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Beyond the tracks: Parramatta Light Rail and the brave work of city-making

Parramatta Light Rail Stage 1 is more than a new transport connection. It is a city-shaping project that shows how infrastructure can support public life, strengthen local identity and create greener, more connected places. In the heart of Western Sydney, the project offers a timely lesson in the bold, brave and beautiful work of planning for growth, complexity and long-term civic value.

When Parramatta Light Rail Stage 1 opened to passengers in December 2024, it marked more than the arrival of a new public transport service. It signalled a shift in how Western Sydney's infrastructure can be imagined, designed and delivered: not as a technical insertion into the city, but as a catalyst for public life, connection and place.

Running 12 kilometres from Westmead to Carlingford via the Parramatta CBD and Camellia, with 16 accessible stops, the light rail connects some of the city's most important destinations, including the Westmead Health Precinct, CommBank Stadium, Powerhouse Parramatta, Parramatta Square, PHIVE, Rosehill Gardens and Western Sydney University campuses. Yet its broader significance lies in what happens around the line: revitalised streetscapes, new civic spaces, greener infrastructure and better everyday connections across one of Australia's fastest-growing regions.

The project responds to a distinctly contemporary planning challenge: how to deliver vital transport infrastructure while transforming the public realm in a rapidly growing, diverse and complex urban corridor. This required integrated outcomes across seven precincts, each with its own character, constraints and community expectations. Heritage, pedestrian amenity, green infrastructure, accessibility, utility coordination, staging and regulatory requirements all had to be resolved within a live urban environment.

That is where brave planning becomes less about grand gestures and more about disciplined, collaborative decision-making. Parramatta Light Rail Stage 1 asked many disciplines to work from a shared civic purpose. Urban design, landscape and architecture were embedded from inception through delivery, ensuring the project achieved broader social, environmental and city-shaping outcomes alongside its



Figure 2: Parramatta Light Rail, Tramway Avenue stop, Parramatta, 2025 (Source: Copyright State of New South Wales (Transport for NSW), 2025)

transport function. Early collaboration with stakeholders established a clear design vision, captured in the Parramatta Light Rail Urban Design Requirements, known as "The Blue Book", which helped guide quality and consistency through procurement, design development and construction.

The result is infrastructure that performs as both movement system and public realm. The line improves access to jobs, education, health, culture, recreation and local centres. It also supports a more walkable and inclusive city, with fully accessible stops, clearer wayfinding, safer crossings, improved footpaths and a 5.7 kilometre active transport link that encourages walking and cycling as part of daily life.

In the Parramatta CBD, the project demonstrates how transport can help create places, not only connect them. The pedestrianised dining and entertainment precinct on Church Street shows the potential for light rail to support civic experience when movement, safety, business activity and public life are considered together. Here, infrastructure becomes part of the street: a daily setting for people meeting, dining, working, studying and moving through the city.

The project's environmental ambition is equally important. Parramatta Light

Rail Stage 1 includes Australia's longest stretch of green track on a light rail project, with 1.3 kilometres of grass-covered line across three areas that reimagines transport infrastructure as living landscape. By replacing much of the standard concrete track form with vegetated systems, green track helps reduce urban heat, soften the visual impact of hard infrastructure, support noise absorption and create a cooler, greener city spine. A climate-suited turf species was selected for resilience and long-term performance, showing how detailed design decisions can contribute to larger sustainability goals.

The project also delivered 1,975 new street trees, water-sensitive urban design and a collaborative tree strategy to improve shade, amenity and ecological value along the corridor. These outcomes matter in Western Sydney, where urban heat, growth and liveability are inseparable planning issues. They show that public transport infrastructure can also be climate resilient infrastructure.

Designing with Country was another defining part of the project. Themes of waterways, sightlines and ancestral trees are woven into the design, strengthening recognition of Dharug Country and local Aboriginal heritage. Key outcomes include an Aboriginal garden at Cumberland Hospital and the

Bidgee Bidgee Bridge, named in honour of a local Elder. The Ngara stop, meaning "listen, hear, think", and Yallamundi stop, meaning "storytelling", honour First Nations language and cultural continuity. An Indigenous planting palette reinforces the character of Dharug Country, while fig trees impacted by the corridor were ceremonially released and propagated for future planting.

For planners, the project offers clear lessons. The first is that collaboration is not a supporting activity; it is central to delivery. A project of this scale only succeeds when agencies, designers, engineers, operators, contractors, councils, businesses and communities can work through complexity together.

The second lesson is that good infrastructure is place-based. Standard solutions rarely produce lasting civic value. Across Parramatta Light Rail Stage 1, design quality depended on understanding each precinct's role, from heritage-rich Parramatta North to the revitalised urban heart of the CBD.

The third lesson is that community expectations are part of the planning challenge, not separate from it. Construction, access changes and disruption are real for residents and businesses. Navigating these impacts requires communication, care and a willingness to balance immediate needs with long-term public benefit.

Ultimately, Parramatta Light Rail Stage 1 shows what infrastructure-led urban renewal can achieve when people, culture and sustainability are placed at the heart of city-making. Its legacy will not be measured only in kilometres of track or passenger numbers, but in the daily patterns it enables: a student travelling to campus, a health worker reaching Westmead, a family walking to a stop, a visitor arriving for dinner, and a community seeing its streets become greener, safer and more connected.

That is the bold, brave and beautiful work of planning: looking beyond the project boundary and asking what kind of city the infrastructure is helping to create. ■



Figure 1: Passengers cross tracks at Tramway Avenue stop, Parramatta, 2025 (Source: Copyright State of New South Wales (Transport for NSW), 2025)

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