

AT LAST: A CHANCE FOR LOCALS TO SAY WHAT THEY THINK OF SUBURBAN PLANNING

FOR Darling Point, that elegant, but much troubled harbourside quarter, 1970 is going to be the year of The Big Plan.

Which will be followed, the aldermen of Woollahra Council earnestly hope, by the Era of Wonderful Peace.

Darling Point has a long history of acrimonious dispute, among the people who live there and the aldermen who control its suburban destiny, as to what sort of home unit blocks should be built and where and to which heights.

Now Woollahra Council has appointed a town planning consultant to supply a quite detailed plan for the future development of the peninsula running from New South Head Road west to the tip of Darling Point.

There is nothing unusual in hiring a planning consultant — but this one actually proposes to ask the inhabitants of Darling Point what they think should be done.

The expert, 37-year-old George Clarke, of the architectural firm of Clarke, Gazzard and Partners, of Sydney, proposes something more searching than a few casual questions.

A statistically sound random sample of Darling Point people will be chosen and everybody on the list will be contacted for a personal interview based on a questionnaire.

The Big Plan will be announced to the world at large at a Press conference to be held by the Mayor of Woollahra, Dr G. C. T. Burfitt-Williams, on January 14.

But the first spoon has already been dipped into the pot of public opinion.

Before Christmas, circulars signed by the Town Clerk, Mr F. D. Bolin, went to residents announcing the questionnaire and adding that any resident who did not happen to fall within the random sample was nevertheless invited to express his or her opinion by:

Large, plush

- Phoning Clarke, Gazzard and Partners and asking to have a questionnaire posted out.

- Sending written statements of opinion to the Council, marked for the attention of Mr Clarke.

- Writing to the mayor to say that he or she (the resident) was willing to serve on working committees and seminars to be set up under the chairmanship of various aldermen.

Although the birth of the home unit age has caused agonies to almost every local government authority in Australia, Darling Point's pains have been particularly severe.

One look at its skyline will show you why.

Darling Point is an old, rich and socially OK part of Sydney which has breathtaking views of one of the world's great harbours — all this placed a few minutes' drive in your Mercedes from Hunter Street.

Real estate developers have been understandably keen to pull down old Darling Point mansions and build tall blocks of home units on the land.

The land costs the developers a mint.

To make the construction of a



DARLING POINT PLANS ITS FUTURE

By JOHN YEOMANS

unit block worthwhile, the building has to return a lot of money. Hence the blocks which have been built have been large and plush.

So large and plush in fact that the great elegant spikes of concrete and glass on Darling Point have turned this charming headland into one of the most starkly dramatic areas in urban Australia.

And as every tall block has gone up, there have been howls of protest from people living nearby in private houses or older and lower flat blocks.

Some objections: the noise, interruption of view, blockage of sunlight, traffic congestion, wind currents generated by the new units.

And, most of all, the destruction of privacy—the unhappiness of having strangers living in apartments so placed that they can look in the windows of your own home.

But redevelopment in one form or another is essential if our cities are to avoid the only-too-obvious agonies of the suburban sprawl.

In Darling Point, one of the most public disputes concerned Ranelagh, the striking shaft of masonry now being completed at the base of the peninsula.

In 1967, council approved a 20-storey block on what was then 76,000 square feet of land.

In 1968 the developers (Progress and Properties Ltd.) increased the

land area to 90,000 square feet. Approval was then given for a 23-storey building.

Last year the land area was increased to 96,000 square feet (all these are round figures) and approval was given for a 26-storey building.

Finally, Progress and Properties increased the plot area to 100,000 square feet and asked approval to increase the height of the building to a whopping 30 storeys.

Council refused. It gave many reasons, including "injury to amenity," that is, damage to the enjoyment of people living nearby.

"Not ideal"

The development company appealed to the Land and Valuation Court. Mr Justice Elsie-Mitchell upheld the company's appeal.

But he added that the development was not an ideal one and would not necessarily have been approved by his Court if construction had not already reached 26 storeys.

It is likely to be quite a time before the wounds caused by the Ranelagh business heal up and as similar wounds have been caused in similar but less legalistically decided cases for years, anything which George Clarke's audience participation planning can do to promote harmony will be an advantage.

Mr Clarke is a lithe, olive-skinned man with a thatch of short hair starting to turn grey.

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My second major cit. parties res n'hood exercise after Battery Point Hobart in 1966 1967

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He expounds his views with all the eloquence of somebody with an Irish father and a French mother.

He is an architectural whizz kid with a keen appreciation of the value of public relations.

Any potential client who wants to know who Mr Clarke is, can get a foolscap-size, spiral-bound plastic-covered brochure entitled "GEORGE CLARKE — PROFESSIONAL BIOGRAPHY."

The client will rapidly discover that Clarke (born in Randwick and educated at Sydney Grammar School) has a string of architectural and town-planning degrees after his name as long as the tail of a comet.

He is a bachelor of architecture from Sydney University with a diploma in town planning from London

and a master's degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Having worked in London and New York, Clarke came back to Australia in 1959, formed a planning and architecture practice with Mr Donald Gazzard and imported, as his specialty, the American idea of "citizen participation in the process of urban planning."

Which means that the people who live in an area to be replanned are given a chance to say what they would like the plan to be.

Transparently this is an idea with limitations.

It is not possible to make a town planning omelet without breaking eggs. There is no point in asking the eggs' opinion if the community at large has agreed that the omelet must be made.

The redevelopment of The Rocks is a classic case.

To ask a man who lives in a terrace house in The Rocks for \$8 a week if he is in favour of having his house pulled down could be a fair sort of waste of time, once the community has decided that the whole area is to be reconstructed.

In other circumstances, citizen participation could be very useful.

The city council of Hobart and the Municipal Council of Willoughby obviously thought so, because each has recently hired Clarke Gazzard and Partners to do citizen participation replanning schemes.

In Darling Point there is no question of changing the character and purpose of the district. Darling Point is rich residential now, and it is going to stay rich residential.

And it could be a valuable aid to all future residential planning to know

what the Darling Point type of citizen regards as O.K. sunlight, O.K. view, O.K. car parking, O.K. noise control and so on.

In Mr Clarke's experience, the people in different parts of Australia have very different ideas on what is acceptable privacy, what is adequate noise control and so on.

"Perth people live a highly motorised extravert sort of life," said Mr Clarke, leaning his elbows didactically on the white top of his desk.

"Perth people like to keep their windows open and their curtains pulled back.

HILLY

"Hobart rather likes to live behind drawn blinds in houses with courtyards enclosed, perhaps by brick walls.

"Adelaide and Sydney supply a striking comparison on standards of privacy.

"Adelaide is flat—a city of one and two storey homes.

"In the whole of Adelaide there is still only one high-rise dwelling block.

"So Adelaide people grow up accustomed to complete privacy in their back gardens. Neighbours can be shut off by any fence or hedge which is about six feet high.

"But Sydney is hilly. And that's the controlling factor.

"Sydney people grow up unworried because they are overlooked at home from the windows of some home higher up the hillside.

"Thus Sydney people's idea on what is a tolerable degree of being overlooked is much more flexible than that of Adelaide people," said Mr Clarke.

I wouldn't care to forecast what degree of privacy Darling Point people consider to be adequate.

But I'm sure that George Clarke and Woollahra Council will spend a most instructive six months finding out.