

City rides skyhigh to a hazy future

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FROM the top of the tallest building in Sydney, the Australia Square tower, the city stretches beyond the horizon — a chaotic mass of office blocks and red roofs, saved only by the apparent beauty of the harbor and the brilliance of the light.

Except for the occasional patch of headland, the buildings have devoured nearly every foot of green. Each day more and more cars pour into the city along all the brave new highways that cut through buildings, suburbs and landscapes.

Blocks of perfectly good offices are pulled down and replaced by bigger and taller ones. This week the builders of Australia Square, the Lend Lease Corporation announced plans for what will be the tallest building in the country — a 860ft hour glass giant on a plaza stretching from Martin Place to King Street, from Pitt to Castlereagh Street.

No one has bothered to ask how this building, and all the others like it, fit into an overall plan of Sydney — a plan that would take the people of Sydney comfortably into the year 2000 and a population of 5½ million.

Where are the town planners and architects? The traffic control experts, the rapid transit men and the public transport buffs? Are there any sociologists and psychologists to tell the planners just how much noise, stress, density and congestion people can stand? Who co-ordinates?

With 2½ million people already in Sydney the brick veneer is beginning to crack.

Various plans are being considered. The State Planning Authority has the Sydney region outline plan; the National Trust has Sydney 2000 which it produced in answer to the SPA's plan; the City Council has asked the Urban Systems Corporation, a group of town planners, to produce a strategic master plan for the city.

A few local councils have started town planning studies and schemes of their own; a few civic groups, in the face of what they consider council neglect, have outlined plans for their own communities.

At present there is no way of co-ordinating planning. From architectural details to the zoning of land, control lies with a variety of authorities — the State Planning Authority, the Water Board, the Department of Main Roads, councils and in some instances the Lands Department, the Department of Local Government, the Housing Commission, and the Maritime Services Board.

The Paddington Society is the one local group that has had any success maintaining its community identity. In Balmain, the local association presented a plan to the Leichhardt Council to try to make some sense out of the suburb's jumble of industrial, maritime and residential areas.

According to Mr. R. Beverley and Mr. J.

Chanter, two architects who live in Balmain and worked on the plan, the council simply refused to consider it.

"They said we could only object to a development if it actually affected us — like blocking the view from the backyard," they said.

"There is simply no machinery for the council to consider the plan as a whole or for an individual or an organisation to present one."

They say all but about 5 per cent of unit development in the area is built without an architect's design.

Some architects were willing just to put a building on a block of land without any thought to traffic, congestion, its relation to other buildings and the needs of the environment, they said.

The Glebe Society is another group with a plan — to preserve the buildings and environs of a part of Glebe called the Toxteth Estate.

The plan is still before the Leichhardt Council but it has already won an assurance from the Minister for Local Government, Mr Morton, that a second expressway — the north-western — will tunnel and not cut through the point.

"A second expressway would have effectively destroyed the natural unity and amenities of a highly valued and historic suburb," said Dr Bernard Smith, the president of the society and Professor of Fine Arts at Sydney University.

He says it is not only the unique environment and architecture that should be preserved but the sense of community that develops in such an area.

Urban Systems have also prepared a plan of Artarmon for Willoughby Council. According to their director of planning, Mr G. Clarke, the scheme involves a comprehensive approach to the whole environment.

"This means identifying the total resources and basic problems for each local government area and adopting principles, priorities and procedures for further action," he said.

"Individual decisions can then be made in the light of the aims for the total environment. In most cases a detailed investigation of an area will result in improved living conditions.

"In Artarmon, we increased open space from 8 per cent to 14 per cent and reduced the space occupied by roads from 28 per cent to 19 per cent.

"A pedestrian movement system was evolved and many streets were closed to through traffic.

"Wedges of green will be seen throughout the whole area. The resulting environment will not only be more satisfactory to live in, but will also cost less to maintain."

He said it was an unfortunate fact of life today that only after the problems had become obvious was the necessary action taken to reverse the undesirable trends.

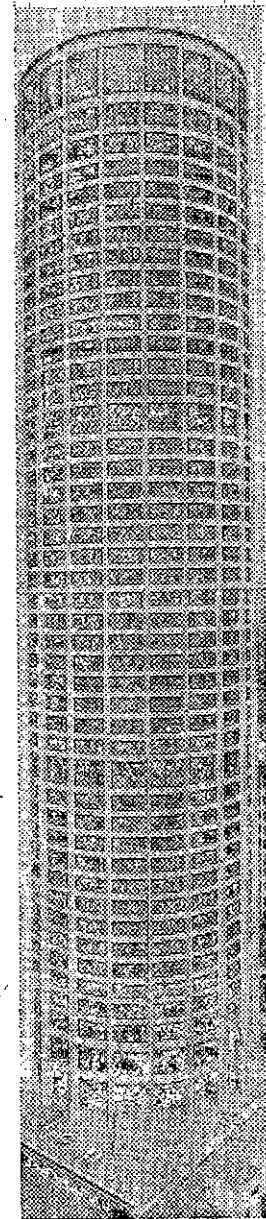
"Councils must take the initiative in regard to development within their own areas," he said.

"Statutory planning schemes are essentially

negative and certainly do not result in the kind of living and working environment we would like to see.

"Positive action must be taken by councils and guidance given to developers. In this way we will get our goals set before the existing development or redevelopment forces us to accept a second best situation."

Urban Systems are preparing a plan for the North Sydney Council. According to the deputy mayor, Alderman J. Woodward, the plan will take into account the integrated development of the whole area except for a civic centre that is about to be built by private developers.



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tallest yet.

"We have suspended all residential development and we intend to find out what people want and what facilities and amenities are needed," he said.

He sees a hopeless situation in some inner city areas.

"In some places, the problems are enormous. Whatever we do in North Sydney has to be built on the mistakes of the past," he said.

"Parts of the existing environment are worth preserving but parts are not. We can't be too idealistic, but the plan will be relevant to what is an imperfect site — we can't obliterate everything.

"Councils are too often confronted with their mistakes — looking at what a building turns out to be after you have approved it."

He believes the problems will always be there because people are attached to cities.

"You can't force them into decentralised regional centres," he said. "But if you are not going to restrict the spread of a city you have to cut down on densities."

The only general plan for Sydney — the SPA's region outline plan — is the one most under attack.

"I was appalled to find that the authority thought only in terms of what it would have to provide for a growing city," the director of the National Trust, Mr R. N. Walker, said.

"The trust believes it should first look at the natural resources that would be needed, set them aside, and then plan the people around them.

"It is a plan for the future that ignores our relationship with the earth and allows the natural environment to be swept aside.

"Town planners seem to accept the fact that the growth of cities is inevitable and that everyone will live in cities," he said. "This is a disastrous line of thought."

Mr D. Meisenhelter, an architect, thinks the plan simply accepts present trends and codifies them.

"It doesn't provide for open parkland or bush," he said. "The authority only looked at Sydney from the real estate point of view and short-sighted economics.

"There was no in-depth co-ordination with other involved departments nor did it listen to Health Department objections about air pollution."

"It created an industrial zone in an area where it will cause the most pollution. You will get a build up of smog right over Bankstown, but who cares?

"The SPA does have some power but it's not allowed to work."

Mr Woodward believes the SPA plan was a rush job and a public relations gesture to planning.

"It only created zones," he said. "It left everything else to the councils."

Professor D. Winston, professor of town and country planning at the University of Sydney, believes that instead of letting the city grow unimpeded, ring after ring, we should leave miles of open spaces and have between them separate well-designed towns of about 100,000 people.

"These would depend on Sydney for special things but be reasonably well contained townships rather than new suburbs," he said.

"And most importantly they must be linked by rapid, efficient and comfortable transport with each other and Sydney."

To achieve this, he says, there must be a swing in emphasis from private to public transport.

"Central city problems, in particular, cannot be handled with the motor car," he said.

"We are reaching the point where the only solution will be to tax cars out of existence in the central city area.

"We could have a series of rings and the motorists would pay more as he entered each ring into the city. Cars would

be used in low density areas and in the country."

Dr M. Neutze, head of the urban research unit at the Australian National University, says: "The collective interest in urban development is seldom seen as important enough to provide the political support necessary for urban development in Australia to be primarily controlled by public planning rather than the private market."

"At present only the worst faults of the unfettered private market are avoided, and development is discouraged in some directions and encouraged in others.

"Planning for people is a slogan without much operational meaning as we do not know what people want or how to find out what they want."

We will have to wait and see what Sydney's strategic plan produces and whether we do allow the tallest building ever.

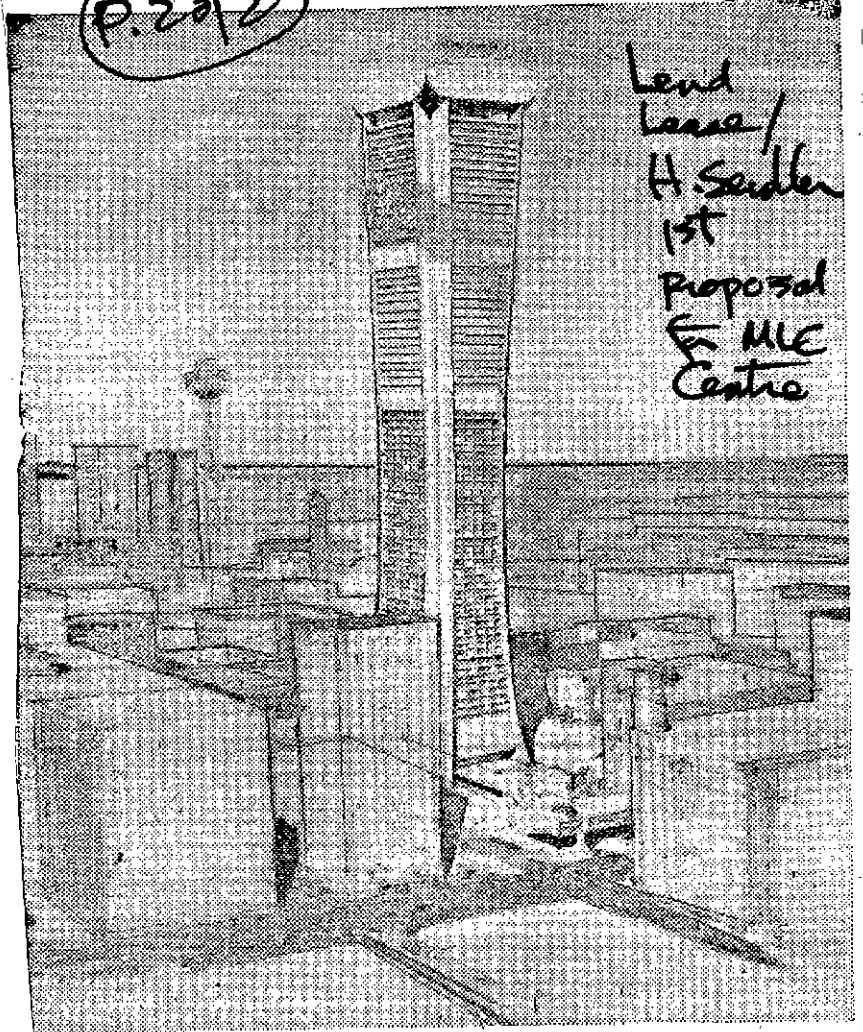
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Hotel Australia block . . . an 860ft hourglass.