
INSTITUTIONALISING DESIGN EXCELLENCE IN CENTRAL SYDNEY 1988-2000

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High-quality architectural and urban design are now widely regarded as key contributors to the competitive advantage of global cities. Sydney, Australia is no exception. Since 2000 'design excellence' has become a central mantra applied to improve design quality. Focusing on the jurisdiction of Sydney City Council, this paper identifies an assemblage of three threads from which design excellence (and in particular mandatory competitive design processes) emerged as a planning objective in the late 20th century. Deep into the post-war period, local government planning processes were still enmeshed in a statutory land use planning system based on a traditional town and country planning paradigm. From the late 1980s these processes were challenged by newer understandings of the 'design dividend' rewarding competitive global cities within an emerging neo-liberal rubric. From 2000 Sydney CBD's touchstone of design excellence has required all major developments on privately-owned sites to undergo a competitive design process. This mandatory step in development approval procedures is unique for an Australian local authority if not globally. By unpacking the evolution of this modern competitive design-injected planning process, we gain better historic insights into localised governance responses and their consequences in the context of the neo-liberal global city.

Keywords

design excellence, design competitions, City of Sydney

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INTRODUCTION

High-quality design is now widely regarded as a key contributor to the competitive advantage of global cities. During the last quarter of the 20th century, different cities responded in various ways to the challenges and opportunities presented by globalisation, but with familiar themes in many jurisdictions centred on urban renewal, sustainability, infrastructure provision, enhancing the public realm, cutting red tape in planning processes, and urban design. ‘Design excellence’ in the urban context became established as one guiding philosophy in Europe and North America through the 1980s.¹ By the late 1980s and early 1990s, design excellence provisions were finding their way into various city policy documents.²

The experience of the City of Sydney, Australia records some parallels to this global narrative. While its awakening to the importance of quality design and linking it to the planning system was slow and incremental, by the turn of this century an ideology of ‘design excellence’ had taken hold and has helped steer the formal development approval system to the present day. The crucial innovation introduced through formal amendments to the City’s statutory Local Environmental Plan and guiding Development Control Plan in 2000 was mandating competitive design processes with the aim of securing high-quality design outcomes. While a broader receptiveness to quality design of the public realm had been established by this time, the novelty in the design excellence provisions was their application to both public and private projects.

Punter³ has intensively documented an evolution in central Sydney from ‘laissez faire’ through ‘discretionary’ to ‘regulatory’ implementation of local planning controls. He identified five periods from the mid-1940s to explain the development of planning and design protocols leading up to the post-2000 pursuit of design excellence.⁴ Our paper canvasses similar ground but concentrates on the institutionalisation of competitive design processes. In so doing we range more widely in acknowledging driving and contextual forces as well as focus more explicitly on the genesis of the Council’s competitive policy, seeking to reconstruct the cultures of design and governance in the lead-up to the institutionalization of new reforms. We deconstruct a complex environment to identify three main converging threads from which design excellence emerged as a planning objective: namely, a more enlightened climate encouraging quality design, powerful exemplars of traditional architectural and precinct-based competitions in leveraging good design outcomes, and the incremental overhauling of the City’s planning arrangements and philosophy by a more progressive civic leadership. The paper draws on secondary sources (including policy documents, Council minutes, professional body publications, and media articles), as well as interviews with key protagonists who have directly observed and/or helped shape the design discourse in central Sydney during the past 30 years.

Our starting point of 1988 is somewhat arbitrary but is intended to capture the wider awareness of city design that coincided with celebrations of the bicentennial of European settlement in that year; thereafter a more formal and coordinated engagement with design issues and quality emerged. The later years of the 20th century represent a transformative period for the City of Sydney in quantitative and qualitative terms. In a reversal of a decades-long declining trend, the population of central Sydney grew significantly from only about 7,000 in 1991 to nearly 26,000 in 2000 (an average annual growth of 15%).⁵ From 1991 to 2001, there was a 28% growth in total floor space, 27% growth in employment and 12% growth in number of business establishments.⁶ The latter half of this period was also a time of renewed investment; in 1995 only 5% of the City Council’s budget was dedicated to capital works; this figure had grown to 62%⁷ for a total spend of \$115m in 1998-99.⁸ The deregulation of the Australian dollar in 1983 was an important macro-economic catalyst which lay behind this surge in economic activity and its triggering of a more internationalised urban economy. From the 1980s central Sydney thus began to be decisively transformed from a traditional 9-5 CBD into a dynamic mixed-use precinct with a rising global profile. It was fast becoming ‘the destination rather than the departure point’ with ‘an emerging pride ... prompting a wider examination of the look and feel of the city’.⁹

A MORE ENLIGHTENED CLIMATE VALUING DESIGN

The first element we identify as contributing to the emergence of design excellence as a key principle of Central Sydney planning was a more enlightened cultural climate which increasingly encouraged quality urban design through investment, advocacy, discussion and critique. This cultural shift involved all levels of government, as well as professional and academic groups.

At the national level, there were both financial and research investments made in improving the state of Australian cities. In terms of the former, the Federal Government committed \$816m in funding through the Building Better Cities program for urban development projects to be distributed amongst the states during 1991-1996.¹⁰ While better design was not a primary program objective, it emerged as an important dimension of many funded projects through their focus on exploring greater choices of housing style and rehabilitating degraded brownfield sites, and through the partnerships forged between planners and architects, the public and the private sector. The 1993-94 Urban Design Taskforce launched by then-Prime Minister Paul Keating was a crucial early example of the evolving climate around urban design and design excellence. The Taskforce examined 'ways in which the day-to-day working, residential and recreational environment of Australians might be enhanced by more thoughtful attention to urban design'.¹¹ The Taskforce comprised prominent architects, planners, councillors, public servants, and academics from across Australia. Its final report concluded that with 'a high level of concern about the quality of Australia's urban areas', fundamental changes were necessary to advance urban design.¹² Wide-ranging recommendations included a national review of urban design, design-oriented strategic plans for city centres, improvements in design-based education and training, and a national prize for urban design. The report tacitly employed the concept of design excellence, though it was not defined at this time; rather, the Taskforce identified a role for the Federal Government to 'lead in identifying by example, demonstration and analysis what constitutes excellence in urban design'.¹³ Also of note was its endorsement of design competitions based mainly on European experience in delivering a raft of positive outcomes including economic benefits, new and innovative thinking, post-professional education, creating opportunities for early career designers and greater public awareness.

The State Government of New South Wales was also increasingly implicated in urban design matters from the 1960s through the controversial attempt to redevelop the historic Rocks precinct in the city and onto the celebration of the bicentenary of European settlement in 1988. This latter celebration's showpiece was the transformation of Darling Harbour from maritime industrial and railway precinct into an archetypal waterfront revitalisation quarter. Featuring a James Rouse-styled festival marketplace, museums, and convention and exhibition centres, it received several architectural and design awards, but continues to evolve and be redeveloped in tune with changing times and tastes. There were also complementary public realm investments in 1988 in Macquarie Street, a major parliamentary and state government precinct, and Circular Quay, the historic maritime gateway to the city and site of the first European colonisation of Australia.¹⁴

Extending this supportive cultural milieu into the 1990s was the successful bid and preparation for the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, effectively a joint venture between the federal and state governments, and the private sector. Here was a classic 'hallmark' event secured with the express purpose of positively projecting both Australia and Sydney to a global audience (and especially prospective investors and tourists) of millions.¹⁵ The successful environmental remediation of a large site on the Parramatta River in the middle-ring suburb of Homebush commencing less than a decade after the Brundtland Commission's landmark report helped sell the benefits of sustainable development. The development of a cluster of new venues at what became Sydney Olympic Park also generated a remarkable slate of opportunities for leading and up-and-coming architects that conveyed natural synergies between globalism, quality architecture, and sustainable design.¹⁶

Around the country, built environment professionals and community groups engaged increasingly in causes and controversies surrounding good urban design, architecture and conservation practice from the 1960s. In Sydney the Civic Design Society played a vital role in brokering public discussion about issues of urban regeneration, heritage conservation, reclaiming streets from motor vehicles, and bicycle transport into the early 1980s.¹⁷ By then there were many more environmental and heritage bodies competing for the ear of government and the wider community. In design circles, establishment of the Architecture and Design Panel of the Australia Council in 1980 signified a national interest in pursuit of design excellence across architectural, interior, industrial and civic design. Another body, the Urban Design Forum, has proven an effective advocacy and information network since formation in Melbourne in 1986.¹⁸ The traditional professional institutes became more interested in city design and urbanism. The pages of the journal of the NSW Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA, later AIA), *Architecture Bulletin*, capture an emergent interest in urban design from the late 1980s. The Institute's growing role as a commentator on public planning and policy culminated in the 1998 decision to develop an urban design policy.¹⁹ Sydney University also initiated one of the first tertiary degrees in urban design in the late 1980s.

Hence, during the 1980s and 1990s urban design in particular became an important consideration at every level of government and also for non-government institutions. For some observers, design had become a 'fetish' that was compromising the traditional redistributive goals of planning.²⁰ But more than aesthetics was at stake, and driven by international, national and local initiatives and events, design discourse and debate lifted appreciably through the 1990s and became embedded in advancing sustainable development. Despite much of this unfolding outside the immediate jurisdiction of the Sydney City Council, there would be important policy implications for Central Sydney.

GROWING PRACTICE OF DESIGN COMPETITIONS

Competitions 'in all their various forms, are a very useful way to investigate alternative approaches and new possibilities in architecture and design.'²¹ Here was a second major historical thread to point the way forward. In Sydney, the tradition of competitions for major public buildings stretches back to the early nineteenth century.²² In the fifty years following the First World War, there were some two dozen noteworthy competitions for public and private projects. The most famous of these was for the Sydney Opera House (1956-57). Thereafter to 1980, although a time of considerable private commercial investment in Central Sydney, little of this was delivered via competitive processes. In the early to mid-1980s, design competitions picked up again, often in the form of 'ideas competitions' and frequently driven by the RAIA. The RAIA's ideas competitions involved key locations such as Circular Quay and its Overseas Passenger Terminal (both organised in 1983), the Capitol Theatre (1985), Taylor Square (1987) and Railway Square (1988). Given that design competitions were historically the cultural and professional domain of architects, it should not be surprising that the peak professional body was a driving force.

The 1990s saw a relative explosion of competitions. The RAIA continued its involvement, sponsoring competitions for Woolloomooloo and its Finger Wharf (1991) and Circular Quay (1995). Inner-city councils became involved. There were several council-run competitions for swimming pools – two at North Sydney Pool in 1995 and 1997. South Sydney Council ran a 'visions' competition for the Green Square urban renewal zone in 1995-97. Although competitions were usually organised by the RAIA and local government bodies, other entities were also involved from time to time. For example, the Olympic organising committee ran competitions in 1991 for the velodrome and athlete's village to include in the bid documentation and the Museum of Contemporary Art also ran two competitions for an expansion of its facilities.

While rarer, there were also private sector design competitions from the late 1980s that anticipate the Council mandated processes after 2000. An early example was the competition for the First Government House site in 1989, which ultimately yielded the Governor Phillip Tower and the Museum of Sydney. Nearly a decade later

(1997-98), a competition by private developer Meriton oversaw one of the first major developments at the ACI site in Green Square. Meriton again showed its interest in 2000 with the competitions to finally fill in Sydney's "most famous hole in the ground" at its World Square site.²³ The City Council reportedly insisted on a design competition in this case given the sensitivity and scale of the site.²⁴

Two observations can be made of trends in the 1980s-90s. First, as the movement towards using ideas or design competitions for key public and private projects gained in popularity, and particularly in central Sydney, more architects were given the chance to compete. Sydney's architectural fraternity gained more experience with the process both inside and outside the RAlA. Second, some recurrent issues began to emerge. There were cancelled competitions and scrapped winning designs along with missed opportunities that could have been delivered through competitive processes. There was dissatisfaction amongst architects with these failures, as well as perceptions of low-quality entries to some competitions and perceived breaches of rules and ethics by competition organisers. The upshot was not to scrap competitions, but rather to insist on better organisation and terms of reference.

Despite the leap forward driven in part by *ad hoc* competitive projects, this period was not exempt from mediocre and look-alike architecture. On the one hand, there were rumblings largely kept from public gaze that the design of major central city office buildings was still largely the domain of a relatively select group of big architectural firms ensconced in comfortable working relationships with developers with a consequent brake on genuine innovation. On the other hand, there emerged a more public critique of the standard of design with residential development (especially multi-unit dwellings) an area of particular concern. Regis Towers, for instance, was recognised as a defective and potentially illegal example of overbuilt and poor-quality CBD housing.²⁵ Sparked in part by investigative journalism into the matter and a parliamentary inquiry, a state-wide policy setting standards for multi-unit dwellings was established in 2002. This policy (SEPP65) was just one of an array of plans and policies that emerged from this *fin-de-siecle* period to advance quality design.

EVOLVING PLANNING AND DESIGN REGULATION BY THE SYDNEY CITY COUNCIL

From the 1970s statutory and strategic planning initiatives sought to give the Sydney City Council greater control and discretion over urban development in the CBD, but these dual legal and visionary strands were not effectively aligned until the mid-1990s. By that time the notion of design excellence was established and set to be operationalised, although the primary drivers remained local issues such as enhancing design innovation, diversifying architectural commissions, promoting mixed land uses, and creating a 24/7 city life, rather than advancing the cause of global competitiveness *per se*.

In the 1970s, local government planning processes in Sydney's CBD were still enmeshed in a post-war statutory land use planning system predicated on a traditional town and country planning-based zoning scheme ill-equipped to respond to the nuances and opportunities of innovative design. In 1971 the State Government perversely gazetted (made legal) a longstanding draft planning scheme just ahead of the Council's long awaited new strategic plan, meaning that for some years thereafter there was a lack of alignment between policy and implementation. The State Government's new *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* emerged as the outcome of an animated debate and consultation centred on widening the definition of 'environment' and introducing a stronger social focus through more transparent and workable opportunities for public participation. As alluded to above, this created the platform for consolidated statutory and allied development control plans, but these did not emerge in the City until 1993.

That delay can be partly attributed to tensions between the State Government and the City Council. In 1987, these led to the State dismissing the elected Council and installing Commissioners for two years. In the interim the State passed the City of Sydney Act 1988 which created a new Central Sydney Planning Committee (CSPC) composed of representatives nominated by Local and State Government, though the State held a majority. Members were required to have relevant experience in areas such as architecture, urban design, building, and heritage. Key plan-making powers for major development were given to the CSPC.

Genuine strategic planning had languished through the 1950s and 1960s until the City's first strategic plan in 1971 introduced a then-revolutionary approach in its attention to urban design, heritage, environmental considerations, people's experience of the city, and economic development.²⁶ This plan moved through several iterations until replaced by the CSPC's *Central Sydney Strategy* 1988. This *Strategy* was an important advance in the bicentennial year. It introduced a precinct-based planning vision, and 22 core urban design principles that provided guidance for a decade.²⁷ It got rid of pedestrian improvement bonuses first introduced as part of the 1971 plan, due to the latter's 'failure to achieve acceptable building forms and public amenities'.²⁸ Unfortunately, the statutory planning underpinning the *Strategy* had not kept pace so a commercial building boom in the late 1980s lacked strong guidance with regards to urban design. In 1991 a revised strategic plan - *Sydney 2030* - and its associated statutory plans were exhibited. This attempt was panned for its overemphasis on the past, a bird's-eye approach, and neglect of public domain and lived experience of the city.²⁹ A special review panel described the plans as 'bewildering ... inconsistent ... wordy and repetitive'³⁰ and it was only heavily-amended plans finally given state government approval in 1993.

From this point, design quality began to be articulated as a coherent principal objective for the City as a new governance regime became established. A new City Council under Independent Lord Mayor Frank Sartor was elected in late 1991. Its *Living City* strategy (released in 1994 and accompanied by a transport strategy *Accessible City* in 1995) channelled many of the broader influences discussed earlier to advance a decisive shift towards a diversified vision of the city centre. Cited by the Urban Design Taskforce as an excellent example of contemporary planning for good urban design³¹, *Living City* envisioned a 24-hour city, promoted residential uses in the CBD and favoured the public realm through approaches like traffic calming, lighting, accessibility, and other streetscape improvements. The 'Sydney Spaces' program funded in part by Olympic money³² coordinated investment in a diverse set of public realm projects involving numerous private urban designers, architects and landscape architects.³³ Significantly, the City of Sydney also initiated its own design ideas competitions for several hotspots including Circular Quay (1991), Ultimo/Pymont (1994) and the Town Hall precinct (2000).

The statutory planning documents associated with *Living City* were exhibited in 1995, received more warmly than previous attempts, and gazetted in 1996. With strategic and statutory plans now affirmed and aligned, refinements and supporting policies began to take shape. One introducing amenity standards for residential and serviced apartment developments, a second formulating a floor space transfer scheme to preserve heritage-listed buildings, and a third to provide site-specific controls for a major, city block-sized commercial redevelopment all exemplify the more sophisticated and urban design-driven approach to Sydney's centre. *Local Environmental Plan Amendment #8 - Urban Form and Design* in 1998 introduced design excellence as a fundamental principle. In 2000, when a consolidated amendment to all development controls was gazetted, the principle was finally enshrined in statute, along with requirements for competitive processes for major private developments in the city centre.

Exactly how the Design Excellence provisions were specifically drafted in 2000 is unclear. The culture of reform and commitment to urbanism established by Sartor and his independent professional colleagues was clearly conducive to innovative thinking. Punter directly credits Sartor, contending he wrote the competitive requirements mainly to address localised issues in the CBD like monopolistic design, insufficient expertise within

Council, and a lack of success on design grounds in court cases.³⁴ Sartor's exposure to design approaches in world cities in his role as a civic figurehead of Sydney's Olympic movement, the positive outcomes of *ad hoc* competitions in the 1990s and the more enlightened appreciation of the 'design dividend' by this time would also have given him confidence that the provisions would be accepted by the private sector.

CONCLUSION

Sydney City's current Local Environmental Plan (2012) maintains the commitment 'to deliver the highest standard of architectural, urban and landscape design'. The definition of 'Design Excellence' for large-scale developments encompasses a long list of considerations including land use mix, treatment of heritage and streetscape constraints, environmental impacts, and contribution to the public domain. 'Design Excellence' can be attained in different ways but the default protocol is a formal expert adjudication of alternative proposals prior to a detailed development application being submitted. Projects deemed to have attained excellence can be awarded significant floorspace or height bonuses.³⁵

Our understanding of the origins of this policy in 2000 highlights three major narratives which interacted and reinforced each other: a wider predisposition to the significance of design quality debates, the pre-history of design competitions presenting a suitable methodology, and the evolution towards sound governance and progressive thinking within the City Council. The introduction of 'Design Excellence' as a statutory concept was well-timed for Sydney to go about the business of becoming a global city during the 2000s. The fact that the requirements were made of both public and private development is particularly noteworthy, as Sydney is possibly the only city in the world that systematically requires competitive design processes of private projects.

'Design Excellence' might be seen as an additional regulatory requirement that belied the neo-liberal turn to fast-track, developer-friendly planning since the 1980s. But in other ways this was an initiative in tune with the times.³⁶ It embraced the ideology of competition as a means to securing the best outcomes. The linking of architectural and urban design to better investment returns through prospective development bonuses statutorily embedded in planning processes is definitely market-empathetic. And it has sought to make Sydney more competitive generally through higher standards of sustainable, innovative and contextual design. While concerns have been expressed as to the cost, time and transparency of the competitive design policy in practice, the stronger consensus is of a successful, innovative policy that has been critical in changing the cultures of both planning and major commercial development in Sydney.³⁷

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- 2 Punter, *Design Guidelines in American Cities*.
- 3 Punter, "From the Ill-mannered to the Iconic"; Punter, "Urban Design in Central Sydney 1945-2002".
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- 5 Council of the City of Sydney, *Planning for the Living City*.
- 6 Hu, "Remaking of Central Sydney."
- 7 Lochhead, "Sydney Afresh."
- 8 Punter, "Urban Design in Central Sydney 1945-2002", 105.
- 9 Jahn, "President's Report."
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- 13 *Ibid.*, 64.
- 14 Webber, *The Design of Sydney*.
- 15 Searle, *Sydney as a Global City*.
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- 25 Ryle et al., "Towers of Trouble."
- 26 Freestone et al., "Sydney 1967-1971."
- 27 *Ibid.*, 85-86.
- 28 Punter, "Urban Design in Central Sydney 1945-2002", 94.
- 29 Bechervaise et al., "Sydney 2030 – A vision for the future."
- 30 Punter, "Urban Design in Central Sydney 1945-2002," 93.
- 31 The Prime Minister's Urban Design Taskforce, *Urban Design in Australia*, 14.
- 32 Hu, "Shaping a Global Sydney".
- 33 Council of the City of Sydney, *Sydney Spaces*.
- 34 Punter, "Urban Design in Central Sydney 1945-2002," 122-6.
- 35 Council of the City of Sydney, *Competitive Design Policy*.
- 36 Sager, "Neo-liberal urban planning policies."
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