



The formidable benefits of design competitions

Kim Crestani, City Architect, City of Parramatta and Director, Order Architects.

For over a decade, City of Parramatta Council has been conducting design competitions in accordance with Director General's requirements for major buildings in the City; however it is the past 5 years where the competition space has exponentially grown to deliver a phenomenal number of award-winning buildings to create Sydney's Central River City – Parramatta.

No other local government area has seen the intensity of design competitions and outputs that the City of Parramatta has produced. Since I was appointed Council's first City Architect in September 2015, Council has been involved in thirty-three architectural design competitions. This is a significant achievement in the number of design competitions and more than any other LGA in NSW during the same period.

City of Parramatta has developed a robust 'end to end' design excellence process that is an integral part of Council's strategic planning and development assessment processes, continuing during construction, with the Jury signing off all the way through to completion with an end goal to deliver great buildings and public domain. Council has recently produced a 200-page book of all of the competitions completed since 2015.

To incentivise proponents to achieve design excellence, the Parramatta LEP permits height and floor space bonuses through the successful completion of a design competition.

There are however some "speed bumps" that must be navigated to dovetail design excellence and planning pathways. We continue to streamline these exigencies to maintain the

highest level of design and promote improved approval timelines. In essence, ensuring that for buildings that are considered design excellent, we are able to resolve any 'tensions' between the design and the planning requirements to achieve approval in a timely manner. The fastest time from completion of a design competition to DA approval has been nine months.

Some issues arising relate to Design Competitions being conducted prior to the public exhibition of a planning proposal. This may mean that a winning design competition scheme can be endorsed by Council prior to Councillors endorsement and the wider public commenting, not to mention key government agencies who may not have endorsed such proposals. In the case of City of Parramatta's CBD planning proposal which will be exhibited and then gazetted in the not too distant future, these issues will hopefully be resolved, and the process should be 'smoother'. Great buildings (like great movies) take time, resources and money and a simplified system would be more sustainable and welcomed.

I will never cease to be amazed at the level of interrogation that some architects bring to the design competition space. Some critically dissect a reference design and challenge such

issues as building envelopes, setbacks, flooding alternatives, traffic and access. Radical solutions can sometimes yield positive responses to the projects.

City of Parramatta has also engaged independent ESD consultants to test drive and support high quality initiatives to ensure building performance, especially in regard to heat sink effects, solar mitigation, sun shading devices and reflectivity into the public domain. These initiatives have been well embraced by industry and the property development lobby. The past five years have yielded some thirty + design competitions, with an end construction value of \$5.5 Billion, 5,000 apartments and 560,000sqm of commercial office space, along with public buildings – The Library, Aquatic Centre, Parramatta Stadium, Arthur Phillip High Rise School and the Parramatta Powerhouse.

The number of people involved to achieve this outcome is extraordinary – planners, architects, engineers, technical advisors, ESD consultants, jury members from industry and the Government Architects Office, not to mention a growing involvement from the largest and most well respected property development companies and award winning architects in Australia.

It is my view that optimising design excellence for the built form and the public domain can be achieved and processes streamlined to ensure a pipeline of well-considered and exemplary city shaping projects can result. ■

Since September 2015, Kim has held the position of City Architect at City of Parramatta Council. In this role she has led the rollout of thirty + design excellence competitions with a value of some \$5 Billion. In February 2019 she was appointed to the prestigious competition jury for the International Design Competition for the Powerhouse Precinct at Parramatta. Kim has, as a Director of Order Architects been appointed to the Design Excellence Jury for Atlassian's Sydney Headquarters.



Figure 1: Image from Future Parramatta flythrough, November 2019 (Source: City of Parramatta)