

SUBMISSION ON EDGECLIFF/WOOLLAHRA REZONING PROPOSAL

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1. PREAMBLE

This submission is made from the perspective of one who has been an architect for over 60 years. In which time I have been the Assistant Government Architect and a Director of a large commercial firm, Peddle Thorp and Walker, now PTW, from which I retired 12 years ago.

In these 63 years I have presided over numerous civic and urban design projects such as Circular Quay improvement, Walsh Bay development, Barangaroo, Central Park and Woolloomooloo Finger Wharf and have designed numerous apartment buildings, ranging from luxury developments in the City of Sydney, Bondi and Double Bay to more affordable schemes in locations such as Rhodes and Rosebery.

Having perused the many hundreds of pages of consultants' reports I am of the opinion that the proposed Edgecliff Woollahra Precinct Rezoning proposal is the most ill-considered and environmentally devastating idea that I have witnessed in my professional life-time. With its 142 towers (buildings over 9 storeys) it will destroy the essential character of this 168 hectare large heritage conservation area. With the majority of the sites beyond West Woollahra subject to redevelopment by high rise buildings with extensive excavation, life will be a nightmare for residents living in a construction site.

2. THE POLITICS OF PLANNING AND CONSERVATION.

I have lived in three locations over the last 60 years, initially in a shared house in Darling Point and subsequently in Paddington. I have lived in my current house for 53 years and am very familiar with the precinct that extends from Darling Point, through Edgecliff, Woollahra through to Paddington and Bondi Junction.

In the late 1960s I witnessed the demolition of Sydney's finest mansions in Thornton St, Darling Point, to be replaced by 20 storey towers of undistinguished design. This happened at a time when the City of Sydney was subjected to an orgy of demolition of its 19th and early 20th century fabric leading to increasing public dissatisfaction and the BLF Green Bans.

It was largely in response to this that the Wran Labor government was elected on a platform of heritage protection. In 1977 the NSW Heritage Act was introduced followed by the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act in 1979 which led to Heritage Registers of items of cultural significance and Heritage Conservation zones.

It is ironic that at a dinner in March 2026, held to celebrate the election of the Wran Government I witnessed Premier Chris Minns make churlish remarks about the privileged and wealthy residents of Woollahra to the mirth of a large gathering of "true believers." It is, of course, a fact that Neville Wran lived the latter part of his life in a heritage building in Wallis St, Woollahra.

3. ABANDONMENT OF WOOLLAHRA STATION

Upon his election in 1976, Wran set up a Legislative Assembly Inquiry into the Eastern Suburbs Railway which had been subject to cost overruns and delays. Partly in response to objection to a station by nearby residents the Inquiry recommended the abandonment of the station and termination of the line at Bondi Junction instead of Kingsford, as originally proposed. As I recall one factor discussed was the rail authority's desire to reduce the journey time to Bondi Junction by 2-3 minutes benefiting a catchment many times the size of that at Woollahra.

4. THE NEED FOR GREATER DENSITY IN SYDNEY

Few in the architecture profession would deny the support for greater density in areas well served by public transport as opposed to the unsustainable greenfields development characteristic of Western Sydney. Clearly a revision of the existing controls was necessary as well as the introduction of new planning schemes and urban design guidelines to achieve good results. Sadly this is not the case with the proposed Edgecliff-Woollahra Rezoning proposal the methodology of which is flawed and lacking in vision.

Despite extensive lip-service to responding to heritage and "working with country", the whole approach appears to be working backwards from an arbitrarily imposed target of 10,000 homes rather than making a proper evaluation of environmental factors and achieving an appropriate outcome.

5. WHAT MAKES SYDNEY UNIQUE?

Sydney is blessed by its distinctive topography, especially around Sydney harbour where a series of ridges and valleys draining into the body of water set up a distinctive urban morphology. The peninsulas projecting into the water offer a variety of built and natural form such as the City of Sydney, Kirribilli and Milsons Point contrasting with parkland such as Bradley's Head, Ballast Point, Balls Head and the recently completed Headland Park at Barangaroo. The reading of the metropolis is provided by isolated clusters of high-rise buildings in locations such as Bondi Junction, the CBD of Sydney, North Sydney, St. Leonards, Chatswood, the Rhodes Peninsula, Wentworth Point, Burwood and Parramatta.

One of the most serious defects with the Proposal is the obscurity of the plateau of Woollahra by building 33 storey towers half way down the steep slope of the Wallaroy precinct or locating a 22 storey tower in the middle of the valley at the western end of Trumper Park.

Aerial perspectives show an unarticulated mass of towers stretching all the way from Darling Point to Bondi Junction. This seriously diminishes the distinctive morphology of this part of Sydney.

6. WHY HIGH RISE TOWERS?

Almost all the development proposals are towers with associated podiums which are not a characteristic of the historic evolution of Woollahra, apart from several towers built in the 1960s. Many fine inter-war buildings are 3-6 storeys in height. As buildings of this height require less separation and cast shorter shadows, they can achieve comparable densities and require less site amalgamation.

Macleay St in Potts Point consists largely of interwar masonry buildings ranging from 7 to 10 storeys in height. They are built to the street alignment and have retail activating the street level. Large London Plane trees arch over the street. In recent years a number of new buildings have been constructed in this typology and more are under construction.

Potts Point with its diversity of buildings with apartments ranging from pre-war studios of 20 sq m to lavish contemporary penthouses is one of Sydney's liveliest and most desirable precincts, accommodating genuine social diversity and an urbanism with a human scale.

Edgecliff Road, near the intersection of Rosemont Avenue has some excellent examples of this typology.

7. PROBLEMS WITH PODIUMS.

Until 1960 height regulations in the CBD of Sydney produced streets with buildings of a uniform building height of 150' (45 m). With the increased demand for high-rise office towers the City introduced development controls for street walls with minimum and maximum heights and tower set-backs to create harmonious streetscapes with an appropriate context for remaining historic buildings.

The morphology of the Rosemont precinct is quite different, consisting largely of 20th century free standing houses and 3-6 storey apartment buildings. The diagram for Wellington St showing an extensive single storey podium with a large 17 storey slab-like tower, set back 18 metres from the street plane does nothing to achieve a harmonious streetscape responsive to heritage buildings in the street. A far more appropriate

solution is the 4-6 storey building currently under construction on the corner of Wellington and Fullerton St designed by William Smart.

Similarly, the 4 storey podium with a 6 metre setback and a 14 storey slab-like tower does little to relate to the scale and character of existing buildings in Ocean St.

The extensive use of podiums is inimical to maintaining deep soil planting and tree cover that is an essential characteristic of this area.

8. SIZE OF AMALGAMATIONS AND SCALE OF DEVELOPMENT.

The size of the proposed amalgamations generates buildings out of scale with the character of the area and are a challenge to achieve financially. The large floor-plate towers, often 33 storeys in height are difficult to design in a manner that is harmonious with adjacent heritage buildings.

A far more preferable solution is a building with a smaller floor plate surrounded by extensive planting. The Proposal's own Heritage Study suggests an exemplar at 75-79 Darling Point Rd, President Towers, where a cylindrical tower, surrounded by dense planting sits most comfortably with heritage buildings across the street and on either side.

Another successful example is the "Pointe" building by architect Luigi Rosselli where an eight storey building with two apartments per floor mediates successfully between a pre-war 6 storey building and a higher 1960s tower.

A further example is "Margaux" where a strongly articulated six storey building relates well to two storey adjacent mansions. These three buildings demonstrate how increased density can be achieved in a manner that preserves the human scale and character of the precinct. They are all on sites significantly smaller than the amalgamations proposed but have been proven to be commercially viable.

9. SHADOWS FROM TALL BUILDINGS

At the winter solstice on June 21, the sun angle looking north is 28.5 to 32 degrees. This means a 30 storey building, 100 metres in height will cast a shadow 200 metres in length. This means, for instance, that the 30 storey towers to the north east of Edgecliff Rd will cause serious overshadowing of the interspersed 7 storey buildings. Similarly spaces between buildings along Roslyndale Ave, Wallaroy Rd and Manning Rd will be subject to serious solar access issues.

The Study shows no shadow diagrams to justify the formal concept.

Wind is another serious issue with high rise buildings in Sydney especially those orientated towards the harbour. Many existing buildings have had their balconies enclosed.

10. EDGECLIFF PRECINCT.

This is a precinct asking for change. The poor quality and disorientating Edgecliff Centre should be re-developed for real gain. This is also a location where a concentrated high-rise landmark cluster has been proposed for many years and may create a memorable sense of place.

The problem is the heavy traffic in New South Head road and its intersection with Ocean St.

Notwithstanding the creation of the Woollahra Railway Station and the proposed restrictions on carparking it is inevitable that there will be a significant increase in traffic. This will be further aggravated by the uplift in development in Double Bay, Rose Bay and Bondi Junction and elsewhere.

It is important that some modelling be done to assess the cumulative impact of all these developments upon traffic in this location.

It is noteworthy that the Kings Cross Tunnel and Syd Einfeld Drive have created comfortable conditions at Kings Cross and Bondi Junction. Similarly the City of Sydney has achieved remarkable gains by eliminating traffic from George St, helped by the Cross-City tunnel.

The Proposal suggests that the centre of Edgecliff be re-orientated from New McLean St with a small new civic plaza. However the problem remains that extensive frontages to New South Head Road are fundamental to the structure of the precinct.

Given the size and extent of the development and the steep gradients of New South Head Road, both to the east and west, investigations should be made as to the feasibility of constructing an underpass, similar to the Kings Cross Tunnel. Provision can be made now for the construction of a future underpass as traffic pressures increase. There may be a case for a more intense development in this location to generate necessary funding.

This site is a major challenge and a master-planning competition would be useful to explore options.

11. WOOLLAHRA STATION PRECINCT.

The dramatic amphitheatre-like slope to the west of the railway platform is one of the most remarkable places in Woollahra dominated by a magnificent stand of tall trees growing in a lush, rain-forest like environment. The proposed plan envisages the destruction of this unique place through the removal of the trees and placing a 32 storey tower block in their place. This is an act of environmental vandalism.

A new scheme should be designed in which the trees form a park adjacent to the rail platform. The park could be embraced by a crescent of buildings overlooking it from the

west. Arriving at the station adjacent to this beautiful greenery would be a unique experience. The current design is a lost opportunity.

It would be useful to have a design competition for this at an early master-planning stage.

12. IMPACT OF FORTH STREET DEVELOPMENT ON HISTORIC HOUSES IN QUEEN STREET.

Queen Street, between Ocean and Nelson Streets, has a unique and intact sequence of magnificent 19th century houses unparalleled elsewhere in Sydney. The houses on the north side have a change of level towards Pickering Lane which bisects the block between Queen St and Forth St. Almost without exception, the Queen St houses have sunny, north-facing gardens as well as studios over garages.

The quality of this beautiful environment will be destroyed by the row of 9 storey buildings in Forth St, built virtually to the alignment of Pickering Lane. These buildings will cause serious overshadowing and loss of privacy to these most desirable residences and are most inappropriate.

13. DESTROYING HAWTHORNDEN

Hawthornden is a splendid mansion dating from the 1840s on a large battle-axe block, accessed by a gateway from Roslyndale Avenue. On a large intact site, it is a tangible reminder of the evolution of Woollahra and the splendid scale of the gardens and houses that characterised the area before subsequent subdivisions. Sloping towards the north east, above the houses in Wallaroy Road it enjoys views over Double Bay to the harbour.

The extensive gardens, tennis court and swimming pool are shielded from low town houses to the west by a dense stand of trees.

While this unique site remains untouched its context will change dramatically. The 2 storey town houses are replaced by a 26 storey tower block to the northwest while to the north and east eight and seven storey buildings along Wallaroy Road will block the view to the harbour. The overshadowing, loss of views and privacy seriously diminish the quality of this historic estate.

14. JOHN STREET BETWEEN MONCUR ST AND OCEAN STREET.

This block of John St contains a row of terrace houses and other 19th century houses on the south side and a row of largely recently-constructed town houses on the north side. Many of these are architect designed and relate well in scale with the historic buildings on the south side creating a unified and harmonious streetscape.

It seems totally incongruous that the valuable houses along the north side of the street are to be demolished and replaced by a street wall of 5 storey apartment buildings, casting a shadow in winter over the street and causing a loss of privacy for the backyards of houses in Queen St to the north.

15. JOHN STREET BETWEEN MONCUR ST AND VICTORIA STREET.

This block has consistent development of 19th century terraces on both sides of the street which is arched over by magnificent trees. It seems totally inconsistent with the nature of this intact conservation precinct that terraces on the north side are to be demolished and replaced by a 5 storey apartment building.

The 3 storey public housing on the corner of John and Moncur Streets is to be replaced by an eight storey apartment building which will be highly intrusive in this streetscape of two storey terrace houses.

16. VISUAL PRESENTATION OF SCHEME

The presentation documents are complex and lengthy but are limited in conveying the appearance of the proposed developments. The renderings at the beginnings of the "Character Area" sections in the Urban Design Report are most seductive but highly selective in their viewpoints. The drawing at the 6.4 Cliff Edge North Character Area is beautiful but the space of the park seems much larger than the area designated and seems to be based on an extreme wide angle lens model.

The images in the visual impact study by Urbis are alarming but the scale-less blank models in the montage are difficult to digest as reality.

It would be useful to see more of these with more realistic renderings.

17. COST OF DEVELOPMENT AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Woollahra is one of Sydney's most expensive locations with real estate values making site amalgamations extremely difficult. This is likely to be aggravated by premiums above normal values to secure sites owned by residents opposed to the proposed changes.

The Proposal's own Affordability document details the high price of properties and land values in the precinct which make the land component per apartment extremely high.

The sites are often extremely steeply sloping, difficult to build on and high-rise towers are more expensive to build than more conventional housing stock.

Approvals are likely to be subject to objections from impacted nearby residents, with delays adding to costs.

For all these reasons, it is unlikely that the proposed rezoning will deliver much in the way of affordable housing. It would be useful to explore greater densities in areas adjacent beyond the study area.

The section of New South Head Road to the west of the Edgecliff study area as far as Rushcutters Bay Park is an area suitable for greater density. Another is the ridgetop at Bondi Junction, surrounded by far less culturally significant development than that of Woollahra and should be explored as a way of better achieving the development targets.

18. CONCLUSIONS

A. CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF WOOLLAHRA

Woollahra is a place of unique cultural and environmental significance and largely a heritage conservation zone. Any uplift in density should be respectful of these qualities.

B. DEVELOPMENT TARGET

It is unlikely that the target of 10,000 additional dwellings can be achieved within the parameters of the conservation zoning and respect for its unique topography and should be revised downwards.

C. SIZE OF SITE AMALGAMATIONS

The large site amalgamations are problematic in this context, creating massive towers with large floorplates. Slimmer towers in dense landscaping on smaller sites will provide a better fit. Studies of smaller amalgamations should be carried out.

D. PODIUM AND TOWER TYPOLOGY

The street wall/podium and tower typology is inconsistent with the character of the area and should be used sparingly in areas of prime retail opportunity.

E. CONTAINMENT OF EXTENT OF HIGH RISE

High rise buildings should be confined to the central "plateau", east of Ocean St and west of Edgecliff Rd.

F. WALLAROY SLOPE

Developments on the "Wollaroy" slope should be of a stepped typology as can be seen on the edges of Darling Pt. The relationship with "Hawthornden" is damaging and should be revised.

G. WOOLLAHRA STATION SITE

The richly forested site adjacent to the railway site should be totally revised to preserve the trees and create a park.

H. EDGECLIFF UNDERPASS

The Edgecliff plan remains dominated by a central heavily trafficked seven lane highway. Provisions should be made for a future underpass to alleviate this problem.

I. SHADOW DIAGRAMS

The thirty storey towers generate massive overshadowing and diagrams should be produced to assess this problem.

J. TRAFFIC MODELLING

The increased density of development in Woollahra, as well as at Double Bay and Rose Bay are likely to produce significant increases in road traffic. Modelling should be done now to assess long term effects.

K. VISUAL IMPACT STUDIES

The Urbis report on visual impacts is a sobering document. Further studies should be made of other sites to assess the impact of proposed development.

L. FORTH STREET PROPOSALS

The proposed 9 storey buildings in Forth St have a negative impact on the fine houses on the north side of Queen St and should be revised.

M. JOHN STREET PROPOSALS

The developments on the north side of John St have a negative impact on the heritage conservation zoning of this attractive street and should be deleted.

N. WESTERN END TRUMPER PARK

The high rise tower at the western end of the Trumper Park valley is inconsistent with the topography and is extremely damaging to the Paddington townscape. This should be deleted.

O. GOODWIN VILLAGE SITE

The cluster of high-rise towers on the Goodwin Village site is inappropriate and should be replaced with lower buildings.

P. MASTER PLAN COMPETITIONS

Sites such as the surrounds of Edgecliff Station and Woollahra Station are complex planning challenges which could generate rewarding architectural outcomes. Design competitions should be held at the masterplanning stage.

Q. COMPETITIVE DESIGN PROCESS

It is important that new buildings reflect the high architectural standard of historic developments in Woollahra and should be subject to a competitive design process as would be the case in the City of Sydney.

R. LISTED HERITAGE ITEMS

While these are retained, their context is altered in a damaging way by their new surrounding development. It would be useful to see further development of the relationship between new and old.

S. HERITAGE STUDY

The recommendations of the Heritage Study do not appear to be reflected in the planning documents. A further effort should be made to incorporate this advice.

T. SITES BEYOND PROPOSED REZONING AREA

The section of New South Head Road to the west of Edgecliff and an extension of the Bondi Junction precinct can achieve significant uplift without the difficulties of achieving this in Woollahra, and is worthy of study.