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EMBEDDING URBAN DESIGN PRINCIPLES IN THE PLANNING PROCESS



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■ The Queensland Government, with the introduction of an urban design referral trigger for major projects under the draft Planning Regulation 2017, has thrust the issue of urban design and its relationship

to the planning process, back into contention.

For me, town planning and urban design are cut from the same cloth in the sense that both seek to create great places. Urban design is a process: a way of looking at the urban environment, analysing it, and delivering an outcome. In this way, it is also a planning process. For me, the terms are somewhat interchangeable depending on the scale of the project.

Local governments are individually taking on the promotion of good urban design as

a result of the visions set out in planning schemes, in an attempt to put a face to those visions. Local governments are to be applauded for their efforts, and need to be encouraged to keep at it. Guidelines such as the New World City Design Guide: Buildings that Breathe prepared by Brisbane City Council are a good example, but there are many more.

The Queensland Government has seen fit to try and create an urban design referral trigger for major projects being undertaken around the State. The Queensland Government is a welcome player in this space, and has a valuable contribution to make regarding the urban design of our cities, towns and centres. They should have a say on these matters, but I am not sure the urban design trigger, as it is intended to function, is the best way for the State to support local governments to achieve good urban design outcomes.

Reviewing development applications as part of a third-party process that sits outside of local government planning schemes has the potential to undermine the development assessment process and create uncertainty of outcome and lack of transparency in assessment. This is particularly the case since the proposed trigger contains no policy or assessment tools against which to measure the urban design quality of a major project.

Given this, a number of questions are raised about the referral process: What aspect of the design is to be reviewed? What is the application to be assessed against? Is the State intending on developing a separate code for the assessment of applications? Is the assessment solely reliant on the view of an individual on the State's Urban



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Design and Places Panel? There are many outstanding issues relating to both certainty and transparency that need considerable clarification.

Design can be such a complex and fraught issue with as many points of view as there are stars in the sky. There have been many attempts made over the years to try and promote better design outcomes for buildings and places; however, because of the absence of general agreement on the outcomes – of what constitutes good urban design – these processes wither and die.

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The Urban Design Protocol developed by Creating Places for People is one such attempt, and a good one at that. The Next Generation Planning document is another good example of a document that looks at various aspects of urban design from the scale of a full town or city, to an individual street and building.

At present, the planning scheme for an individual local government is the preeminent piece of legislation that controls urban design outcomes arising

through the development assessment process. A planning scheme creates outcomes and, for better or for worse, is the most fundamental urban design code that exists in Queensland. It is the result of review, testing, consultation and political scrutiny, and some would argue that it represents the aspirations of the community in terms of the development outcomes that it promotes.

From my perspective, the State needs to play a role as an advocate for better urban design by assisting local governments to ensure urban design principles and processes are embedded within planning schemes. Schemes need to be tested and reviewed to ensure these outcomes can, and are, being achieved. This should be part of the State’s mandate and commitment to urban design. This means the State needs to develop a clear and unequivocal position on the principles of good urban design and their application in Queensland. More importantly, these principles need to be reflected in the State Planning Policy. This puts everyone on the same page, provides more rigour in assessment, and ensures that everyone has a complete

understanding of what the State expects in terms of urban design outcomes.

So, how else can the State support local government in promoting good urban design? Start with the most basic of urban design codes, the planning scheme, and assist local government to improve their skills and processes. Ensure that planning schemes reflect the principles of good planning and design set out in the State Planning Policy. This is perhaps the best place to start, and the right end of the process to start at.



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