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New Design Review Panel a case of the Nanny State gone too far!

The Government needs to take a step back from its quest to “improve the quality of the built environment” through the appointment of “100 leading design experts” to look at State Significant buildings and precincts (which already go to the Independent Planning Commission for determination).

Treasurer Dominic Perrottet should be overseeing this new Design Review Panel. At last, someone who is prepared to stand up to the industry of architects which have for too long held Sydney back by adding complexity, cost and causing delays to those prepared to invest in creating new homes and employment in our great State. Surely the architectural community is mature enough to sustain some honest critical feedback. Our Treasurer has shown the way.

This is not a debate about protecting heritage. Genuine heritage of the development of Sydney’s built form should be protected. This is about ensuring that the focus of the NSW planning system is to efficiently drive the NSW economy forward – not hold it back through more red tape, more green tape and rank duplication. With the NSW Productivity Commission looking to cut back on process and regulation – this move will take us backwards.

Government architects have historically played a critical role in shaping the design of public open spaces, government buildings and many of the most cherished sites of modern Sydney.

However, they have also been responsible for some reprehensible failures. The public housing monstrosities at Waterloo were championed at the time by the Department of Housing’s own architects – this was the future! Thankfully, now with private sector support, they are being progressively pulled down. The catastrophic outcome of these 1970s icons is neatly summarised in the Wikipedia entry on the area:

“the area still maintains a notorious reputation in Sydney for urban decay, casual violence, residents committing suicide by leaping off their high-rise balconies, alcohol abuse and a large Ice epidemic, with used syringes scattered across the housing complexes.”

A new industry has recently bloomed – that of architects reviewing the work of other architects – or “Design Review Panels”. Design Review Panels have become a duplicative waste of time and money. They are the last thing we need to expand in the context of COVID-19 and we certainly don’t need 100 of them!

Private sector developers are required to use registered and suitably qualified architects (many the same as those on the list) to design new multi-storey apartment buildings (covered by SEPP 65) under NSW law. In many cases, particularly in Sydney’s CBD’s International Design Competitions are mandatory and then those are then they are reviewed by Design Review Panels – often with completely different recommendations.

Our experience of the role of Design Review Panels has too often shown them to be an indulgent exercise in debates on opinion. Changes to colour; changes to the mix of apartment sizes inside a building; changes to the building material used on a façade; changes to the very design of the building – not just to be compliant – but fundamental changes which are driven by opinion.

If the role of this new Design Review Panel is to ensure compliance with controls, or to determine that there is sufficient merit-based justification for variation from controls, then that would be a valuable role. Value for money is critical. If they were strictly time limited and required to assist with the progress of developments through the planning system – then great. However, these processes have increasingly become an opportunity for one architect to have a debate with another architect, all at the expense of the developer (they are to be paid \$1,000 for half a day’s work) – who necessarily passes on these costs to the new home buyer.

Landmark buildings in locations like the CBD of Sydney require design excellence and international competitions, but this new policy by Planning Minister Rob Stokes has gone too far. It is time to reign in the prevalence of architects – particularly where they are doing nothing more than reviewing each other’s opinions.

The above can be attributed to Tom Forrest, CEO, Urban Taskforce Australia - Media Inquiries: 0429 460 863