competing interests that the policy must acknowledge and examine.

There may need to be an open and transparent discussion of these competing pressures, as the built environment in global cities is a 'contest' between them. The New York City Plan openly acknowledges this reality. Paul Ham, author of '1914', speaks about the problem of ignoring the forces that really drive world affairs.

Vulnerable elements of the built environment, such as heritage and the grain of urban fabric, will be increasingly challenged by urban renewal. This policy is essential to deliver a better balance between old and new.

This is why Principle One is critical. Achieving urban development that is contextual, local, and 'of its place' is a serious and difficult challenge. Major urban renewal projects are of such a scale that in many situations the local context is so transformed and overwhelmed that achieving 'of its place' is not possible.

3. PEOPLE AND PLACES

Design should improve the built environment for the public good. This should be an overarching consideration when GANSW evaluates proposals against the design principles.

'Making people's lives better' should be a theme running through the document.

The Minister's statement is very good, as it clearly links people and the public good to the public realm. More of this lay person's language would strengthen the narrative of the document.

Better Places for People would be a better title, as that is what the policy aims to deliver.

4. THE CASE FOR DESIGN EXCELLENCE

The document should start with two succinct statements:

- a definition of good design and design excellence; and
- the value of design (with reference to a survey of community attitudes similar to the survey undertaken by TfNSW)

The document should set out a clear one-page summary of the policy in the form of a process, which may have sub-variants for the different categories – cities, buildings, public domain and infrastructure.

The process should generally reflect the National Urban Design Protocol process and cover:

- who should be involved and how;
- the steps – research, analysis, options, assessment (against criteria), iterations, development, documentation, post evaluation and publication;
- criteria (or principles); and
- mandatory outcomes

The mandatory outcomes should be similarly succinctly addressed.

The policy should touch on design culture, including: discussion, education, learning and public review.

The design process needs to be explained - how it integrates, imagines, etc. – and how design excellence improves enjoyment of place. The document needs to explain how people's lives are made better by good design.

It also needs to make the case that poor design equals poor amenity – and in many aspects, such as our physical, social and emotional response to places.

Design should not be described as a 'standalone' process. It needs to be strongly engaged if it's to be successful.

5. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POLICY

The document appears to be a business case for the GANSW. It will be more effective practically and politically if the document is an over-arching built environment design policy produced by the NSW Government.

It needs to clearly assign the leadership role in the delivery of the policy to GANSW, while acknowledging the need for all agencies to play their part in delivering places that make people's lives better.

A key objective of the policy should be the coordination and stronger alignment of the varying government agencies with regards to built environment outcomes, while acknowledging that these outcomes are not the primary objective of most agencies, which have other priorities.

The Institute notes that the current misalignment of departmental priorities is creating poor physical outcomes that fail to achieve many of the seven principles outlined in this document.

The comments in the Government Architect's foreword on integrating agencies are correct. That is why the document needs to present a clearer process for doing this, as it's a key issue.

It would be good if the GANSW was required to review all government agency briefs for built environment (or related) projects.

The Institute considers that GANSW should also have a special role in those development approval processes that lack the normal community consultation process, such as unsolicited proposals and State significant development. Ideally, GANSW's assessment of these proposals against the design principles should be made public.

It would be good if there was a more explicit link to the Greater Sydney Commission's district plans that will guide local environmental plans. Key initiatives like the green grid are now embedded in the Metro Strategy. This document should do the same.

6. DOCUMENT LAYOUT AND DESIGN

The graphics don't help to convey the message of the policy. There are no captions explaining why the images in the document have been selected. It is critical that a design excellence policy is communicated with compelling and informative images.

Many images in the draft are of low-rise heritage buildings. This seems not to address the Minister's words about growing Sydney and the opportunity for design excellence to deal with such issues. There are many good higher density examples that can be used.

Given this is a state-wide document, illustrations of regional examples should also be included.

The policy (which could be appended to the revised version of this document) should aim for the clarity and brevity of the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter (10 pages).

The document needs to more clearly cover the basic building blocks of urban areas - streets, parks, buildings and infrastructure - and not focus on concerns that will be of fleeting rather than future interest.

B. ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

1. The principles reflect a thorough survey of international best practice in design policy - are the principles articulated such that they will be effective?

A It is unclear how the principles will be used to assess a project – which should be the whole point of articulating them.

One test for their efficacy is agreement through broad community discussion.

The principles should be succinctly and clearly defined.

The **first principle** needs to convey understanding of the context of the built environment within the natural environment.

The document needs to address the landscape as the natural and cultural context in which we live and one of the principal influencers of how the built environment should be designed.

Towns and cities should be designed as both places in the landscape and places that incorporate green infrastructure.

There is a tendency in NSW to continually erode the boundary between town and country that the policy needs to be helpful in addressing.

It is debatable whether 'The urban environment is where most of us live, work and recreate' (p 56). Apart from the Sydney CBD, Potts Point, Pyrmont, North Sydney CBD and similar precincts, most of the NSW built environment is suburban in character.

There needs to be statutory protection of built and natural places if we are to 'Reflect and build on existing built, landscape and cultural values'.

Too many of the principles lack clarity because they contain more than one idea. For example, in the second principle, 'sustainable, efficient and durable' are all different ideas that need to be addressed in different ways.

Achieving a healthy community needs to be the over-riding goal of the **fourth principle**.

The principles should also address aesthetics more clearly.

Should there be a principle about giving economics, design, and stakeholder input equal weight? Otherwise the only non-built environment principle here is No 6 – value creating and cost effective. There should be some discussion of what “value” means or this could be misinterpreted.

2. The preface refers to the delivery of the principles outlined in the document.

Are there any additional approaches that you think would be effective?
Should these additional approaches be part of the document?
What mechanisms would make it easier for professional associations to be engaged in delivering the principles?

A The document fails to 'provide a framework for examining places and reviewing proposals from a design perspective' (p 20).

Although the design process is generic across different scales, the inputs will be different in each case.

3. There are three scales of opportunity articulated in the document - cities and towns, public realm, and buildings.

Do these scales work effectively for the purpose of the document?
Will this outline of scales set the scene appropriately for further work?

A They are themes, not scales. 'Site', 'street', 'precinct', 'suburb', 'district', 'town' and 'city' are scales.

'Public realm' is a design and planning factor that can be considered at each of these scales.

The 'scales of opportunity' need to relate to other design disciplines as well as architecture.

Infrastructure needs to be a key consideration.

4. As part of the next steps the GANSW will be building an evidence base of case studies.

Can you provide any case studies or project information that demonstrates the benefit of applying design excellence to support the policy and help to develop a design-led planning methodology? GANSW is particularly interested in how design excellence and good design adds to the value of a project or overcomes issues such as community resistance to growth etc.

A Community attitudes tested at various times could provide the most valuable evidence base to support the policy.

Towns, cities and precincts evolve over time. The Goods Line is a very promising start to a project that does not yet have a clear destination at its western end to balance Central in the east.

Similarly, while Central Park has won public approval as the result of good master planning, what will be the public reaction when all the buildings have been completed?

Pyrmont demonstrates the results of good and bad approaches. Pirrama Park is a well resolved public realm asset, but Jacksons Landing does not work well.

Case studies will help to define the scales that should be addressed by the policy.

It is recommended that relevant projects that have received design awards from the Institute, PIA, and AILA over the past 10 years should be examined. These projects represent work that has been judged to have achieved design excellence by architects, planners and landscape architects – city, public realm and building as per the themes noted above in point 3.

There are also industry awards that can be reviewed

What are the long-term effects of bad design? There needs to be work in this area to support the case for design excellence.

There is a valid argument that the public realm should increase in size as residential density increases. How should this be quantified? Is it a matter of a simple formula, or do the individual qualities of different precincts need to be taken into account?

5. Can you provide any case studies or project information that would contribute to an overview of the current context and demonstrate issues that this document could help to resolve?

A The green grid is a good example of a concept that covers a range of scales and addresses several issues requiring co-operation between government agencies and community organisations. It also raises questions of definition: what is the meaning of 'green infrastructure', 'park' or 'open space'?

6. Future focus: how can GANSW work collaboratively with the associations in the development of policy & guides / implementing strategy / promoting design excellence?

A A process of strong engagement with the associations will deliver a more clear and concise policy. This in itself will help to determine the next steps. The practical guidelines flowing from the policy that will demonstrate how the principles inform design actions are likely to attract more engagement from the community.