

# Audax Urban

## INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Audax Urban has been engaged by Strathfield Council to conduct an independent desktop peer review of the Planning Proposal (PP) material, with a focus on the Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) for the site located at 94-98 Cosgrove Road, Strathfield South. The review has also focused on the massing presented, methodology, and conclusions made.

The PP seeks an amendment of the Strathfield LEP for both height and floor space ratio to facilitate a three-level industrial warehouse, which is generally a rectangular site with an approximate area of 43,100 sqm.

The site is currently occupied by a single storey warehouse within an established industrial and logistics precinct. The site is located to the north of an R2/R3 Low/Medium Density Residential precinct and RE1 public recreation areas.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Upon review of the PP materials, it is Audax Urban conclusion that the most significant visual impacts would be the residential dwellings and precinct to the south (especially those along Madeline Street) and the public recreational spaces (RE1) such as Cooke Park. The Geoscapes' Visual Assessment has in most of the 12 locations interrogated adequately assigned an adequate "magnitude of Change" to each location, but failed to assigned a correct 'Significance of the Visual Impact' concluding that "the impact in most cases was 'negligible or minor' with few instances of a moderate impact. It is Audax Urban's opinion that the Significance of the Visual Impact in some cases high/moderate to high. The methodology used by Geoscapes is also questionable in that no proof of the veracity of the montages is provided and at best these can be described as 'artist's renditions and their accuracy cannot be ascertained as they are not court certifiable montages. The proposal has been found to have greater level of visual impact than that described in the Applicant's VIA and it is not found to be meritorious from a visual impact point of view.

## OVERALL FINDINGS

Based on the RLs Provided (ridge at RL 51.600 minus Ground Level RL 17.000) The warehouse is equivalent to a 10-storey residential building. The proposed facility's corners where the offices are located are equivalent to a 9-storey residential building. However, due to the presence of a 3m understorey carpark, the southern end of the building will be equivalent to 11 (centre) and 10 (southern end).

While the proposed increase in height alone was found to have significant visual impacts to the residential precinct to the south, the length of the overall facility is also a contributory factor. The proposal's longitudinal (east-west) dimension along the centre of the facility is 208.1m (refer to NettletonTribe's Concept Design Report, Page 17). This combined with the proposed increase in height have a significant impact and exacerbate the proposal's perception of bulk and scale.

## CONTEXTUAL FIT

The VIA is prefaced by a notion that the "Indicative Reference Scheme prepared by Nettletontribe Architects ... demonstrates" that "a suitable built form, urban design and landscape outcome can be achieved within the proposed amendments to the Strathfield LEP 2012 and Strathfield DCP" and that "the design of the warehouse is complementary to the surrounding industrial context (page 51).

The above is substantiated by the SEE (page 55), which states that:

*the Site is designated for industrial development (E4) under the Strathfield LEP 2012 and has a current industrial use. Therefore, a new industrial development in this location is not out of place with the existing or future character of the area.*

While the type of facility and use will complement the existing character of the intramodal/logistic precinct, the proposed height and density will be a marked departure from the surrounding existing character within the logistics precinct and, especially that of the residential precinct to the south. The preface of the VIA is biased and advocates for the suitability of the reference scheme before the analysis is completed. The SEE (page 55) is more objective and states that "the Indicative Reference Scheme is expected to be clearly noticeable as an industrial development with views along Madeline Street within the residential area to the south-east of the site to be significantly altered by its presence". The findings of Audax Urban's review agree more closely with the SEE. Audax Urban has concluded that the proposal contravenes the objectives of Part D of Strathfield DCP, which aim:

*'... to ensure developers and property owners submit industrial development proposals which are attractive and sympathetic to the streetscape, are appropriate for the surrounding built and natural environments, have a minimum impact on surrounding non-industrial uses and are functionally and economically viable.'* and

*'To ensure that new industrial development is of a type, scale, height, bulk and character that is compatible with the streetscape characteristics of the surrounding area.'*

## METHODOLOGY

The accuracy of the montages cannot be confirmed for the following reasons:

The VIA report (page 5) states that “camera positions of photographs taken from selected viewpoints were added to” a “model from the recorded GPS data. Known reference points obtained from survey information and point cloud data (ELVIS) were positioned into the view and these were then combined with the site photographs to create the simulated photomontages of the Reference Scheme”.

The method described above is robust and competent; however, no proof of the surveyed points, surveyor registration, wireframe underlays, point cloud overlays has been provided and therefore, they are not court certifiable montages. The visualisations are artist's renditions at best. Their degree of accuracy cannot be ascertained or confirmed and therefore the montages are not able to sustain the scrutiny of the L&E Court.

In addition, the use of drone shots at 120 m in the selection of additional vantage points is also not understood as the height of the surrounding vegetation would expose areas that would normally be filtered by the existing vegetation. Therefore, the selected points would appear more favourable (with more screening) from the viewer's average height.

## PEER REVIEW FINDINGS

As the visualisations are artist's renditions and cannot be relied upon to assess the quality of the impact making it difficult to agree with the report's found 'magnitude of impact' and its conclusions.

For instance, **V1** shows the line of sight between the proposal's top of the roof ridge and the viewer being below or partially interrupted by a tree. However, the drone image which is taken from RL 53.6 shows no such interruptions between the ridge and the point of the viewer. The proposal is the equivalent of a 10-11 storey building, and yet it blends or disappears behind 1 to 2 storey buildings noting the topographical location of the warehouse is higher than the viewer. If the montage was correct, there is no way to confirm its accuracy.

In the case of **V2**, the height of the viewer is at RL 27.9, which is much higher than the location of the View 1 in comparison (16.7) and yet the proposal appears to be taller than the existing one to two storey buildings in the foreground. Again, any doubts with regards to the montages should be able to be verified by a wireframe or overlay of the digital cloud form, but this has not been provided.

The reference scheme illustrates a 208 metre long facility (east-west). This is the equivalent of two city blocks when compared to the surrounding existing industrial development, which is smaller in footprint and much lower in height.

The proposal's 'bulk and scale' will exert a perceivable 'magnitude of change' within the surrounding vantage points, and they will experience a significant impact, especially from the surrounding residential precinct. Yet, the VIA concludes in most instances that the 'magnitude of change' is low and the 'Significance of the Visual Impact' low.

For example, **V5** – from Cookes Skate Park, Belfield located 125m from the subject site was found to have a low 'magnitude of change' because the vantage point will be filtered by the existing vegetation of the park. However, as shown in the extract of drone image below, a great extent of the park including the entire edge and seating area of the field will be in full view of the proposal and the magnitude of change will be high and the visual impact far greater than minor.



Figure 1 Extract from VIA Figure 8: Drone at Position 2 - RL 53.6m - Looking East (source GeoscapesVIA)

Audax Urban agrees with the VIA's assessment of **V9** - Madeline Near No.116, Belfield - Looking Northwest which states that "there would be a substantial change to the baseline, with the proposal creating a new focus and having a defining influence on the view. Views are direct and at close range with changes over a wide horizontal and vertical extent. Therefore, it is judged that the magnitude of change is very high.

In Audax Urban's opinion the length of the building is excessive, facades lack articulation and elevations are planar and unrelieved. The massing lacks any real architectural interest, and all of these contribute to the impact.



The 'magnitude of change' and the 'level of impact' in **V11** and **V12** are found to be similar to that of **V9**. However, the Applicant argues that Visual impact is low and moderate because "the proposal will form a new building of high quality which would visually be an improvement over the older buildings which currently occupy the site". In addition, the applicant argues that "the articulation on the corner of the building, including windows and material changes help to reduce visual impacts".

As discussed in the next section of this peer review report, the proposed massing and architectural expression do little to alleviate the proposal's visual impacts.

## PROPOSED MASSING AND ARCHITECTURAL QUALITY

The proposed height from 12 to 35m is a 291% uplift which will increase the visibility of the 208 m facility above the scale of the existing lower industrial development in the vicinity, which in general observes Part D of the SDCP control, where an industrial building "shall not have a wall height of more than 10m above natural ground level".

Page 50 of the SEE argues that the "Reference Scheme includes a series of design measures to break down the overall bulk of the development type:

*These include the breakdown of horizontal layers, placed of ancillary office space on the corners of the built form, and glazing across the warehouse façade... The combination of these items assist in breaking down the vertical and horizontal bulk and scale of the development, supported by façade articulation and materiality ...*

However, the proposal appears as an overly long facility when considering its height and instead of emphasising verticality the layering accentuates its horizontality. The unrelieved roof datum also contributes to this. The approximate floor to floor heights (35m/3) suggests that each level is equivalent to 3 residential storeys; therefore, the glass windows are monumental at almost 3 resi storeys in height. The elevations are not only long, unrelieved and continuous, they are monumental in scale. The monumental scale of the fenestrations and articulation makes the elevations more legible and visible from the residential precinct.

Contrary to the Applicant's assertions (refer to 7.1.2 Façade Articulation and Materiality), "the use of glazing for ancillary office space, combined with the co-location of car parking", do not assist "in creating a human scale of the development to the immediate surrounding context". As seen in View 11, the proposal lacks an activated ground level and the interface with the public domain is dominated by blank walls.

The additional 2 metre setback to the Hope Street interface will be imperceptible in reducing of the overall appearance of bulk and scale from most of the vantage points analysed.

## PROPOSED LANDSCAPING

The SEE states that “80 new trees are proposed to be planted around the perimeter of the site. This will help to filter the development for visual receptors at close range”. The “proposed landscaping around the perimeter of the building as seen in the 15-year rendition of the landscape for each view location, makes no material difference to the appearance of bulk and scale and does not improve the ground level interface.

The tallest nominated species in the *Indicative Planting Schedule* include White Stringybark, Grey Ironbark, Turpentine tree that have the capacity to grow up to 20m. The proposal will reach approximately 35m in height and even at a mature height, the vegetation will not filter the upper portions of the future development.

As the VIA montages accurately show, the proposed vegetation will do little to mask or filter the overall look of the development even at mature age. Simply, two thirds of the height of the development will always be exposed, and the vegetation will do little to soften or filter its appearance.

## ADDITIONAL FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

- The proposal has not included any analysis or information to meet the planning principle related to site isolation with regards to the isolated site at the southeastern corner – intersection of Madeline and Hope Sts.
- The vehicles ramps appear to be external structures not encapsulated within the building or ‘sleeved’. This is contrary to SDCP section 3.2 4., which state that “Vehicle ramps are to be integrated into the design of the development”.
- The Applicant's proposed site specific DCP, lacks substance and offers no real controls or built form guidance.

In general, the proposal has been found to have greater level of visual impact than that described in the Applicant's VIA and it is not found to be meritorious from a visual impact point of view.

The background features a large grey circle on the left and a large teal circle on the right. In the top right corner, there is a smaller circle with a white hatched pattern. In the bottom right corner, there is another smaller teal circle and a larger circle with a white hatched pattern.

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