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PROPOSED MIXED USE DEVELOPMENT
CORNER OF BURELLI AND KEMBLA STREETS, WOLLONGONG

Urban Design Review

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1.0 Introduction

This report provides an urban design review of a proposed development within the City Centre of Wollongong. The author is Geoff Baker, Urban Design Principal, HBO+EMTB Urban and Landscape Design, Sydney.

1.1 Site and Context

The subject site is located on the southeast corner of Burelli and Kembla Streets. It has a site area of 1,909 square metres.

Immediately to the east of the subject site is a 6 storey office building known as Corporate Square and beyond that Council's offices in an 11 storey tower. The site is part of a larger land-holding in common ownership which occupies the entire Kembla Street frontage from Burelli Street to Stewart Street and extends eastwards on Stewart Street to the side boundary of the Sacred Heart church. The owner proposes a three stage development to be known as "Mid City Square". Stage 1, adjacent to the Sacred Heart church, has development approval. The proposal which is the subject of this report is Stage 2. Stage 3 will be located on the corner of Kembla and Stewart Streets, where a two storey commercial premises is currently located.

The uses on Burelli Street opposite the subject site are civic. Directly opposite is the Wollongong City Gallery (formerly Council's offices), which is a 2 to 4 storey locally designated heritage item. To the northwest, on the corner diagonally opposite the site is St Andrews Presbyterian church, also a locally designated heritage item. To the northeast are Civic Plaza, an important element of the city centre's public domain, and the Illawarra Performing Arts Centre.

The land on Kembla Street directly opposite the site is currently at grade open parking for the Woolworths supermarket further west on Burelli Street. It is zoned the same as the subject site and a similar intensity of redevelopment could occur there. A row of street trees on Burelli Street adjacent to the Woolworths carpark are a locally listed heritage item.

1.2 The Proposal

The Applicant proposes to demolish the 2 storey office building currently located on the site and replace it with a mixed use building of 12 storeys with 4 levels of below-grade parking. Retail/commercial uses are proposed at ground level, a mezzanine floor above that, then 8 floors of commercial tenancies and finally two residential floors. The residential component comprises two double storey penthouses. These are accessed via the same ground floor lobby as the commercial floors and one of the three lifts servicing them.

The building form comprises an 8 storey tower sitting on a 4 storey base. The base is set back 4 metres from Burelli Street and is built to the boundary on Kembla Street.

The eastern facade of the base is located 12 metres from the western facade of the adjoining Corporate Square building to create a plaza. It is intended that this plaza will connect to the lobby entrance on the north side of the approved Stage 1 development. This lobby runs north-south through the building, providing a connection to Stewart Street to the south. The proponent includes

a drawing in the current Stage 2 application which indicates a “Future pedestrian link in Stage 3”, running north-south adjacent to Stage 1 and connecting the plaza to Stewart Street. No information is provided as to the nature of this connection.

The southern facade of the base is located approximately 21 metres from the existing building to be replaced by Stage 3. No information is provided as to the separation distance(s) proposed between the Stage 2 development which is the subject of this report and Stage 3.

A single point of entry is provided to the ground floor lobby from the plaza to the east of the proposal. Entry doors to the ground floor tenancies are provided on Burelli and Kembla Streets. Vehicular access to the basement parking is via a single point of entry off Kembla Street and a ramp which descends eastwards along the southern face of the building’s base. It is assumed that bicycle access to the first basement level is via the vehicular ramp.

1.3 Regulatory Framework

Two local planning instruments are of particular relevance to this review:

- Wollongong Local Environmental Plan (WLEP) 2009
- Wollongong Development Control Plan 2009

The site is zoned B3 Commercial Core under WLEP 2009. It is understood that the proposed uses are permitted with consent in this zone. The proposal complies with the applicable height control (46 metres proposed, 48 metres permitted) and Floor Space Ratio control (5.19:1 proposed, 5.6:1 permitted). The proposal does not comply with Clause 8.6 (a) of the LEP, which requires that the street facade of the building base must adjoin without separation that of the building next door. In this case an exception is made to allow for the plaza between the proposed building and the Corporate Square building (noting the requirement in Wollongong DCP 2009 for a pedestrian connection between Burelli and Stewart Streets in this location and the fact that the adjoining building does not extend to the boundary).

Clause 8.5, Design Excellence, of WLEP 2009 is central to the approvals process and forms the basis of this review. It is referenced in detail in the following Section.

Wollongong Development Control Plan 2009 includes Chapter D13: Wollongong City Centre, which contains a variety of controls applicable to the subject site. It is understood that the proposal does not comply with a number of these controls. Some of these non-compliances are detailed in the following Section of this report. The most significant from an urban design perspective is Clause 2.2 Building to street alignment and street setbacks, which requires a 4 metre setback of the tower above the base. The proposal does not satisfy this requirement on Burelli Street.

1.4 Other Documents

A number of additional documents have been examined in the course of preparing this review. These include:

- DA drawing set including 3 photomontages
- Two sets of comments from Council’s Heritage Officer
- Two sets of comments from Council’s Design Review Panel

- A letter dated 24 May 2011 from MMJ Town Planning, representing the Applicant and in particular Appendix 4 “Context & Site Analysis Review” and Appendix 7, “Variations Statement”

2.0 Urban Design Review

Wollongong LEP 2009 includes Clause 8.5 Design excellence which states in sub-clause (3) that “Development consent must not be granted to development to which this clause applies unless, in the opinion of the consent authority, the proposed development exhibits design excellence”. Sub-clause (4)(e) provides a list of matters which must be considered in making this determination. The assessment which follows cites each of these matters and the reviewer’s response.

(a) whether a high standard of architectural design, materials and detailing appropriate to the building type and location will be achieved

The architectural design of a building is a broad and inclusive term. It includes response to context, functional performance, environmental performance and aesthetic quality. Various aspects of the design of the proposed development are addressed in the following Sections and Sub-sections of this report. There are some aspects of the design which are not considered acceptable. On this basis the standard of architectural design is considered passable, but not high.

The predominant external material of the proposed building is glass, framed and frameless and in various finishes and colours. Coloured zinc sheeting is used to clad the roof and sloping plane behind the northern sloping glass facade. These are good quality materials which should resist weathering and maintain the appearance of the building over time.

However, as discussed in Section (b) below, the extent and variety of glass framing types is considered excessive. The free-standing columns supporting the building’s street canopies also detract from the potential elegance of the architectural composition and add clutter to Burelli Street.

(b) whether the form and external appearance of the proposed development will improve the quality and amenity of the public domain

The building envelope controls in Chapter 13 of DCP 2009 create a building base between 12 and 24 metres high with a tower above. The base creates a scale at street level which is appropriate for Wollongong City Centre. It “humanises” development. To ensure that the base is clearly legible and has sufficient presence to achieve its urban function, the tower above must be setback significantly. Clause 2.2.3 of DCP 2009, Chapter D13 requires a 4 metre setback.

As detailed in Sub-section (v) below, the proposed development has lesser setbacks on Burelli Street, the minimum being 1.27 metres at Level 6. It is clear from examining Section B-B on Drawing DA-16 and the photomontages that the visual presence of the base is substantially diminished by the sloping facade above.

This shortcoming is of particular concern in the building's Burelli Street context. The proposed base has a scale which is compatible with the civic buildings on the other side of the street and it lessens the visual impact of the development on Civic Square. The reduced setbacks resulting from the sloping facade compromise these outcomes. There appears to be no compensating benefit to be derived from the tilted facade. It is recommended that the building should comply with the 4 metre tower setback required in the DCP.

In addition to a variety of glass finishes and colours, the building's architectural expression relies in part on a multiplicity of external elements – columns, spandrels and shading devices. It is considered that these elements are deployed to excess and that a more restrained articulation of the facades and the elimination of the columns supporting the canopies on Burelli Street would produce a more elegant and dignified architectural expression. The integrity of some of the facade elements is also of concern. In particular, the sloping glass element facing Burelli Street above the building base is treated as a floating glass plane, but the applied framing and sun shading is not compatible with this concept.

Taken altogether, the sloping facade elements and excessive articulation of the proposed building make an assertive and prominent statement. The building seems deliberately intended to call attention to itself. In this location, with civic uses across the street and given that the building contains primarily commercial uses, its external appearance is overly exuberant. Because it is not sufficiently respectful of its civic neighbours, the proposal will not improve the quality of the public realm.

(c) whether the proposed development detrimentally impacts on view corridors

Figure 3.12 of DCP 2009, Chapter D13 indicates that neither Burelli Street nor Kembla Street is a designated view corridor. Site inspection confirms that the proposal will not detrimentally impact view corridors.

(d) whether the proposed development detrimentally overshadows an area shown distinctively coloured and numbered on the Sun Plane Protection Map

Wollongong LEP 2009 Sun Plane Protection Map – Sheet SPP_025 indicates that the proposal will not overshadow any of the coloured and numbered areas on the map. The Applicant's Shadow Diagrams (Drawing DA-26, assumed to be midwinter but not labelled as such) show overshadowing of Stewart Street, but the LEP anticipates this by allowing a building height of 48 metres. The proposal is 46 metres. Greater overshadowing of Stewart Street and the properties on its south side is expected from Stages 1 and 3 of the Mid City Square development.

(e) how the proposed development addresses the following matters:

(i) the suitability of the land for development

The site is considered suitable for development from an urban design perspective. There is a clear opportunity to improve the quality of built form on the site.

(ii) existing and proposed uses and use mix

The existing use on the site is commercial. The proposed development contains commercial, retail/commercial and residential uses. These uses are permissible under the zoning and are appropriate in urban design terms.

Figure 3.4 of DCP 2009, Chapter D13 indicates that the Burelli and Kembla Street frontages of the site are to have “active street frontages”. It is indicated in the application documents that the ground floor of the proposal may be occupied by a bank. This use will not contribute significantly to the vitality of Burelli and Kembla Streets. Whilst the difficulties associated with mandating uses are understood, it is noted that an agreement with the Applicant to provide active ground floor uses is highly desirable. A coffee shop on the northeast corner of the ground floor, opening out onto Burelli Street and the plaza would receive winter sun and significant commercial exposure.

The inclusion of residential floor space, albeit only two penthouse units, is a positive feature of the development. Whilst its contribution to a more vibrant city centre will be marginal in itself, it is to be hoped that this gesture will encourage other developers to include residential floor space in their future projects.

(iii) heritage issues and streetscape constraints

There are two locally designated heritage items on Burelli Street opposite the proposed development -- St Andrews Presbyterian church and Wollongong City Gallery (formerly Council’s offices). To the northeast are Civic Plaza and the Illawarra Performing Arts Centre. As described under Section (b) above, the proposed development, in its form and architectural expression, would draw attention to itself and thereby lessen the prominence of the heritage and civic items it faces.

(iv) the location of any tower proposed, having regard to the need to achieve an acceptable relationship with other towers (existing or proposed) on the same site or on neighbouring sites in terms of separation, setbacks, amenity and urban form

The proposed development adjoins Corporate Square, an existing 6 storey building to the east, and a proposed 7 storey building to the south known as Mid City Square Stage 3.

Clause 2.5.3 of DCP 2009, Chapter D13 requires a minimum side and rear setback above the building base for commercial uses of 6 metres. To the east the proposal provides 10.5 metres. For the residential uses at the top of the building to the east (which are above the top of the Corporate Square building) the requirement of 12 metres is also met.

To the south the proposal just satisfies the 6 metre requirement for the commercial floors of the building. For the top two residential floors, however, where a 12 metre setback is required, the setbacks are approximately 10 metres and 11.5 metres. Given that each of the two units has two other aspects, this non-compliance is considered acceptable.

(v) bulk, massing and modulation of buildings

The proposed development complies with the Floor Space Ratio and Height controls of WLEP 2009. The general massing of the building takes the form of a base surmounted by a tower, consistent with the “build to” lines, street frontage heights and setbacks in Chapter 2 of DCP 2009, Chapter D13.

There is an important non-compliance with the front setback control on Burelli Street, however, where the DCP controls require a 4 metre setback above the base. At the first level above the base (Level 5), the setback is 2.7 metres. At Level 6, it is 1.27 metres. It then increases consistently up to Level 10, where it is 3.59 metres. Substantially greater setbacks occur on the next two levels, which contain two penthouse apartments.

The substantially reduced setback of the lower part of the tower on Burelli Street (1.27 meters versus the DCP’s 4 metres) blurs the distinction between base and tower and reduces the visual prominence of the base. In addition, the effect of the progressive setback from Burelli Street is to create a sloping facade, which is a prominent feature of the proposed development. These issues are discussed further under section (b) above.

Clause 2.4.3 of DCP 2009, Chapter D13 sets a maximum building depth for commercial floorplates of 27 metres. The proposal exceeds this standard by as much as 2.6 metres at Level 6. If the proposal complied with the 4 metre setback on Burelli Street it would satisfy the building depth standard.

Apart from the sloping Burelli Street facade, the form of the building is relatively straightforward. The facades, however, are heavily modulated as discussed under section (b) above.

(vi) street frontage heights

The proposed development has streetwalls fronting Burelli and Kembla Streets which are 4 storeys and 15 metres high. This height satisfies the DCP requirement for street frontage heights of between 12 and 24 metres (Clause 2.3.3 of DCP 2009, Chapter D13). It is an appropriate response to the civic buildings on the opposite side of Burelli Street.

(vii) environmental impacts such as sustainable design, overshadowing, wind and reflectivity

It is understood that the Applicant has submitted an Energy Efficiency report which indicates that the building will achieve a 4 star rating. This satisfies Council's requirement under Clause 5.2.2 of DCP 2009, Chapter D13. It is proposed that rain water will be retained on site for reuse. Council should urge the Applicant to aim for a higher star rating.

Overshadowing, discussed in Clause (d) above, is not a significant concern.

It is understood that a wind effects report has been submitted by the Applicant, but this has not been sighted. It is noted that 1.2 metre high glazed screens have been added to the outer edge of all sides of the building at the top of its base (Level 5). These screens are presumably intended to mitigate wind effects on the streets and ground level open spaces around the development.

Whilst it would appear that the screens may be effective on the east, west and south sides of the building, where the tower is setback from the base 4 metres, their efficacy on the north side is a concern. Because the tower portion of the north facade slopes outwards and is setback only 1.27 metres at its bottom edge (Level 6), the proposed screen on Level 5 may have little effect in blocking wind blowing down the face of the building. This could have adverse consequences at ground level on Burelli Street.

Reflectivity needs to be addressed, given the predominance of glass as a facade material. It is understood that reflectivity is to be limited to a maximum of 20%.

(viii) the achievement of the principles of ecologically sustainable development

Clause 2.4.3 of DCP 2009, Chapter D13 requires any residential floor plate to have a maximum depth of 18 metres. The proposal slightly exceeds this dimension, but because the building core is relatively large, this is not an issue. Depths from windows to core are typically 5 metres or less.

In general, the proposal's two penthouse apartments enjoy high levels of internal amenity and follow accepted ESD principles. The exception is passive solar heat gain in winter. One unit faces south, with relatively minor exposure to the east and west.

This shortcoming can be addressed by reconfiguring the floor layout so that one unit occupies the eastern half of the floor plate and the other the western half. It is

recognised that only one unit would then enjoy ocean views. One way to address this might be to flip the units over on the floor above.

Lack of shading of glazed areas in summer is also a concern. A visually prominent canopy is provided on the north side of the building above the upper residential storey, but this would be entirely inadequate to exclude summer sun. There is no indication of screening to east and west facing glazed areas.

(ix) pedestrian, cycle, vehicular and service access, circulation and requirements

The base of the proposed building is set back 4 meters from the Burelli Street boundary, in accordance with the requirements of Figure 2.2 of DCP 2009, Chapter D13. This results in a generous footpath which extends the existing wider footpath to the east of the site to Kembla Street. The enhanced width is compatible with the civic uses and plaza on the other side of Burelli Street.

A 12 metre wide plaza is proposed between the eastern facade of the new building and the Corporate Square building to its east. It is intended that the southern end of this plaza will connect to the lobby entrance on the north side of the approved Stage 1 development and then, via the lobby, to Stewart Street to the south. In addition, a drawing in the current Stage 2 application indicates a “Future pedestrian link in Stage 3”, running north-south adjacent to Stage 1 and connecting the proposed plaza to Stewart Street. This north-south connection between Burelli and Stewart Streets accords with Figure 3.1 of DCP 2009, Chapter D13. A connection is logical and reasonable, but to be truly public it will need to be completed in Stage 3 as a pedestrian link which is open to the sky or a public arcade.

The potential for an east-west connection to the south of the proposed development has also been raised. It is difficult to comment on this idea in the absence of any drawings depicting it, however it would seem in principle that this connection may be unnecessary and even unwise. It is not shown on Council’s diagram. Its amenity may be questionable if it adjoins the vehicle ramp which is part of the current Stage 2 proposal. And it may pose a safety and security risk because of limited visibility.

The current Stage 2 proposal includes a two storey high Lobby which runs along the full length of the eastern side of the ground floor and varies in width from 6 metres at its northern (Burelli Street) end to 7.5 metres at its southern end. It has single storey doors and an external canopy along its eastern edge adjoining the plaza. The value of this lobby is questioned. Whilst it would provide weather protection to pedestrians walking past the building, it is clearly not part of the public realm and will not animate the plaza. As shown on the Eastern Elevation (Drawing DA-18) it will present as a “closed” wall of glazing to the plaza. This may exacerbate the lifelessness of the ground floor facade of the Corporate Square building on the eastern side of the plaza. If the lobby space was allocated to active uses opening out directly onto the plaza a more dynamic public space would result. The proposed canopy along the eastern facade

would still provide a measure of weather protection. An alternative approach would be to redesign the lobby as a colonnade, with two storey openings, no external awning and active uses adjoining it. The plaza would be less activated, however.

Only one entrance is provided to the main foyer, off the plaza and via the lobby discussed above. Whilst access from the plaza is desirable and should be retained, a main building entrance off Burelli Street or at the corner of Burelli and Kembla Streets should also be provided. Loss of ground floor commercial space would be compensated for if the eastern lobby were partially or totally allocated to active uses as suggested above. The main building core would need to be redesigned, but this appears feasible.

It is proposed that access to the two penthouse apartments will be via the main foyer and one of the lifts which serve the commercial floors. Whilst this arrangement is not ideal, it is acceptable given that there are only two apartments in the development.

Vehicular access onto the site occurs at one point only, off Kembla Street. A kerb crossing leads directly to a ramp along the southern boundary of the site which takes all vehicles down to the basement levels of the development. This arrangement is considered optimal. Bicycle riders must use the same ramp to access the bicycle parking area on Basement Level 1. Subject to applicable Australian Standards and any other relevant regulations, this arrangement is considered acceptable.

(x) impact on, and any proposed improvements to, the public domain

A new plaza is located between the proposed development and the existing Corporate Square building to the east. The provision of this open space requires the waiver of the requirement in Clause 2.5.3 of DCP 2009, Chapter D13 for nil side setback for a building base, presumably intended to create a continuous streetwall. Because the Corporate Square building is set back from the common side boundary, a continuous streetwall on Burelli Street cannot be achieved. Waiver of the nil side setback control for the proposed development is necessary to create the new plaza and is considered to be justified.

Although the plaza is located on private land, it will effectively become part of the public domain. It is noted that Drawing DA-01 shows “Security Gates” across the plaza at its northern (Burelli Street) end. Council will need to ensure that appropriate opening hours are maintained.

The plaza includes large planters, trees, benches and steps which form a “spine” running down the centre of the space. It is understood that this device allows differing levels between the two buildings to be reconciled and that planters or other furniture cannot be placed against the Corporate Square building because its ground floor wall facing the plaza is fully glazed.

The plaza is part of a full block pedestrian connection and will improve the public domain. Some of the elements furnishing it (most notably the planters which measure

as much as 12 metres by 3.5 metres) are over-scaled, however, and should be significantly reduced in size. It may also be possible to reduce the number of steps in some locations by regrading the plaza surfaces. It is also suggested that the planter which is currently located on the central axis of the foyer extended out into the plaza be replaced by steps, to allow unimpeded access from the foyer to the plaza area adjoining the Corporate Square building.

Two narrow linear planters are located in front of the building along Burelli Street. These appear tokenistic and may attract litter. It is suggested that they be replaced with steps or low walls

3.0 Conclusion

Whilst the proposed development meets the fundamental development controls of WLEP 2009, it faces a more difficult and complex test under Clause 8.5 of the LEP. Design excellence may at first sight seem highly subjective, but there are a variety of issues which can be explored in order to arrive at a more informed judgement. This report examines all of the measures identified in Clause 8.5 in order to facilitate an overall assessment of design excellence.

The proposed development has many positive aspects and addresses many of the matters under Clause 8.5 satisfactorily. However, there are concerns which call into question the design excellence of the proposal. They include:

- Inadequate setback of the tower on Burelli Street, which diminishes the presence of the building base. The base is a crucial urban design element. It has a scale which is compatible with the civic buildings on the other side of the street and it lessens the visual impact of the development on Civic Square. It is recommended that the building should comply with the 4 metre tower setback required in the DCP.
- The sloping elements of the Burelli Street facade and the excessive articulation of the facades generally. Taken together, these create an assertive architectural statement which is considered inappropriate in relation to the heritage buildings and civic realm opposite. A more restrained approach to the building's architectural expression is encouraged
- Uncertainty about the provision of active street frontages at grade along Burelli and Kembla Streets and the proposed plaza on the eastern side of the building
- The potential for adverse wind effects on Burelli Street, given the configuration of the sloping tower portion of the north facade and the windscreens below it at Level 5
- The poor configuration of the proposal's two penthouse apartments for passive solar heat gain in winter. They can be replanned to resolve this issue
- The value of the Lobby along the eastern side of the ground floor. It will not animate the plaza and may be better allocated to active uses opening out directly onto the plaza to create a more dynamic public space
- The provision of only one entrance to the main foyer, off the plaza. A main building entrance off Burelli Street or at the corner of Burelli and Kembla Streets should also be provided

- The design of the new plaza between the proposed development and the existing Corporate Square building to the east. It should be simplified, over-scaled elements should be reduced in size and the number of steps reduced where possible.