



URBAN DESIGN CONSULTATIVE GROUP MEETING

ITEM No. 2

Date of Panel Assessment: 21 April 2016

Address of Project: 731 & 745 Hunter Street, Newcastle West

Name of Project (if applicable): Birdwood Park Development – Sites A & B only

DA Number of Pre-DA? Pre-DA

No. of Buildings: Two

No. of Units: Site A -170 hotel rooms
Site B - 72 Independent Living Units + 60
Aged Care rooms

Declaration of Conflict of Interest: Glen Spicer

Attendees:

- Applicant
- John Streeter - EJE
- Garry Fielding Planner
- Tom Elliot – Developer/Land Owner
- Tim Sherlock – Reid Campbell architects
- Richard Campbell – Tactical Group

Council

- Murray Blackburn-Smith
- David Paine

This report addresses the nine Design Quality Principles set out in the Apartment Design Guide (2015) under State Environmental Planning Policy No.65. It is also an appropriate format for applications which do not include residential flats.

The Panel report for the March meeting is repeated below, followed by new comments on the applicants' April submission in *italics*:-

Background Summary

The applicant has consolidated a number of adjoining sites in an area with potential for major redevelopment, and the intention is to build a staged development. A new hotel is proposed on an area designated 'Site A', an Aged Care residential building on 'Site B' together with retention and revitalization of the heritage-listed Drill Hall, all fronting Little King Street. These are to be the first stage of the development, with a high-rise mixed use building on 'Site C', and a commercial development on 'Site D' – both fronting Hunter Street – to follow. A new pedestrian path is proposed adjacent to the Drill Hall and the existing Latec House site, linking Little King Street to Hunter Street.

The ambience of the sites is presently not attractive, and their redevelopment is certainly highly desirable. They are part of a large area in Newcastle West which has been rezoned to permit much more intensive activities, and buildings of considerably greater density and height. Within this context the general development strategy and the types of activities proposed would be appropriate, as would the overall heights and densities of the four major building components.

The present application is limited to Sites A and B only. Both the hotel and aged care buildings as proposed are well under the maximum density and height permissible under Newcastle LEP 2012. The planning and forms of both are constrained to some extent by the 'formulaic' requirements of the clients, particularly in the case of the hotel, for which the standard 'Holiday Inn' brief is restrictive. This leads to a major concern about the submitted preliminary design, -the unsatisfactory and unrelated forms of the two buildings addressing Little King Street.

The following issues were discussed:-

- (a) *The architects advised that preliminary work is about to be undertaken on the design of a four-storey pre-school centre to be located on 'Site D': this will be helpful in assessing whether set-backs between buildings on this site and those proposed for the subject development will be satisfactory. Irrespective, it will be important for legally enforceable conditions to be in place to ensure that any future buildings on 'Site D' will comply with the agreed height/setback for the proposed centre.*
- (b) *The plans submitted to the meeting indicate positive responses to the Panel's comments in relation to built form and aesthetic issues in particular.*
- (c) *Little King Street and Birdwood Park –Following the March meeting the Panel discussed with Council the critical issue of managing traffic and integrating the urban design of this street, the potential for pedestrianizing all or part, and the need to review the landscape design of the Park to complement and enhance its character and usability. Preliminary advice is that the Council traffic engineers are considering in particular a one-way system which will minimize its use for through-traffic. As soon as some consensus is reached on traffic, Council landscape architects should be engaged with the process. The applicants advised that they were fully supportive of these initiatives and were keen to work with Council to achieve the best outcome.*

(d) *Right of way/easement and narrow site to the north-west. Council and applicants agreed that it is timely to investigate options to resolve this presently awkward and unattractive adjoining site. Council to initiate discussions?*

1. Context and Neighbourhood Character

The context is well documented in the submission, with the exception of two matters:-

- .The direction of due North in the context diagrams, where this appears to be inaccurate.
- .The potential form of development on sites C & D, which although not part of the application will have major impacts on Sites A & B. It would be very desirable to include an 'indicative' and realistic plan form for both sites so that their potential relationship and impact can be appreciated. One very relevant issue for example is the setback distances from the south boundary of a development on Site D, which are important in assessing whether or not the setbacks of the aged care building from the common boundary are acceptable as proposed.

The existing character of the neighbourhood is in process of changing dramatically with numerous high-rise buildings approved nearby, several on the immediately opposite side of Stewart Avenue, and some close-by on the opposite side of Hunter Street. Latec House which has for decades been an intrusive presence due to its height in this lower scale area, immediately adjoins Site B, and is closer to the common boundary than would be permissible under contemporary planning controls, thus posing challenges in relation to privacy and overshadowing for the proposed aged care development.

A narrow right-of-way vehicle access adjoins the north-west end of the site, with an adjacent 'sliver' of a privately owned site presently used for parking on its other side. It is not known whether the roads authority has any intention of utilizing this site in full or in part for road widening purposes. The applicant advised that they approached the owner of the narrow driveway 'axe-handle' immediately to the north-west of their site which provides access to their Hunter Street property but they declined to sell. The major arterial Stewart Avenue is one of the key road entrances to Newcastle and there is an obvious opportunity to significantly enhance its character by substantial tree-planting, extending the ambience provided by the 'tree canopy' in Birdwood Park which is to the immediate south-west. It is strongly recommended that Council take the initiative and explore how the best outcome might be achieved.

Birdwood Park is an invaluable asset. It is presently not well used due to its being 'isolated' by King Street to the south and Stewart Street to the north-east, and its main value in recent years has been aesthetic and environmental. It will however be a very significant asset for the proposed new developments, providing attractive outlook and opportunity to enjoy the park for both hotel guests and residents in the aged care building, and - equally importantly – separating them from the traffic noise and pollution generated by the two increasingly busy arterial roads.

It will also be critical to integrate the design of Little King Street into the development so that the amenity of the Park is enhanced, by way of additional tree-planting, pedestrian-friendly paving, street furniture etc. The DCP proposes that the street should be a 'Shared Zone', and this outcome is strongly endorsed.

No further comments

2. Built Form and Scale

The planning and amenity of both hotel and aged care buildings are generally acceptable, but their forms in relation to Little King Street are unresolved and unacceptable. This key concern relates to the height and scale of the podium levels, the setbacks above, and the unresolved relationship between the two major buildings along this prime frontage.

The DCP frontage controls specify a street-frontage height of 22m, with a 20m setback above this level to tower blocks behind, potentially up to 90m in height. The Hotel building exceeds the DCP street-front height by approximately 5m., whilst the podium of the aged care residential building is some 11m. lower with an approx. 5m. setback to the 9-storey tower behind, resulting in this unacceptable dilemma, with the two buildings neither related to one another nor complying with the DCP.

This is an unusual case where two major new adjoining buildings are being designed concurrently, and the best outcome must be obtained, rather than insisting on DCP compliance. The Panel is of the strong view that a street-front podium of approximately the height proposed for the aged care building would be by far the most desirable option, and that a set-back above that level of the order shown would also be appropriate. This would result in a comfortable human scale at street level, as well as providing a suitable transition in scale to the heritage-listed Drill Hall.

The architects for the Holiday Inn advised that the plan of the hotel was required to comply with the standard pattern adopted by the proponent, but it is quite apparent that the outcome recommended above could readily be achieved by setting back the 'accommodation' section of the hotel above the car-parking levels. (It is noted that the submitted shadow diagrams in fact are indicative of the building forms recommended above). Some further minor intrusion into the DCP 6m. rear setback by the northern wing- beyond that already proposed - would be acceptable, since the main bulk of the building is be set back far beyond this line.

The main street frontages of the upper parts of the two buildings should be generally aligned in plan, and the *podium parapet heights* should be consistent, with some minor variations being acceptable depending upon their detailed design and articulation. The significant differences between the two in height of the 'tower' elements would not be of concern provided that the podium bases are developed as recommended. The submitted diagram 'Massing Elevation Proposal' showing a 'scaling up of the massing' from north to south would be acceptable, although there is adequate room for further variations to the heights

if desired, provided that there is strongly expressed podium base, with the taller forms set back.

The following refinements were proposed:-

- (a) *The upper accommodation levels of the hotel to be set back 3.5m. from the front boundary with an approximately 10.5m. high podium below. This would respond to the podium as proposed for the adjoining RSL development. Although lower than the latter, it would be acceptable in principle, provided that the designs for the two podiums are refined to include articulation/stepping etc to ensure that they are sensitively related in detail where they interface.*
- (b) *The upper levels of the RSL building have been moved closer to the front boundary, -now a 3m. setback –so that the two ‘tower’ buildings are close to aligning in plan along Little King Street frontage. This also has the significant advantage of increasing the separation distances to adjacent buildings on the rear boundary. Again this change is acceptable in principle, but there are serious concerns about the projection of the balconies almost to the front boundary line, making them unduly assertive. If the balconies were to be reduced in length, with their front balustrades parallel to the boundary, and were set back 1100 from the boundary for their full length, they could potentially be acceptable.*
- (c) *Rear separation distances of RSL building. With the now proposed changes these are potentially acceptable, subject in particular to the restrictions on ‘Site D’ as discussed above being implemented. Without this condition being imposed the separation of only 7500mm at the northern end could not be supported. Although separation distances to the existing residential building on the Latec House site are below ADG standards, the fact that that development provides far less than an equitable share of setbacks, and the proposed provision of adjustable full-height screens to all balconies on the new building, together would justify acceptance of the amended configuration.*
- (d) *The design of street level frontages in both buildings now provides for continuous awning cover, with accentuation of the main entry to the RSL building. The design of the hotel frontage should now be similarly refined.*

3. Density

Within LEP standard and acceptable

No further comment

4. Sustainability

Although not discussed at the meeting, both developments should very desirably include environmental initiatives beyond statutory requirements, such as solar collectors, rainwater/wastewater recycling, and greening of roof-decks. Both the hotel guest rooms and aged care residential units should *not be reliant* on year-round air-conditioning. This may well require some departure from standard practice for the hotel chain, but it is not only highly desirable to minimize energy usage, but also to enhance the ambience and amenity of rooms by ensuring that guests can open windows when the ambient outside temperature is pleasant.

These comments are further emphasized. Both developments in this conspicuous Newcastle location should be exemplary. The rear courtyard spaces in particular will provide opportunities for 'green' initiatives which could also create attractive outlook for hotel guests and residents, who will both look obliquely over the courtyards of the new adjoining properties.

Greening of the top of both narrow podia along Little King Street could substantially enhance their ambience and attraction, and minimize the visual impact of the 'tower' walls above.

5. Landscape

There are numerous opportunities for landscape to complement and enhance the character and quality of the buildings and their context. Landscape architect(s) must be part of the team(s) at the next stage of design development, and should address landscape to roof-tops, rear courtyards, street-front podium decks, and critically both Little King Street and its integration with Birdwood Park in cooperation with Council staff.

No further comments

6. Amenity

The street awning should continue for the full length of both frontages, being raised if necessary at vehicle entry/exit points. Continuity of cover around the corner and along the right-of-way frontage would also be desirable. There could potentially be extremely high standard of street-front amenity, allowing for outdoor dining etc facing both the park and new pedestrian pathway, by way of imaginative design and development of the public domain.

Aged Care Generally should be of reasonable standard. However the separation distances between the proposed building and its existing and proposed neighbours fall short of the ADG recommendations. The breaches relate both to the former Latec House and Site D to the east, and although in the case of Latec House this is primarily but not entirely due to the fact that the building was constructed well before SEPP was introduced. The setback of the proposed new building should be measured as required from the balcony edges. This concern would be mitigated by the proposed limitation on the height of new development on Site D to four storeys. The proposed separation nevertheless is not acceptable and it is recommended that:-

- A. Approval to the development should include a legally binding 4 storey height constraint on any future building on Site D, possibly also including its setback from the southern common boundary.
- B. Separation from the common boundary be increased and habitable rooms and balconies oriented and screened to ensure that privacy of residents in both the new development and Latec House is adequately protected.

The roof-top communal areas would potentially be a very attractive amenity, subject to development of the design to include landscaped areas etc. The following detailed matters also should be addressed:-

.Projecting balconies, particularly those to the north-east and on corners would be extremely exposed to winds. Balconies should preferably be recessed, but if not should have adequate adjustable screening, -which also is valuable for providing privacy, screening washing, barbeques etc

.Visually integrate and enhance character of RAC and ILU entrance foyers by including glazed areas and possibly open areas between.

.Allow access at RAC level for ILU elevator(s) as back-up when elevator for former is out-of –service. This would also provide opportunity for taking RAC residents to roof-top communal area on occasions.

.Communal spaces as discussed under 8. below.

- (a) *See comments above under Built Form in relation to various issues.*
- (b) *Design of roof-top communal space requires further refinement to ensure that there is adequate area with good winter sunlight: at present this is unduly restricted*
- (c) *Street frontage should be 'activated' to the extent possible by removing car-parking bays which are adjacent to the frontage.*

Hotel Within the acknowledged constraints of the standard hotel format, amenity for guests and visitors would be reasonable. The provision of natural light, and potentially natural ventilation to corridors at accommodation levels is commended. Note separate recommendations relating to landscape and allowing natural ventilation to guest rooms.

- (a) *Provide privacy screens at end of corridors to minimize direct overlooking of private residential areas in adjoining RSL building. These could be oriented to still allow for attractive outlook*

7. Safety

The proposed new pedestrian link would potentially be attractive, subject to it being adequately activated when the Hunter Street stage is completed. Presumably it is intended that the path will remain in private ownership? When Site B only is in operation it will need to be secured after dark. Generally the proposed new developments should substantially enhance the safety and security of the park and the immediate neighborhood.

No further comments

8. Housing Diversity and Social Interaction

Both developments address specific market, legal and commercial requirements and it is understood will be compliant in those respects.

In the Aged Care development, the independent living units are arranged in groups of eight at each floor level, and from the experience of the panel and independent research this should function very effectively in the social sense. The broad access passage at each level commendably opens at both ends and offers an ideal opportunity to include a small seating area for residents and

visitors to socialize and enjoy outlook (and winter sunlight at upper levels at the northern end). Small balconies could further enhance this amenity.

No further comments

9. Aesthetics

The prime objective in relation to both buildings is that they should complement Birdwood Park, forming an urbane background to the park. It is suggested that whilst the tower components should be very discreet, the podium levels could be more visually assertive. This goes to the importance of their detailed architectural character and selection of materials and finishes.

. The preliminary images of the aged care building suggest that in general the design would be satisfactory in relation to its architectural character. The colours should have greater warmth than is suggested by the images, consistent with traditional Newcastle materials and finishes.

. As to the hotel, whilst it is appreciated that the design of facades is generated by the standard model, the submitted images indicate unacceptable emphasis on the contrasting horizontal 'stripes' at the accommodation levels, which would be unsympathetic in this context. This could potentially be resolved by minimizing the contrast, and again selecting warm colours and tones, rather than the contrasting off-white and dark blue shown in the images. The dark blue of the podium level façade to Little King Street should also be reconsidered, and the selected colour(s) must relate sensitively to the podium of the aged care development. The façade signage as indicated is considered to be acceptable.

(a) Hotel *The proposed refinements from the original submission are all positive and supported in principle.*

.Respond to above comments regarding design of street-front awning

.The proposed patterned screen to the podium-level parking is supported, and should be developed to minimize any external impact of headlights: also the very assertive red colour should be toned down, -perhaps to a 'rust' colour/tone.

.Although the colours for the main façade above are now far more appropriate as indicated in the presentation, there could be greater warmth in tone.

(b) RSL *The colours, detailed forms, articulation etc are supported, with the important exception of the balconies to the street frontage. These should be at least set back and reduced in length as recommended above under Built Form para (b).*

.Amendments Required to Achieve Design Quality

In addition to the various detailed matters raised above, the following critical issues require resolution before a DA is submitted:-

.Form of buildings in relation to the street frontage and to each other

.Separation distances/privacy of aged care units in relation to Latec House and Site D

.Balcony design in independent living units

.Character and aesthetic quality

Response to the detailed issues raised in italics above

.Summary Recommendation

The submission is in principle as very desirable development in relation to the activities proposed, and the general height, scale and density of the buildings.

1. The critical issues noted above and the other detailed matters covered in this report should be addressed by the applicant, along with landscape design proposals, before a Development Application is submitted. Particular attention should be paid to the issue of separation distances from Latec House.
2. In view of the potential transformation of Little King Street into a vital new public domain, it will be important to develop a clear vision as to the best outcome, how traffic should be managed, and how the design can be integrated with upgrading of Birdwood Park. It may be that an urban design study commissioned by Council should be undertaken in association with the development of the applicant's proposal. Council should also explore options regarding the right-of-way and the narrow site to the north-west with a view to improving the public domain and streetscape in this area.

The issues raised above should be addressed and resolved by the applicant before submission of the DA.

Council too is urged to take the initiative in relation to Little King Street and Birdwood Park and take advantage of this unique opportunity to enhance urban design and landscape outcomes.