

## Dealing with DAs 2008 Style

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# Landscaping – a priority, not an afterthought

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So the question is:

We want to increase the densities of our cities for lots of economic and social reasons and in this case we are discussing Sydney. How do we do this without disrupting the recognisable patterns, the rhythms of Sydney that have been built up over the life of the city and that we have come to know and presumably love?

In assessing the landscape treatment of developments under SEPP 65, it is important to understand the evolving cultural patterns of a city that is in a continually changing form, reflecting the diverse forces that shape our city habitats. SEPP 65 is one of these forces that attempts to set guidelines to reflect both the concerns of living within an aesthetically pleasing environment and building on the existing site's natural and cultural features.

We as designers, users, critics and custodians of the built environment need to be aware of both the present and past forces that have shaped our city and to provide environments that reflect both the *genus loci* of the place as well as the needs of our citizens such as encouraging social opportunity, access and respect for neighbours amenity. The social patterns that exist today which are largely based on a dispersed suburban framework and the down sizing of households are some of the generators of SEPP 65 and will result in closer and more urban living. The use and nature of open space will necessarily modify as a result of these evolving household types and we as a society will need to recognise the demands of these patterns.

When you look at the history of Sydney and the shaping of the external domain, much of the spaces are the result of the appropriation of public open space for sporting clubs, or land that is not developable as it associated with a flood plain or waterway, such as the so called 'green belt' areas set aside as part of the Cumberland Plains; areas that have been too steep for traditional development patterns and areas that have been set aside for industrial and defence purposes for example. We would not have the vegetated bluffs of Middle Harbour, South Head, Georges Heights and associated land forms without the risk of the Russians and other marauding threats of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

In relation to the present image as noted above, much of this vegetated mantle has only been really accrued after WWII and particularly from the late 1960s and early 70s. Sydney of the post war years was a city of rapid expansion with the building of many new suburbs consisting of individual houses in the main and the consolidation of some of the inner city suburbs. The results were a dry, exposed and sometimes

dusty place with an absence of street trees to many areas, cultivated gardens focusing on the flower garden and trimming of plants, the focus lying in the backyard for both recreation and the lemon tree and some garden plots with a notable absence of canopy trees. These cultural landscape patterns were encouraged by the substantial post war immigration boom that brought many people from Mediterranean countries that did not have a history or background of substantial canopy vegetation rather with the use of external areas more orientated to the needs of the domestic table and relaxation.

The build up in awareness of the modern ecological movement coming out of the end of the Menzies era and the push for Green Cities under the Whitlam Labor government, reflected the increase of awareness and understanding of the environment and a more relaxed relationship with our climate. A combination of awareness of the environment with the influence of post war immigration on what was once a fairly laconic and restrained society. This has been realised in part in the increased outdoor café lifestyle and street life that now exists, Macquarie Street, Sydney, King Street, Newtown, and Victoria Road, Darlinghurst being a good cases in point.

The influence of the Green movement reached far and wide with streets that were never designed for trees such as inner city areas of industrial Alexandria were suddenly the recipient of many appropriate and inappropriate species. The attempts did not end there, as once the benefits of the greening of the streets were apparent (shade, shelter, visual amenity, flora, fauna etc) people registered that this was an improvement and that the need and desire for such an amenity was seen as an integral part of the way that they should live.

As a result of these and other forces, the city image of Sydney of today is defined at a broad scale by not so much by its buildings but by its overall regional character of a drowned river valley surrounded by eroded plateaus overlain with a cultural landscape of mainly Eucalypts native to the Cumberland Plain dominating the primarily single and two storey built form of suburbia (that we sometimes like to abhor).

However, reaching through this canopy of trees are the built spikes (or blunted knives?) of commercial and retail centres of the rapidly expanding regional centres, which the growing Sydney population so depends on. Growth suburbs such as Chatswood with its Zenith Centre that looks like it has come from Mars; Hurstville, what I call the blunted knife form, Miranda dominated by the temple of retail, Westfield Miranda Fair like a big flat lozenge ready to suck up any errant retail dollar and the CBD, its' high towers set off by the waters of the harbour and contrasted to the vegetated canopy of the Botanic Gardens and so the list goes on.

Complementing the canopy of trees around these commercial regional centres there is a rich diversity of cultural landscapes that we take for granted much of the time until they are suddenly not there. These are in the main the private landscape domains of the suburban street that complement the trees that characterise much of Sydney.

If you think that I have a fairly jaundiced view of our regional centres within the overall Sydney CBD, you are right. The transition from regional service and shopping centres with residential above and amongst, of generally a two storey form to a place of greater density, height and therefore impact has not in general been a happy one with the examples as noted above the result of this intensification. However, the changing social patterns of greater Sydney have the opportunity to start filling and diversifying these centres.

This is already happening in the changes being wrought in Parramatta, to the laneways of Eastwood and to many other regional centres, where there is a 'bridging' of form and vegetation from the high rise commercial precinct, to the mid scale residential development with street trees and some landscaped areas to the recognisable single storey ¼ acre family home with large backyard, vegetated front yards and extensive street planting. There is a great capacity to adapt and resolve living and working areas given the right economic and planning framework.

So you ask, what has this got to do with landscaping under SEPP 65? A lot, I say, as it is only when we assess what we think is important as a society that we can then absorb change and make that change better for us as living city.

#### *The example of Paris- European Experience*

Flat top apartments with no visible planting breaking the built form. However, tree lined streets provide a suitable amenity. No private domain planting exists to be viewed from the street; as is the Mediterranean tradition. Rather a number of internal courtyards exist that form vegetated amenity for the residents of the apartments.

#### **Opportunities and Constraints of SEPP 65**

*The removal of much of the private open space to the street frontage and the replacement with, in many cases, the built form- Is this necessarily a bad thing?*

It has to be carefully thought out what the value of the amenity we are removing and how we are going to change the relationship of the built environment, the public domain and contribution of an amenity to the

streetscape. An internalising of the shared and private landscape areas within a development site benefits the residents and visitors providing amenity and a pleasant outlook; however, it does minimise integration and interaction with the broader landscape and neighbourhood.

*What is the overall effect on our environment of our streets?*

There has to be a much greater understanding of the relationship of the built form and landscape and what in the end we are striving for in relation to city image. There is also a much greater pressure on the public domain in relation to the requirements, demands and expectations of these spaces as they are conduits for social interaction, commercial and recreational vehicular and pedestrian traffic along with the important role of street trees and associated environmental benefits that these elements bring to our cities. Liverpool is good case in point where there are a number of approved DAs of substantial scale that have not in my opinion fully thought out the ramifications to the streetscape and public domain. They leave for example footpaths at the same width as exists with minimal capacity for street trees, café seating and other potential benefits to a vibrant street life including facilitating the active edge to these developments.

*What is the effect on our overall environment of our city?*

The heat spike that is characteristic of substantial urban areas is a familiar characteristic of Sydney, particularly in the western suburbs where the cooling afternoon sea breezes are realised in a late afternoon south easterly. The intensification of the built form that will result from SEPP 65 must be carefully assessed site by site and strategies put in place to ameliorate this un-wanted and potentially disastrous characteristic of large urban areas, given the increasing urbanisation of the world.

*City Image*

There is an opportunity to create pools of cooler air flow in combination with architecture through ensuring the footprints of the developments allow for areas of open space big enough to support statuesque planting forms, that is key planting elements that complement the new architecture. The skyline of Ashfield comes to mind where there are a number of tall Norfolk Island Pines and other tall and erect plantings that punctuate the skyline and may provide a model for a more vibrant and visually satisfying environment. The growth of low cost housing for example in Hanoi is representative of the anonymous tower block the world over, the growth of which blunts the local, regional and national identity of the place. This is a worldwide concern and one that Sydney should not fall into the trap of.

*The opportunities of SEPP 65*

I see that there are number of opportunities in regards to SEPP 65. The landscape policy under SEPP 65 design guidelines recognises the importance of useability, links and overall capacity of private open space

and communal open space to provide functional areas that start to recognise the requirements for modern contemporary open spaces.

The opportunities for more rationalised open space are many and varied; such as the creation of larger areas of shared open space that provide both a visual amenity but also a functional and recreational amenity for residents of the development.

The provision of incidental open space creates informal recreational spaces, even a quasi pocket park within or adjacent to the development, community gardens organised by the strata group may make the development semi self-sufficient, the provision for deep soil landscape areas goes to providing a suitable medium and area to take advantage of landscape as a key differentiator in the character of the local and regional area.

Less reliance on existing street plantings and surrounding landscape to provide amenity and interest to building facades, rather increased building set backs and the inclusion of vegetated areas to the street frontage and increased landscaped areas to entry ways and pedestrian links.

An example of opportunities with these layouts is a project that we were involved in adjacent to Sydney Park where the arrangement on site allowed for a varied uses on the site. This can, in retrospect, be increased further with areas for community gardens, rainwater facilities and other environmental attributes.

As Sydney continues to develop in size and diversity, the desire for Sydney to become a global Green city is becoming strongly apparent. Overall, our approach to design is moving in the right direction, though more acknowledgement of the varied pressures, changing needs, and users demands on public and private open space is needed. SEPP 65 starts to address those issues, providing good foundations for further evolving policy that meets contemporary demands in a sustainable way. It is my contention that Landscape Design within the SEPP 65 framework can be brought to the forefront of the design process and that equal weighting be given to the demands of both architectural spaces and external spaces.