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The bold, the brave and the beautiful

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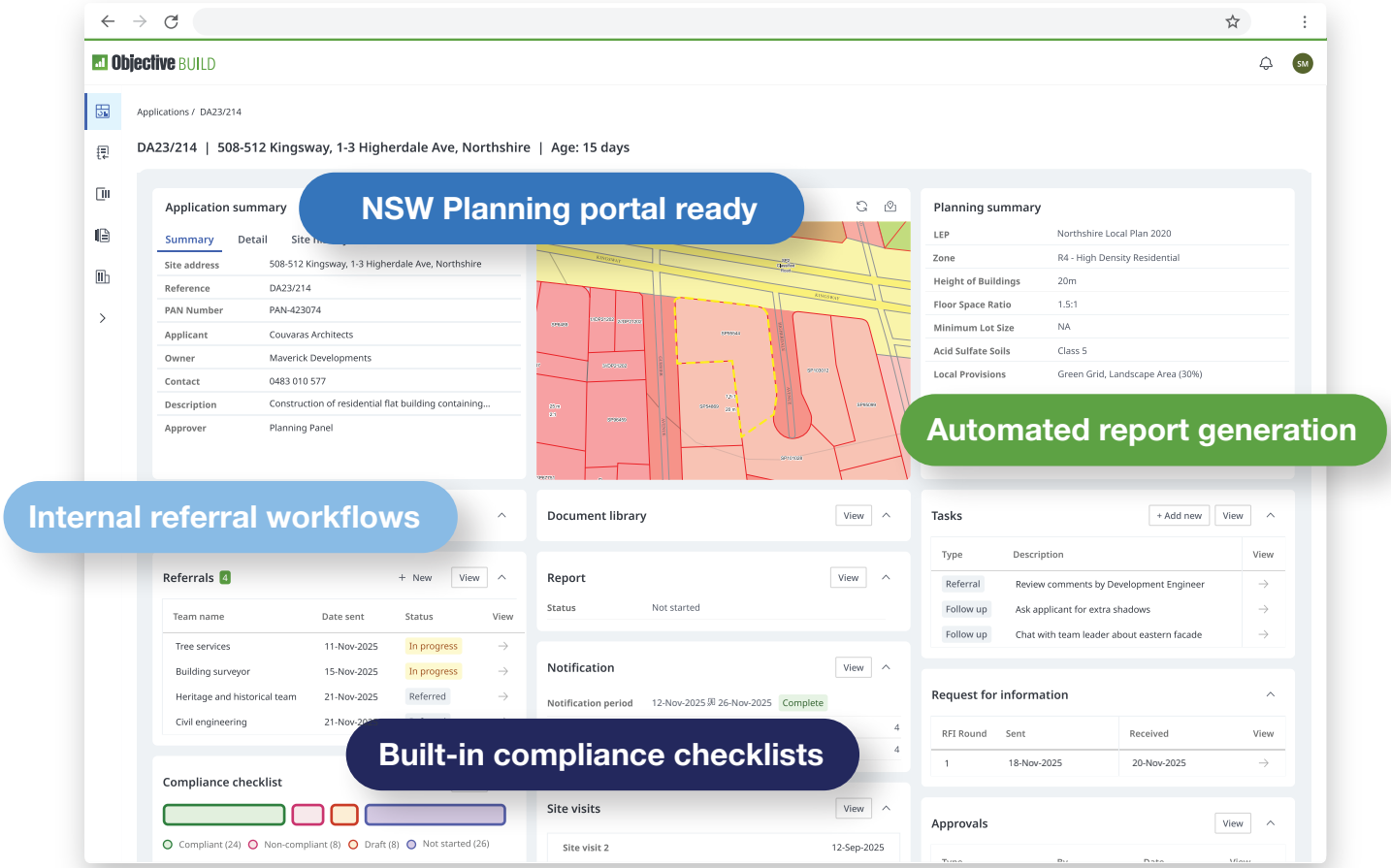

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Cover: Parramatta Light Rail on green tracks through Cumberland Health Precinct, Parramatta, 2024 (Source: Brian Merill, Copyright State of New South Wales (Transport for NSW), 2026)

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This issue

EDITORIAL

Back to our roots: planners being bold, brave and beautiful

Dr Isara Khanjanasthiti MPIA, Senior Lecturer in Urban and Regional Planning, University of New England (Sydney)

Following a whirlwind period of planning reforms, explored in our last edition, this issue of *New Planner* steps back to the roots of what planning is, or should be, all about: being bold, brave and beautiful.

The bold

Planning has always been underpinned by a *bold* ambition: to imagine futures beyond the destruction caused by industrialisation and car dominance. From Ebenezer Howard's garden cities (1898)[1] to Jane Jacobs' eyes on the street (1961),[2] our discipline has sought to reframe urban life in ways that challenge orthodoxy. In 1973, John Friedmann proposed 'transactive planning' as the process in which the planner offers new perspectives while the community provides context-specific knowledge.[3] In 1997, Patsy Healey framed planning as a way to foster communication and collaboration within our increasingly fragmented societies,[4] now arguably even more divided. These influential works illustrate planning's intellectual boldness.

Four articles demonstrate boldness in planning. **Prof Awais Piracha RPIA** examines planning for data centres, urging us to handle the growing infrastructure demands of the digital economy with a more deliberate approach. **Jacy Macnee MPIA** confronts the disruptive force of AI, advising us to redefine our value through judgment and advocacy. **Liam Walsh** challenges us to connect climate risk to feasibility, reshaping practice to guide growth towards economically resilient locations. **Akshaisankar Sabu PIA (Assoc.), RUDU** and **Lizwin Kurian PIA (Assoc.)** highlight the fuel crisis as a wake-up call to break Australia's car dependency.

The brave

Equally, planning has required us to be *brave* to navigate conflict and resistance while advancing transformative ideas. In 1965, Paul Davidoff challenged our profession to embrace conflict and community interests as a democratic resource rather than a threat.[5] Recent scholars argue that planning requires the courage to challenge neoliberal pressures and work alongside communities towards inclusive outcomes.[6]

Two articles explore this theme. **Denver D'Souza Alcântara MPIA** reflects on transport-led rezoning, asking planners to confront uncertainty and adopt adaptive approaches. **Hamish Sinclair MPIA (Fellow) MNZPI** argues that pursuing beauty requires the courage to challenge entrenched habits.

The beautiful

The aspiration for *beautiful* outcomes completes the trio. Beauty, through urban design, ecological integration or cultural resonance, is not simply aesthetics but the lived experience of places fostering inclusivity and delight. In 1889, Camillo Sitte warned modern planning had become overly technical,[7] while the *City Beautiful Movement* embedded harmony and order through Neoclassical and Beaux-Arts architecture, street grids and wide boulevards. More recent scholars argue that beauty emerges when multiple agents are allowed to express themselves in the urban fabric.[8]

Four articles illustrate beauty in practice. **Disha Chugh PIA (Assoc.)** shows how temporality, culture and adaptive design can create cities profoundly moving in their expression. **Dom Svejkar** argues renaturalising waterways and designing with Country can increase urban resilience and aesthetics. **Piers Hemphill RPIA** demonstrates how creative visual communication can make planning deeply connected to lived experience. **Sean Perry MPIA** proposes *Beauty in My Backyard (BIMBY)* as a useful lens, showing early engagement can foster collaboration and deliver outcomes communities recognise as beautiful improvements.

Other contributions

This issue features insights from PIA NSW President, **Sue Weatherley MPIA (Fellow)** and NSW Planning Minister, **the Hon Paul Scully MP**. **Gary Peacock RPIA** reviews three Land and Environment Court cases on solar farms. Lastly, **Dr Bhishna Bajracharya MPIA** and **Dr Daniel O'Hare MPIA** examine Queen's Wharf Brisbane, QLD's $3.6-billion megaproject, drawing lessons from a development representing the culmination of bold, brave and beautiful planning.

Back to our roots

The triad of bold, brave and beautiful works in unison, and the absence of one compromises the others. Beauty emerges when bold ideas and brave practice come together to shape places that are practical and uplifting. Thus, planning is inseparable from its pursuit of outcomes that are bold, brave and beautiful. This issue reminds us what our profession is truly about.

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***Dr Isara Khanjanasthiti MPIA** is Senior Lecturer in Urban and Regional Planning at UNE Sydney. He leads student capstone collaborations with industry and teaches development control, transport planning and planning history. His research explores airports, cross-border governance and housing in Australia and Southeast Asia.*

CONGRESS WRAP UP

The people who saw it coming

Jo McClellan MPIA, Senior Executive Policy and Advocacy, Planning Institute of Australia

There is something fitting about the Planning Institute Australia celebrating its 75th birthday in Canberra. Delivered off the back of an international competition, the nation's capital remains planning's most enduring proof of concept: vision without delivery is just a drawing.

That history framed this year's Congress. And the question that ran through almost every session was a good one: what kind of profession do we need to be now and for the future, and are we ready for what that demands?

What struck me was how the core challenges of planning have remained for decades, yet how profoundly the pressures around them have changed. Housing, infrastructure, population growth, environmental pressures, community expectations have long been the work of planners. But the scale, speed and stakes are completely different now. Climate impacts are no longer projections on a risk register. Housing affordability is not a warning on the horizon. As demographer Simon Kuestenmacher put it: **"People in 50 years' time will have their quality of life determined by the planning decisions we make today."**[1] That is not a burden to shy away from. It is a reason to step forward.

One of the things I most valued was watching Heads of Planning from different states and territories genuinely grapple with the same pressures, reform debates and tension between urgency and long-term thinking. The openness about what is and is not working was refreshing. Planning systems need to keep improving, but they cannot carry the full weight of housing delivery, climate resilience, and infrastructure challenges alone. That takes coordination across government, industry and community beyond any single approval pathway.

The international perspective reinforced this just as strongly. Spending time with Sue Schwartz FAICP from the American Planning Association, Andrea Harris from New Zealand Planning Institute, and Dr Muhammad Ariful Islam from the Bangladesh Institute of Planners made clear the pressures Australian planners navigate are not uniquely ours. Population growth, climate adaptation, First People's rights to land and Country, and economic uncertainty are global challenges. It is complex work, particularly at a time when the profession is increasingly called on to defend its value. But perhaps that tension is itself a sign that planning is evolving, finding itself at the centre of conversations it was once kept at the edges of.

Figure 1: Simon Kuestenmacher and Tim Ross at National Congress 2026 (Source: PIA, 2026)

What I find genuinely exciting about this profession is the breadth of what planners bring to these challenges. We can hold the long view and still get into the weeds when needed. Increasingly, we are asked not just to design frameworks but ensure they land: that implementation happens, and the vision becomes reality for real people. That shift from planning as a largely technical exercise to a delivery and leadership discipline feels like one of the profession's most important evolutions.

It is also the context in which AI becomes genuinely interesting for planners. The conversation at Congress was not about whether technology changes the profession, it clearly will and already is, but about what the profession will change into. If AI takes on more modelling, analysis and routine assessment work, planners can be freed up to exercise judgement, navigate competing community values, hold the long-term view in a short-term political environment, and build the trust that good planning depends on. Our profession is not threatened but sharpened by these tools, provided planners lead the transition rather than simply respond to it.

The presence of colleagues from across the country reflects the strength of the networks planners build and the importance of nurturing them. What I saw was a genuinely supportive profession: senior leaders sharing hard-won insights, emerging planners asking sharp questions, and practitioners from very different contexts finding common ground. PIA exists to strengthen the profession and amplify its voice at a time when planning sits firmly at the centre of some of the country's biggest debates. The challenges are real and significant. So too is the capability of those working to meet them.

I am grateful for the warm welcome from so many across the profession and look forward to continuing the deep conversations that began at Congress. The world that planning was once preparing for is already here. The work, and the people doing it, have never mattered more.

Endnotes

1. Simon Kuestenmacher, keynote address at PIA National Planning Congress, Friday 22 May 2026.

***Jo McClellan MPIA** is a social policy and strategic planning expert with more than 20 years' experience across government, industry and consulting. Her expertise spans housing policy, urban planning, health and the built environment, social infrastructure and strategic advocacy, with a focus on shaping evidence-based policy and practical reform that delivers better outcomes for communities and places.*

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Are planners brave enough to change the world?

Sue Weatherley MPIA (Fellow), PIA NSW Division President

I have mulled over the title of this article for some time, seeking one that captured the importance of planners – and planning itself – having a voice based on expertise and evidence. Increasingly, we live in a world where informed views compete with simplistic short-term ideas, amplified by outrage and social media visibility.

At a recent event discussing the qualities needed in future planners, I argued that one of the most important is bravery: the courage to defend ideas, evidence and long-term thinking, even when doing so is difficult or unpopular. Being brave inherently has risks, but knowing what to defend is one of the defining skills of a successful career – and, at its best, can help change the world.

Planners need this bravery in two ways. First to confront the misinformation, disinformation and sometimes nonsense that exists around planning. The second – be bold in our ideas and actions. It is vital that we defend evidence and expertise against overly simplistic, self-interested responses. The interconnected housing and climate crises, for example, cannot be addressed without evidence-based, long-term, whole-of-government planning.

Planners must defend the public interest, and at times, that requires courage. One of my proudest times in planning was leading a resistance to proposals to remove the solar access plane controls from Parramatta Square. These controls limited the height of buildings to the north of the square, ensuring the public space would continue to receive lunchtime sunlight, even on the shortest day of the year. There was significant lobbying from private interests to remove the solar protection. Throughout the process, we heard increasingly implausible suggestions – from heliostats mounted on private buildings to proposals for a tower that would somehow bend around the sun. Despite the relentless pressure to compromise the public interest, the Greater Sydney Commission ultimately held firm, and the solar protections were retained.

Congress 75th Gala Dinner, Sue Weatherley MPIA (Fellow), Dr Maxine Cooper MPIA (Life Fellow), Barbara Norman MPIA (Life Fellow) & Dy Currie RPIA (Life Fellow) (Source: PIA, 2026)

A common myth in city planning concerns the causes of, and solutions to, traffic congestion. The most common response is to build more roads. Yet this ignores the problems of induced demand: where building more roads encourage more car trips which ultimately recreates congestion. Congestion can only be solved and avoided through the design of cities, including the distribution of land uses and densities and significant investment in public and active transport. As best described by Lewis Mumford,[1] solving congestion by building more roads is the equivalent of using a larger belt to solve obesity.

In a previous role, I dealt with a proposal for a commuter car park near an existing railway station, replacing parking attached to a nearby shopping precinct. I asked what evidence supported the proposal – such as how many additional rail trips it would generate or whether it would reduce parking pressure on local streets. The response was that this research had not been undertaken. In the lead up to the 2019 election the Liberal Government announced commuter car park projects within the Urban Congestion Fund, presenting the $660 million program as a way to increase rail use. It was later heavily criticised by the Auditor General who found, amongst other concerns, that there was little evidence that the commuter car parking increased rail trips.[2]

Recently the Sydney Morning Herald ran its Stranded Sydney series,[3] highlighting the lack of infrastructure planning and delivery in greenfield suburbs. The series finished with some conclusions about the elements of good planning for new greenfield suburbs: plan everything; infrastructure first, then homes; spend our money better and fund more infrastructure; and greenfields can't go on forever. We as planners already know this.

Planning is not just about land use, houses and transport. We need to be brave to say this and bold enough to ensure that the planning will create great outcomes, outcomes beyond housing and job numbers. This is about health and wellbeing, a protected environment and achievement of net zero, amongst other critical outcomes.

I recently read an excellent article by Tim Sneesby MPIA,[4] challenging the idea that "fixing" town planning, whatever that means, will fix the housing crisis. As he notes, the book *Abundance* popularised the argument that deregulating planning controls would unlock supply and, through the magic of the market, eventually make housing "abundant" and affordable for everyone. Yet even the authors of Abundance have since acknowledged that allowing housing in zones does not mean it will be built, and that project feasibility depends on many other factors. Tim's conclusion is: *"Booms and busts have tracked interest rates and credit availability, not changes to planning controls. The planning system has been a constant; the market has been the variable."*

As I am writing this the draft Sydney Plan, the proposed regional for the greater Sydney area, remains in draft form. The draft plan provides a safe road map for actions for the Department of Planning Housing and Infrastructure and local government that can enhance the future of Sydney. But what would the plan look like if it was both brave and bold?

What if it treated housing as a human right, and limited the size of new homes; required prioritised affordable housing; required 50% of carparks to be transformed to affordable or social housing; ceased new greenfield suburbs due to the cost of infrastructure, impact on the environment, and focused on established areas; prevented further development in areas that are and will be subject to climate hazards; and implemented a planned retreat program areas affected by hazards such as heatwaves, flooding and bushfire?

What if it included an infrastructure and transport plan that identified metro lines to be planned for the next 40 years, ceased construction of future motorways and prioritised active transport; ensured there was a more even distribution of cultural facilities throughout Sydney; had a 10, 20 and 40 year horizon; expressed outcomes in terms of wellbeing and health; and aimed to increase the urban tree canopy by 50%; and set the framework for infrastructure including budget allocation?

What if it was a whole of government plan that included strong metropolitan governance to ensure implementation?

These are bold ideas, but not necessarily new or untried. For example, the metro government for the City of Portland, Oregon conducted the American equivalent of referendum in the late 1990's to determine if public money should fund freeways or transit. The community chose transit. The current transformation of Paris to a more liveable city built around less cars and more bikes also shows that bold works in the face of opposition.[5]

We live and work in an uncertain world which will take courage to navigate and influence, especially for planners. Being brave may not mean we can change everything in the world, but we can make a real difference to our communities. We should not underestimate our sphere of influence and the impact we can have when we are brave and bold.

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FROM THE NSW MINISTER

A bold reform agenda

The Hon Paul Scully MP, Minister for Planning and Public Spaces of New South Wales

More than three years after the Minns Labor Government was elected with a determination to address NSW's housing challenges, rebalance Sydney's housing growth and make it easier to create jobs, attract investment and rebuild our energy infrastructure there is a lot to report.

Average residential assessment times have fallen by nearly a third.

NSW is leading the country with more than 79,300 homes currently under construction – the highest level in seven years.

The state has recorded the highest quarter of housing completions in 6 years with 13,358 homes completed in the December 2025 quarter.

These are not just statistics, each of these completion means a new home for a person or family in NSW.

But there is more to do as we face uncertain global conditions and challenging domestic macroeconomic conditions.

The growing momentum in the housing pipeline is an encouraging trend that shows the Minns Labor Government's nation leading planning reforms and initiatives are getting more housing into the pipeline and importantly out of the ground.

This is particularly encouraging as reform from the NSW Planning System Reform Bill that passed Parliament with almost unanimous support in November last year are embedded into our planning system.

For example, we recently exhibited two new pathways which could halve assessment times for low-rise homes which account for 70 per cent of all development applications (DA).

The pathways which make it easier and faster to build homes are out for community consultation until 24 June and propose an expansion of complying development and new targeted assessment pathway. Providing low-rise, low-risk, low-impact housing proposals with the speedier pathway that these projects need and deserve. Assessment in 50 days or less so construction can start sooner

Complying Development Expansion

Complying development already allows low-risk applications that meet all relevant development standards to be fast-tracked in as little as 20 days, compared to an average of around 80 days for a DA.

However, much like the housing market, there has been a gap in assessment pathways between complying development and a traditional DA.

Currently, a proposal that fails to meet just one development standard for complying development is required to go through a full DA process, bogging councils and applicants down in unnecessary paperwork and adding cost and more than 60 days on average to the assessment process.

A new process for variations to complying development, now on public exhibition, would allow straight-forward proposals with a small number of minor departures from development standards to use the faster 20-day complying development pathway instead of proceeding to a full DA.

Targeted Assessment Pathway

This significant change under the legislation enabled a new Targeted Assessment Pathway, aimed at bridging

Figure 1: Heads of Planning panel from ACT George Cilliers MPIA, QLD Peta Harwood MPIA, WA Kathy Bonus (WA), NSW Kiersten Fishburn, and moderator Nicole Bennetts MPIA (Source: PIA, 2026)

the gap between complying development and a full DA.

The first Targeted Assessment Pathway discussion paper, now on public exhibition would enable a new low-rise housing code so applications that do not meet the test for complying development but have met set strategic planning requirements upfront can be assessed in a target timeline of 50 days – half the existing average for a DA.

The new pathway would deliver more proportionate assessment options for housing developments like single dwellings, terraces and townhouses.

This builds on the Minns Labor Government's work to build more terraces, townhouses and single dwellings, which has been accelerated under the Low and Mid-Rise reforms and the NSW Pattern Book.

Together, the two pathways will not only speed up assessment of low-risk, low-impact homes and get shovels in the ground sooner, but allow councils to focus resources on bigger or more complex planning matters while retaining oversight of key issues.

Development Coordination Authority

Another major reform coming to fruition in NSW planning is the Development Coordination Authority (DCA) which will centralise State agency advice and decision-making providing a single front door for all major planning projects.

The DCA began initial operations in December 2025. Its main functions – to bring together experts from a broad range of state agencies so conflicts can be resolved quickly and allow a single, coordinated response – will begin on 1 July.

This means applicants will no longer need to navigate at times conflicting and confusing advice from up to 22 different areas of Government.

Importantly the DCA will be required to meet strict timelines.

The DCA and other bodies will have 28 days to provide feedback on development applications (DAs), providing consistent response times and helping speed up assessment times.

It is a change which is expected cut confusion and end unnecessary delays in the planning system to support more homes, jobs and improve environmental outcomes.

Figure 2: Kiersten Fishburn presenting at National Congress (Source: PIA, 2026)

Community Participation Plan

We are also taking the more than 100 inconsistent and sometimes contradictory Community Participation plans that currently exist and bringing them into one clear, consistent approach to give communities a strong voice in the planning system.

The draft statewide Community Participation Plan which was revealed in April puts the primary focus on strategic planning and major complex development applications instead of sweating the small stuff.

Key changes include:

- extending minimum consultation timeframes on significant state-level strategic planning initiatives like the recent draft Sydney Plan and the State Plan from 45 days to 60 days;
- standardising the process for notification of Complying Development across the state and giving neighbours 7 days' notice before any works begin;
- making public exhibition requirements clear for different types of local development so that councils do not need to exhibit things like new single or two storey houses or sheds and pools that already meet with planning controls; and
- importantly, councils will still be able to tailor their own community engagement strategies to suit local needs and feed into other council plans and policies.

Confusion in the planning system has been a major factor in NSW not building enough homes for decades, directly contributing to Sydney becoming the second most expensive city for housing in the world.

So having one statewide Community Participation Plan means no matter where you live, you will know how and when to have your say on development in your neighbourhood.

Every one of these reforms is creating a planning system that is faster, fairer and more focused on outcomes, so it is easier to build homes, attract jobs and enhance the environment.

As planners and those that oversee the planning process and systems in NSW we should always be considering whether a proposal is helping to meet our shared goal of getting more people into homes, in good communities with a good environment, connected to the services they need and able to get a job near to where they live.

That does not have to mean that every proposal gets the green light but it should be our guiding light as we seek to deliver an overdue overhaul of a system that had drifted away from its primary purpose of helping to advance the interests of the people of NSW – both current and future.

There is more work to be done to address NSW's housing challenges and manage the cost impact associated with conflict in the Middle East but are on the right track.

The Hon Paul Scully *is the NSW Minister for Planning and Public Spaces. He previously served as Shadow Minister for Planning and Public Spaces, Shadow Minister for Police and Counter Terrorism and Shadow Minister for Natural Resources. His background in politics, economics and innovation allows him to understand the many challenges of planning and urban development in NSW. His focus is on working with all levels of government, the community and industry to solve housing, jobs and infrastructure challenges in NSW.*

Planning for data centres: an emerging infrastructure challenge for NSW

Awais Piracha RPIA, Professor of Urban Planning, Western Sydney University

Data centres are becoming a major form of urban infrastructure. Their rapid growth raises questions about land, energy, water and public benefit. Planning systems in NSW are only beginning to respond. The risk is that decisions are made site by site while impacts accumulate across industrial precincts and broader urban regions.

Why this matters now

Data centres store, process and transmit the digital information that underpins everyday life. They support cloud computing, artificial intelligence, banking, telecommunications and public services. In functional terms, they operate as essential infrastructure.

The issue is not whether NSW needs data centres. It does. The issue is how they are planned.

This question has become urgent. NSW is experiencing rapid growth in data centre investment. The NSW Government has announced that 15 projects, valued at about $51.9 billion, are progressing through the Investment Delivery Authority process.[1] This signals a structural shift in infrastructure investment.

Planning systems have not yet fully responded to data centres as a major form of infrastructure with significant land, energy and water implications.

What planners are dealing with

A data centre is a secure facility containing servers, storage systems and networking equipment. These operate continuously. They generate heat. They require cooling. They depend on reliable electricity, water and fibre connections. Large hyperscale facilities can consume very substantial amounts of electricity and water for cooling, particularly in warmer climates such as Australia. They are lightly staffed once operational and often present as large, secure buildings with limited interface to the public domain.

There are different types. Edge facilities are small and located close to users. Enterprise or colocation facilities sit in business parks or industrial areas. Hyperscale facilities operate as large campuses. Each type raises different planning issues.

This variation matters. A uniform planning response is unlikely to work.

From land use to infrastructure

Data centres are usually assessed as industrial or employment uses. This framing is increasingly inadequate as their defining characteristics are infrastructure related. They require large scale electricity supply and are dependent on network capacity. They generate system wide impacts. Their benefits are distributed across the economy rather than confined to a single site.

Some have argued that data centres should be treated as infrastructure rather than employment uses. This reflects their system level role. It also reflects their ability to outbid and displace other industrial land uses.

However, such a shift raises questions. It may reduce local planning control by shifting decision making further towards state level infrastructure and investment processes. It may prioritise speed over place outcomes. It may weaken consideration of employment and urban form. It may weaken consideration of employment outcomes, built form and the long term function of industrial precincts. This is not a simple reclassification issue. It is a question about how infrastructure is governed.

The industrial land question

Data centres are capital intensive. They occupy large sites. They generate relatively low ongoing employment compared to other industrial uses.

This creates a clear trade-off. Industrial land is finite. It supports freight, logistics, urban services and advanced manufacturing. Allocating large areas of this land to data centres has opportunity costs.

These pressures are already visible in Western Sydney. Blacktown City Council has identified multiple data centre developments within its local government area and notes a strong concentration of investment in the region. At this scale, the issue is no longer site based. It is strategic.

Energy, water and cumulative impacts

Energy demand is the central planning issue. Data centres already account for about 1 to 1.5 per cent of global electricity use. Demand is expected to increase significantly as artificial intelligence expands.[2]

In NSW, this translates into major infrastructure implications. Data centres require substations, transmission capacity and reliable supply. Government expectations now emphasise that developers should fund renewable energy and contribute to infrastructure costs.[3]

Water is the second issue. Cooling systems can use large volumes of water. Some facilities may use tens of millions of litres per day depending on technology.[4] This has implications for water supply and recycled water systems, particularly in growth areas.

Heat is closely linked. Data centres produce heat continuously. In some international cases, waste heat is reused. In NSW, this remains limited. This is a missed opportunity.

The key point is cumulative impact. One facility can be managed. Multiple facilities in a precinct create system level pressure on electricity, water and infrastructure capacity.

Built form and community perception

Public perception often focuses on built form. Data centres are seen as large, blank and inward-facing buildings. This is often accurate.

However, their most significant impacts are not visual. They relate to infrastructure demand and resource use.

There are also misconceptions. Data centres generate limited daily traffic once operational. They are not traditional industrial uses. Their impacts are continuous but less visible.

For planners, this requires a broader lens. Built form matters. So does infrastructure capacity, cumulative effects and long-term urban outcomes.

What planning systems should do

A more deliberate approach is needed.

First, NSW should identify preferred locations for data centres. These should be based on electricity capacity, water availability, fibre connectivity, industrial land strategy and interface with surrounding uses. Councils should not be left to resolve these issues case by case.

Second, assessment frameworks need to be strengthened. Proposals should clearly demonstrate energy demand, water demand, cooling systems, emissions, noise, heat discharge and long-term monitoring.

Third, infrastructure coordination must improve. Data centres should not rely on existing capacity built for future population growth. Infrastructure planning must be aligned with development.

Fourth, public benefit should be explicit. Data centres consume significant resources. The planning system should ask what they contribute in return. This may include renewable energy investment, recycled water infrastructure, battery storage, heat reuse or local economic benefits.

The Committee for Sydney has argued for a statewide strategy, clearer standards and stronger infrastructure planning.[5] These directions are sensible.

Conclusion

Data centres are essential. They are also resource intensive. Planning systems need to move beyond treating them as conventional industrial uses. They should be approached as a form of infrastructure with distinct spatial and resource implications. NSW still has an opportunity to set a clear framework. Without it, decisions risk being made incrementally while impacts accumulate across precincts. For planners, this is not a niche issue. It is emerging as a core infrastructure challenge that will shape how cities function in the digital economy.

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Awais Piracha MPIA *is Professor of Urban Planning at Western Sydney University. His work focuses on planning governance, infrastructure, climate resilience, and equitable urban development. He has international research and consultancy experience and serves on local planning panels across Greater Sydney.*

So what, exactly, is the planner for?

Jacy Macnee MPIA, Principal Planning Officer, Property and Development NSW

I suspect that 80 per cent of what most planners do can already be done by artificial intelligence (AI), and the profession has not noticed.

The future people think is decades away

A few weeks ago I asked Claude what publicly available datasets I could use to track property performance in the suburb I had just bought into. Within a single prompt, instead of answering the question, it built me a fully functional rental real estate dashboard. I had asked for a list of data sources, I got an analyst. I am not a software engineer, I am a planner, and the future people think is ten years away is already on my laptop.

Many planners are tinkering with AI and a few are building agents that automate repeatable processes. Yet most workplace conversations about AI are still about whether we can use ChatGPT to draft a meeting agenda. The conversation we should be having is whether the technical core of our work is about to be done in minutes by software.

A wide range of planning tasks that used to take an entire team can now be done by AI-enabled platforms in a fraction of the time and cost, often with more evidence behind them. Compliance checks, constraint mapping, demographic analysis, scenario modelling, and feasibility studies are all becoming automatable. Platforms like Land iQ are already doing a meaningful share of this work.[1]

Land iQ has substantially automated the New South Wales (NSW) Government property audit in my division, identifying surplus government land for housing delivery. The result is significant savings and faster delivery of sites for housing.[2]

Figure 1: A planner working with AI-enabled spatial data and dashboards, generated by the Author using AI (Source: Macnee/ChatGPT, 2026)

Once a category of work has been automated, the jobs that went with it rarely return.[3] This shift is bigger than anything we have navigated before. GIS replaced a single skill, AI is replacing whole categories of work.[4]

So, what is the role of the planner?

Most planners assume the technical work will remain their responsibility, with better tools alongside. There is a stronger view, which I share, that the role of the planner will shift toward judgment, advocacy and stakeholder facilitation as the routine business as usual planning analysis work gets picked up by AI and software systems. This judgement and human engagement work is what the profession is best placed to lead, regardless of its capacity.

As Adam Beck, one of Australia's leading voices on planning technology, puts it: “Technology has always helped what planners do, never what they are for”.[5] Many planners will not make the pivot in time. A skilled planner running AI agents can already do the work of a small planning team, and those who adapt will replace those who do not. Many planners will not make the pivot in time. Fluency in planning with AI needs to be a basic professional expectation within a year or two.

The real reason to keep planners

There is a stronger argument for keeping planners over the long term. Within five to ten years, human planners will be worse than AI on most measurable tasks,[5] and that is acceptable if we learn to use the tools well. What remains critical is having real people in decisions that affect us. Planning is the way a community shapes the place it lives in, and that depends on humans being in the room. That is what makes planning democratic and human-centred.

Rukshan de Silva RPIA, National Vice President of the Planning Institute of Australia, states:

"As AI tools increasingly take on administrative and rules-based tasks across the planning profession, such as determining what legislation is relevant to a specific project, checking compliance with planning schemes, and managing routine documentation, the core value of planners will shift toward matters that require human judgement, influence, and critical thinking."[6]

Communities want decisions about their streets and suburbs to be made with them, by people who can sit in a town hall, listen to a resident whose neighbourhood is changing, and sympathise because they share the lived human experience. AI can analyse community sentiment, but it cannot represent a community in the room. Planners add the human element, represent the community, and act as a check on the powers and technology shaping decisions. That defence only holds if planners upskill, evolve, and argue for it now.

Looking to the future

The next decade of Australian planning practice is being shaped by technology companies and government technology teams, while most planners do little more than use the platforms. That should change.

If planners want to remain stewards of the built environment, we need to do two things. Engage seriously with the conversation about where planning is heading, and transition our skills so we leverage the technology rather than compete with it. That is a competition we will not win.

Figure 2: A community consultation in a town hall, where planners hear directly from residents, generated by the author using AI (Source: Macnee/ChatGPT, 2026)

So what, exactly, is the planner for? Not the analysis or the repeatable technical work. The judgment, the advocacy, and the people whose lives are shaped by what we decide. ■

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Fuel crisis and car dependency: a spotlight on the elephant in the garage

Akshaisankar Sabu PIA (Assoc.), RUDU, Urban Designer, DesignInc
Lizwin Kurian PIA (Assoc.), Corporate Planning Project Officer, Blacktown City Council

Australia's recent fuel disruptions have exposed an obvious yet often overlooked truth in our cities: a strong reliance on private cars. This moment creates an opportunity to reflect on how urban form, planning decisions, and transport systems shape everyday mobility and resilience.

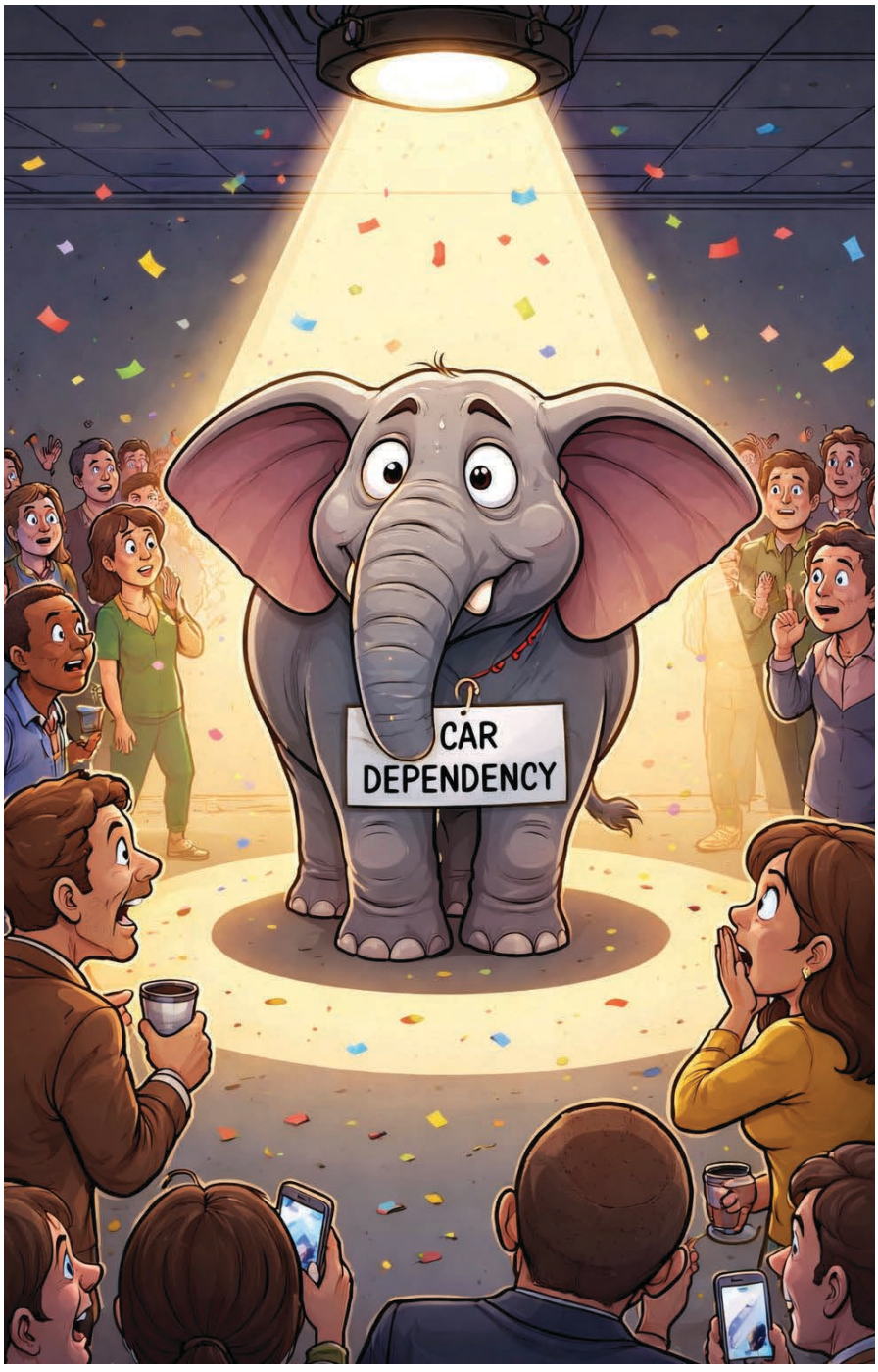

Figure 1: A comic representation of fuel crisis situation (Source: Sabu/ChatGPT, 2026)

Sydney suburbs minus cars

As geopolitical pressures ease, fuel markets are showing early signs of stabilisation. However, the disruption offers a striking glimpse into what our daily life would look like without cars. Imagine waking up tomorrow unable to use your car. Could you drop your kids at school? Get to work? Grab your favourite coffee from the cafe on the way? Buy groceries? Get in a quick gym session? Take your kids to their basketball practice? Go out for dinner at that nice restaurant? If most answers are no, the depth of our car dependency becomes evident.

And if your answers are yes, you likely belong to a relatively privileged minority. In NSW, the most connected suburbs are among the most expensive.[1] This shows that connectivity comes with a trade-off: higher rents and house prices. This raises questions of social equity.

The challenge is not the fuel availability, but the long-standing elephant in the room: our over-reliance on cars. The fuel crisis has exposed how tightly our daily lives are bound to private vehicle use, revealing a broader lack of urban resilience. For years, we have discussed localised living, digital transformation, flexible work arrangements, yet it was the COVID-19 pandemic that finally pushed many of these ideas into practice. Similarly, this fuel crisis should serve as a wake-up call: an opportunity to rethink about our mobility habits and resilience of our cities.

The gap

Australia is one of the most urbanised countries, yet households own an average of 1.8 cars.[2] This is largely a consequence of urban sprawl and limited public transport options in the suburbs. Car dependency is therefore not simply a matter of preference. It is shaped by land

use patterns, infrastructure provision, and the spatial distribution of jobs and services. The impacts of this are well known, including pollution, congestion, and liveability. Less known is how this weakens urban resilience against external shocks such as fuel supply issues, economic stress, or natural disasters. This raises critical questions: what measures have we taken so far, and are they sufficient to address this vulnerability in the long term?

Breaking the car habit

The common response to fuel related issues has been the shift towards electric vehicles. However, while replacing cars with 'new types of cars' may reduce fossil fuel dependency and carbon emissions, it does not address the underlying issue of car dependency. Fuel shortages might soon be over, but what happens when the next disruption emerges? Or worse, what if the next crisis is not fuel, but battery minerals?

Recent years have seen significant investment in public transport infrastructure, particularly in the capital cities. States like Victoria and Tasmania have even responded to the crisis by making public transport temporarily free.[3] There is little doubt that affordable fares, better public transport access, coverage, reliability, and travel time play a great role in in changing long-term travel habits. But these measures alone are not enough to dismantle the deep-rooted car culture of Australia.[4]

Car-free or car-lite approaches have gained attention internationally. It is no longer a fringe idea, but a growing global movement aimed at reclaiming public spaces and reducing car dominance in urban centres.[5] While searching for precedents, we often look to European models, such as Oslo, Helsinki, and Hamburg. Our challenge is that Australian cities are more dispersed. The transition away from car dependency is therefore complex and requires long-term planning.

Sydney already provides evidence that ambitious change is possible and beneficial. The pedestrianisation of George Street and The Rocks, once

Figure 2: George Street (Source: Sabu, 2026)

controversial, has revitalised public space and strengthened local business activity. Yet most car-free projects remain limited in scale, largely confined to tourist precincts or retail-focused areas. They do not form part of a broader, city-wide strategy.

Designing for resilience

Car dependency is not only a transport issue; it is fundamentally a planning issue, rooted in the way our cities are designed to function. Travel behaviour is shaped long before a trip begins: through land use decisions, urban form, and the spatial distribution of jobs, services, and housing.

In case of George Street, while the light rail provided the functional rationale for removing cars, it was the combination of mixed-use development, density, permeability, laneway activation, and late-night economy that contributed to its success. Addressing car dependency more broadly requires integrated land use and transport planning.

Ultimately, the solution lies in reducing travel demand rather than simply managing how trips are made. This means limiting trip generation through decentralisation, mixed use, and increased densities in appropriate locations. Decentralisation creates access to jobs across multiple centres. Mixed-use development integrates residential, commercial, and retail functions enabling people to meet their daily, or even weekly, needs locally. Higher densities naturally support habitual shifts in mobility by making these patterns possible. These changes are gradual and involve trade-offs, feasibility considerations, and long-term commitment.

The trick is not to respond to the supply crises as they arise, but to build cities that are resilient to geopolitical and economic tensions. This does not happen by accident, it requires bold planning, decisive policy, and the courage to rethink how our cities are truly designed.

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Planning reform and climate risk: why feasibility and pricing must improve the picture

Liam Walsh, Director, Hadron Group & Climate Risk Advisory

New South Wales has taken a significant step forward in recognising climate risk in planning. The next bold step is to move beyond identifying risk to understanding its economic consequences and embedding that understanding into how we plan and deliver growth.

Reform is shifting the system, but not yet the outcome

The *Environmental Planning and Assessment Amendment (Planning System Reforms) Act 2025* represents a major shift. Climate change resilience is embedded within the objects of the Act, signalling a clear policy direction toward risk-aware planning.[1]

This is reinforced by the proposed *Climate Change and Natural Hazards State Environmental Planning Policy* (SEPP), which aims to provide a more consistent and forward-looking framework for assessing hazards such as flood, bushfire and coastal risk. Together, these reforms establish a stronger planning basis for considering climate risk.[2] They move strategic planning beyond static hazard mapping toward a more scenario-based approach. However, they stop short of addressing how climate risk affects feasibility, and whether development can be sustained over time.

From physical risk to priced risk

The current reform agenda is grounded in improving how risk is identified and assessed. The SEPP seeks to standardise hazard frameworks, introduce climate scenario considerations, and support more consistent decision-making across NSW. However, there remains a disconnect between hazard exposure and pricing exposure of climate risk in planning.

Planning decisions ultimately intersect with market pricing. Development must be financeable. Assets must be insurable. Households must be able to absorb ongoing costs, including insurance premiums. Insurance translates physical risk into priced risk. It reflects the probability and consequence of hazards and converts this into premiums, exclusions, and coverage limits. These pricing signals are forward-looking and adjust over time as risk changes.

Where premiums escalate or coverage is withdrawn, the cost of risk is capitalised into land values and development feasibility. Lending conditions tighten.[3] Required returns increase. In some cases, development becomes unviable despite being permissible under planning controls.

Development capacity may exist on paper, but not in the market.

Connecting feasibility to planning decisions

The reforms create an important foundation, but they do not yet integrate priced risk into decision-making. There is no requirement within the Act or the SEPP to consider:

- insurance pricing or premium trajectories;
- the capitalised cost of risk within land and property values; or
- whether development remains viable under future risk pricing scenarios.

This is where a more complete picture of development viability is needed. Planning has historically focused on permissibility. The next evolution is to explicitly consider feasibility as a core planning input. This does not mean planning decisions are determined by markets alone. It means recognising risk is already being priced and shaping outcomes regardless of planning intent. Integrating feasibility into planning would help the system better reflect how investment decisions are actually made.

The case for feasibility signals in policy

The Insurance Council of Australia has consistently advocated for stronger alignment between land use planning and natural hazard risk.[4] Its work emphasises the need to prioritise development in lower-risk areas and improve use of risk information in planning decisions.[5] Three practical shifts would move the system in this direction:

1. ***Feasibility as a planning input***
Planning decisions should consider whether development remains viable once the full cost of risk, including insurance premiums is accounted for over time.
2. ***Risk-adjusted capital allocation***
Infrastructure and housing investment should be directed toward locations where risk pricing remains stable, reducing exposure to future cost escalation and stranded assets.
3. ***Feasibility-informed settlement patterns***
Strategic planning should reflect how differential risk and feasibility will influence land values, housing demand and long-term population distribution.

Completing the reform agenda

The *Environmental Planning and Assessment Amendment (Planning System Reforms) Act 2025* and the climate SEPP represent a critical evolution in how NSW approaches climate risk.[4] The logical next step is to connect this framework to feasibility. With it, planning can better guide growth toward locations that are not only permissible, but economically resilient over time.

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Beauty is not an optional extra

Dr Hamish Sinclair MPIA (Fellow) MNZPI, Senior Strategic Planner, Eurobodalla Shire Council

If a town is a promise, building it beautifully demands courage. It begins with admitting that a place can feel wrong, and that matters. Planning privileges what can be measured and modelled, so stepping beyond these limits takes resolve. Courage lies in widening what planning is permitted to notice, shifting from compliance to a deeper question: has the proposal earned its impact?

Much of the contemporary urban condition is shaped not by malice but by habit, systems repeated until they harden into doctrine. Standardised streets, placeless developments and environments optimised for efficiency persist because they go unchallenged. To be bold is to interrupt this pattern.

This calls on planners, designers and communities to trust forms of knowledge beyond metrics. In the interplay between artificial intelligence and urban form, the tension is clear. Artificial intelligence can reveal patterns, but not meaning. Meaning requires human judgment, grounded in experience rather than overridden by abstraction.[1]

Here the beautiful returns, not as decoration but as coherence. Beauty is often dismissed as superficial or applied late, yet it is fundamental to urban experience. Enduring places are shaped by accumulated decisions, small acts of care that respond to context, climate and human scale. Beauty is not an optional extra. It signals that public life matters and that the ordinary deserves attention.

What holds beauty back is rarely cost. More often, it is hesitation: a reluctance to accept that how a place feels is as important as how it performs. Places are lived at walking pace, through the senses and over time.[2] Across cultures, those that feel whole follow shared principles. They respond to how people see, move and gather. Beauty emerges cumulatively, through many small decisions rather than grand gestures.

Recognition alone, however, does not change outcomes. Recovering these qualities requires action, and action requires courage shared across planners, architects, developers, councils and communities.

Figure 1: Human-scale urban life and data-driven design (Source: Sinclair/ChatGPT, 2026)

For planners, this means expanding what is considered valid. Systems prioritise traffic, yield and compliance, necessary but incomplete measures. The lived experience of a place, how it unfolds, how it feels to walk, pause and return is harder to quantify yet fundamental. Courage means acknowledging this and asking not only whether a proposal complies, but whether it contributes to the life of the street.[3]

This shift changes process. Proposals are understood as sequences shaped by time, light and movement. Judgment, coherence, legibility and delight sit alongside technical assessment. It may require slowing down, testing ideas and learning from lived experience before permanence is fixed.

For architects, courage is more intimate. It is the resolve to design with care rather than spectacle, to pursue warmth, detail and continuity over abstraction. Buildings are experienced at the scale of the body, in thresholds, materials and light. These moments carry meaning.[4]

Collaboration with landscape designers, artists and place makers adds depth, helping buildings belong rather than stand apart. Courage also lies in restraint, choosing materials that age well and designing for time, as much as for completion.

For developers and councils, courage often appears in decisions that are not immediately visible: investing in durability, shaping facades that enrich the street and creating public spaces that invite people to linger. These choices may not maximise short term return, but they define long term value. In Sydney's Central Park precinct, the integration of landscape, architecture and public art demonstrates how development can contribute to shared experience, not merely accommodate it.

Across all roles, there is a single thread: communities are equally part of this equation. Cities are not machines to be optimised but environments shaped through attention and the accumulation of choices. Every material, proportion, tree and threshold contributes to the whole.

To build beautifully is not indulgence. It is responsibility. The built environment shapes how people feel, relate and belong. It does not require grand gestures, but persistence, judgment and a willingness to value experience alongside efficiency.

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Transport-led rezoning as a complex systems challenge and why adaptive planning matters

Denver D'Souza Alcântara MPIA, Senior Transport Planner, Transport for NSW

Transport-led rezoning is often treated as a linear planning exercise: rezone land around key transport stations to incentivise residential uplift, invest in transport infrastructure and expect development, mode shift and improved place outcomes to follow. In reality, it unfolds within complex urban systems shaped by delayed feedback, uncertain market conditions, behavioural variability and shifting economic conditions. This article argues that recognising that these are complex system challenges and that adaptive planning approaches are better suited to these realities than static, reactive, or myopic planning approaches.

Transport-led rezoning in context

Transport-led rezoning is a central planning tool in New South Wales (NSW). The Transport Oriented Development Program uses state-led rezonings and controls around transport hubs to create capacity for housing and mixed-use development.[1] The program responds to housing demand and aligns land use with transport infrastructure investment. However, it also relies on assumptions about how markets respond to zoning, how people travel, and how development is staged over a 40-year timeframe. Transport infrastructure investments interact with property markets, funding cycles, demographic shifts, and institutional processes. These interactions can either accelerate or delay the intended effects of rezoning. For example, residential uplift may occur slowly if market conditions are weak, or rapidly if investor sentiment shifts. Travel behaviour may change only once development or key infrastructure is delivered. These dynamics point to a broader issue: transport-led rezoning operates within complex systems rather than linear processes.

Complex systems and delayed outcomes

Complex system thinking acknowledges urban development as non-linear, with the effects of rezoning often delayed, uneven or scenario dependent.[2] Early decisions can influence future outcomes in ways that are difficult to reverse, creating long term impacts that are hard to predict.

Therefore, planning should be less about direct control and more about shaping conditions under which change may occur, so that outcomes and their impacts can be better managed.[3] In NSW practice, this is reflected in how Transport for NSW (TfNSW) embeds scale and sequencing into its network planning frameworks, as shown in Figure 1. These frameworks acknowledge that decisions made at the macro scale influence precinct and corridor planning outcomes. Recognising scale helps planners understand where uncertainty is greatest, where flexibility is needed, and how early decisions are made that can have disproportionate long-term impacts. This multi-scalar approach reinforces the need to move beyond linear assumptions in planning approaches.

Uncertainty as a planning condition

Uncertainty is not a residual issue in transport-led rezoning. It is the environment in which planning operates. Adaptive planning research identifies three major sources of uncertainty that affect how plans perform over time:[4]

- system behaviour (how markets, networks and households respond);
- policy objectives (which may evolve over time); and
- future conditions (new technology, economic cycles).

In practice, NSW Government agencies respond to uncertainty through staged implementation, technical studies and ongoing review processes. These approaches recognise that no single forecast can fully determine future demand, delivery timing or infrastructure response. Planning therefore involves working with a range of possible futures rather than predicting a single outcome.

Planning under uncertainty: a behavioural perspective

Engaging with uncertainty is not only a technical challenge, but also a cognitive one. If cities are complex and uncertain, how planners think becomes a core

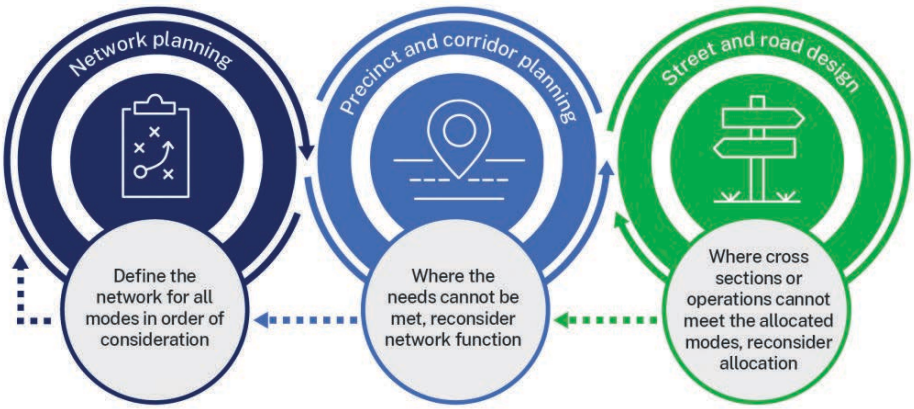

Figure 1: Relationship between various planning and design phases at TfNSW (Source: Transport for NSW, 2023)

part of planning outcomes. Planning decisions are made under conditions of bounded rationality, where information is incomplete and time is limited. In these conditions, professionals rely on heuristics, judgement as well as analysis, which can include predictable bias. Behavioural research highlights patterns that are relevant to planning practice. The planning fallacy, for example, describes a tendency to underestimate time, cost and complexity while overestimating benefits, even when past experience suggests otherwise.[5,6] In transport-led rezoning, this can result in overconfidence in dwelling yield projections, infrastructure timing, or mode shift assumptions.

Adaptive planning

Transport and land use forecasts remain essential tools for scenario testing, evidence-based analysis and structured decision making. However, modelled outputs depend on assumptions about behaviour, technology, and economic conditions, which may change over time.[7] Adaptive planning offers a complementary approach. Rather than treating plans as fixed end states, it frames them as sequences of decisions that can be adjusted as new information emerges.[8] This approach aligns with the realities of transport-led rezoning, where outcomes emerge gradually and require ongoing interpretation.

Recommendations for planning practice

To strengthen planning outcomes within transport-led rezoning and address these challenges, practitioners can respond more effectively by:

- making key assumptions explicit, including those related to demand, affordability, delivery timing and mode shift;
- staging interventions so that responses can be adjusted as conditions evolve rather than locked in on optimistic assumptions;
- using models, and exploring new models not yet available, to test scenarios rather than confirm a single preferred outcome;
- incorporating review points and feedback from previous rezonings concurrently;
- supporting reflective professional judgement alongside technical analysis; and
- integrating behavioural insights to design more human-centred environments.

These approaches do not change the intent of planning. Rather, they strengthen its ability to respond to how cities actually evolve – incrementally, unpredictably, and over time.

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Adaptive planning: lessons from the world's largest temporary city

Disha Chugh PIA (Assoc.), Urbanism graduate, The University of Sydney

For just 55 days, a city larger than most cities in Europe appears on the floodplains of northern India, only to disappear again. A precedent of temporary urbanism operating at a metropolitan scale, the Kumbh Mela challenges how planners think about temporality and adaptability today.

Figure 1: Image showing the before and after landscape transformation (Source: National Remote Sensing Centre, NSRC, 2024)[7]

Temporary urbanism

Urbanists have long approached cities as planned and organised entities, often framing them through a binary lens of permanence or temporality. However, cities are not static. They are in constant flux, shaped by the needs and opportunities, resource availability, constraints, and the aspirations of their inhabitants.[1]

While temporality is widely discussed in urban theory, it has yet to be meaningfully integrated into mainstream planning practice. Planning policies need to act under conditions of uncertainty and continuous risk. We try to calculate continuous risk, but in principle, it is not fully calculable, as there are always surprises and shifting public trust, where trends considered trustworthy today may be condemned tomorrow.[2]

Within this context, Temporary urbanism (TU) has gained prominence in recent years. TU introduces an alternative narrative of short to medium term physical transformations of urban spaces. Such practices include various taxonomies of interim or "meanwhile" uses within large scale interventions.[3] The article focuses on TU as a planning approach for acting under conditions of uncertainty.

Why TU and adaptive planning matter

Australia today grapples with housing crises, evolving community expectations and increased risk of natural disasters. Findings reveal 5.6 million homes at bushfire risk, nearly one million at flood risk, and 23,000 people displaced annually as Australia's housing market is under immense strain.[4,5] In this context, TU offers planning tools for adaptive, innovative, and resilient urban environments.

Research indicates that TU enables a more agile approach to urban design and planning, allowing new forms of thinking, urban intensity, community engagement and local identity.[6]

Kumbh Mela, with *mela* meaning a fair or gathering, represents one of the most ambitious examples of TU operating at

the scale of a megacity of seven million people. It is held every four years at the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers in northern India. The changes in the river's course require the city to respond to an evolving landscape, offering a powerful precedent for adaptive planning (see Figure 1).

Kumbh Mela: a megacity that assembles and disassembles

The gathering is rooted in Hindu mythology and traditions of spiritual and physical cleansing. Following the monsoon's retreat in October, an entire temporary city is assembled for 55 days. During this time, an estimated ten to twenty million pilgrims arrive in twenty-four hour cycles on four principal bathing dates.

The megacity is organised around a flexible spatial grid, making the city legible. Within this framework, many defining features of a megacity are evident, including spatial zoning, transport networks such as roads and pontoon bridges, supported by floating, buoyant pontoons (often hollow, airtight containers), water and sanitation systems, electricity, and social infrastructure such as clinics, community halls, and hospitals.

The grid's adaptability is matched by its material palette. The city is built using five primary materials: cloth, bamboo, nails/screws, string/rope, and corrugated sheets. It enables a cyclical process of assembly, disassembly, and reuse, with materials sourced from and later returned to nearby villages.

Delivering the city requires coordination across multiple departments, including public health, urban development, technology, business and engineering. The governance framework operates across multiple levels, integrating central, state and local government and its departments, public private partnerships, mela association and local communities.

Once the city is dismantled, the grid gives way to agricultural use, with farmers from nearby settlements cultivating the fertile sandbanks before the monsoon returns. In doing so, the landscape reinforces the idea that planning is as much about adaptability as it is about form. Figure 2 shows the process of assembling, use and dissolution of Kumbh Mela.

Kumbh Mela demonstrates TU at a metropolitan scale. While its scale and context are not directly transferable, the precedent offers valuable lessons for

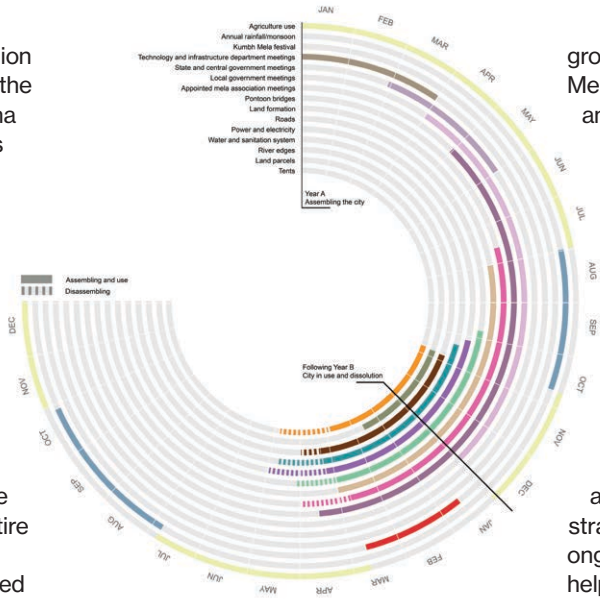

Figure 2: Timeline showing the progression of assembling and disassembling the megacity (Source: Chugh, 2026)

adaptability, incremental planning and stakeholder coordination, demonstrating how short-term, low risk and reversible interventions can inform long term strategic planning outcomes.

Key lessons: future ahead

The lessons from the Kumbh Mela can be distilled into three key principles.

Iterative, experimental-driven planning practices

TU supports iterative and experimental planning practices as it allows diverse ideas to be tested and adapted to uncertainty. Through continuous testing and experimenting, the Kumbh Mela has progressively integrated real-time monitoring, crowd management and smart transport systems, responding to technological advancements.

In NSW, strategic planning could prioritise adaptability alongside compliance, enabling precincts and land uses to change as needs and conditions shift. Scenario based planning, particularly in relation to climate risk and disaster management, can support more resilient planning outcomes by embedding iteration with incremental and evidence-based planning decisions.

Re-evaluating governance and policies for TU

TU often relies on hybrid governance that blurs the boundaries between top down and bottom up planning. This approach can strengthen socio-spatial justice by enabling participation from both the mainstream and marginalised communities. However, in NSW, temporary uses are constrained by institutionalised planning controls, lengthy approval processes and associated fees. These barriers can exclude community groups with limited resources. Kumbh Mela highlights opportunities for state and local governments to re-evaluate planning governance structures and provide more flexibility in planning policies for TU.

Innovative planning practices

TU can support a range of innovative planning objectives when integrated with conventional planning. In NSW, this could include recognising emergency and transitional accommodations within statutory planning frameworks, assessing change readiness in strategic planning, and establishing ongoing resourcing models, which can help translate adaptive intent to practice.

The aim of the article is not to replace permanent planning practices, but to highlight the value of reframing how cities are planned for uncertainty and change. The case of Kumbh Mela shows the power and paradox of planning that allows orderly systems to co-exist with temporality, memory and culture.

Conclusion

As urban environments are constantly transforming, TU brings a new imagination of co-produced, resilient and innovative urban spaces. Kumbh Mela demonstrates how iterative and adaptive planning creates urban systems capable of responding to dynamic conditions while enabling new forms of thinking.

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Valuing living infrastructure

Dom Svejkar, Regenerative Systems Designer

Cities around the world are turning to nature-based solutions to help address natural hazard risks, but also seeing the multiple other forms of social, economic and environmental value they provide. How do we embed these solutions more strategically into planning to realise these diverse positive outcomes? And in Australia, what does it mean to plan, design and govern nature-based infrastructure that is fit-for-Country?

Living infrastructure

'Daylighting' is a process of renaturalising urban stormwater and drainage channels, resurfacing the 'ghost streams' that run underneath our cities, and freeing water to flow along original geological waterways. Whilst concrete stormwater infrastructure was designed to displace water as fast as possible, renaturalisation treats it as a resource rather than waste. It aims to keep water in the landscape for as long as possible: slowing it down, spreading its coverage, storing and sinking it into the ground.

It is a nature-based approach that offers an alternative to maintaining ageing grey infrastructure, which is struggling in the face of escalating flood risks driven by climate change and rapid urbanisation. It builds urban resilience to extreme wet and heat, and offers a multitude of other benefits. Renaturalisation of our waterways supports a diversity of plant life, which in-turn filters pollutant run-off otherwise destined to concentrate downstream. Surrounding trees and their shady canopies grow rapidly as their roots reach water. Groundwater is recharged. Soils are enriched. Birds, tadpoles, crickets, mycelia, and flying foxes show up. Our neighbourhood drains become living waters. The presence of water and shade has an urban cooling effect, which is vital for places (especially Greater Western Sydney) being hit hardest by heat stress and extreme heat events. Community health improves, in addition to the wellbeing benefits of being near water: play, reflection, connection.

What is more, is that we have an opportunity in Australia to do this in our own way, fit-for-Place. A Country-centred approach reminds us that our landscapes are not passive and fixed, and that we should be designing infrastructure that works with the patterns, flows and histories of Place. The NSW Government Architect's *Connecting with Country Framework* is an invitation and inspirational guide to work with and alongside Indigenous Knowledge Systems, to centre Country in the planning and delivery of the built environment. Renaturalisation becomes culturally-sensitive and Water-Sensitive Urban Design.

What does renaturalisation look like in our own "Swamp City" of Sydney,[1] a diverse waterscape of lagoons, mangroves, creeks, chains-of-ponds? How do we plan and create bold Places that reflect cultural and natural character? How can we heal Country by building

Figure 1: A renaturalised Duck Creek, Guildford, Greater Sydney (Source: Dom Svejkar; AI-generated concept image, 2026)

Figure 2: A renaturalised section of Lough Playing Fields, Double Bay (Source: Svejkar/Leonardo, 2026)

infrastructure that works with it? These are exciting questions that offer pathways to enhancing our environment and culture simultaneously.

Valuing co-benefits

With so many social, environmental, cultural, and economic co-benefits, why is this not yet business-as-usual? Why are we not embedding nature-based solutions more strategically as part of urban planning? It is not for a lack of intent – the NSW Department of Planning and Environment *Framework for Valuing Green Infrastructure and Public Spaces*, the *NSW State Disaster Mitigation Plan*, and the Committee for Sydney's Nature's Resilience Dividend report are important steps forward. They are helping to legitimise blue-green infrastructure in mainstream decision-making; to position their multi-benefit value beyond hazard reduction; to demonstrate the abundance of successful examples in cities such as Seoul, Auckland and New York; and to expand on measuring and translating between different forms of value. But there is still a lack of quantifiable data on disaster risk reduction benefits, as well as methods for valuing the complex eco-socio-economic benefits of nature-based solutions.

Part of the problem also lies in the discretisation and simplification of complex, adaptive living systems through siloed infrastructure planning and funding. Budgets and responsibility are thus allocated to specific outcomes and to stakeholders who have little responsibility for the bigger picture. Success is often measured in narrow terms, making it difficult to justify investments that deliver diverse value across multiple systems and longer timescales, even if the overall value is higher.

Integrating nature-based infrastructure into urban planning and delivery requires a shift from viewing blue-green spaces as purely amenities or a sustainability issue, to recognising them as critical, cost-effective financial assets that can deliver both significant cost reductions and more value than traditional grey infrastructure. By quantifying ecosystem services such as flood protection, urban cooling, carbon sequestration, water quality, and biodiversity uplift; planners can demonstrate that investing in nature-based infrastructure can generate significant societal returns (by some estimates, $30 return for every $1 invested),[2] positioning them as a powerful tool in strategic, cross-sectoral planning.

And why not lean into systemic planning and policy-making to support issues such as housing and transport whilst developing blue-green assets? With Sydney's burgeoning Transport-Oriented Developments and boom in public transport development, integrating nature-based infrastructure can help to ensure higher-density living is also liveable.

Stewarding change

What can we learn from nature-based solutions implemented successfully in other cities around the world? A deep understanding of local natural systems and changing flood risks is one key learning, which indicates the need for a fusion of Indigenous and Western Scientific knowledge. Engaging amongst a broader diversity of sectors and stakeholders is also key.

Treating infrastructure as living eco-social systems necessitates a shift in the way we govern them. We need coalitions working together to steward our waters, lands and skies. To listen to them, advocate for them. To bridge the technical, cultural and ecological. We need ongoing collaboration between agencies, communities, and custodians of Country. Without one specific agency taking responsibility for planning, design and long-term change, adaptive governance is needed to respond to the dynamic nature of these systems, and to enable cross-boundary and inter-agency decision-making.[3]

Kinfrastructure

Urban planners have a unique position to shape how places change over time, and the relationships between Country, communities and built form. They help societies decide what kind of places we want to live in, who those places are for, and how we look after them for future generations.

So what kind of relationships do we want to foster with Country that support and sustain us? Nature-based solutions turn passive infrastructure into something alive, beautiful, and with which we can connect: Kin-frastructure.[4] If Country is present in our everyday lives, if we treat it as an asset and an old friend, it changes the way we value and care for it.

Renaturalising urban waterways is one way to show how designing systemically with Country can deliver a wide range of environmental, social and economic benefits. Unlike engineered assets that depreciate, nature-based solutions grow in value over time. But the broader lesson is bigger than water. It is about recognising that the challenges we face are interconnected, and that our responses need to be as well.

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The art of communication: creative visual expression in planning practice

Piers Hemphill RPIA, Associate, Architectus

Felix Saw is a Sydney-based spatial communicator and illustrator. His work demonstrates the value of creativity and visual storytelling within the planning profession. This article explores his practice and considers its relevance to emerging opportunities in contemporary planning.

Effective communication is fundamental to urban planning, as the practice brings together a wide range of people, interests and ideas. While architectural plans and 3D renders communicate the physical intent of development, more interpretive forms of illustration can enhance understanding of how places are experienced.

As a registered architect, Felix has a strong grasp of building design and traditional documentation, but his outputs go beyond the technical. Through illustration, he turns precise architectural forms into clear, engaging, and people-focused stories, showing how creative communication can enhance the way ideas are shared across the built environment industry.

In an era shaped by digital media and reduced attention spans, questions arise regarding the future style of communication in planning practice. Increasingly local governments and agencies are shifting toward more accessible, image-based forms of engagement. The emergence of more concise and visual Development Control Plans is one such example.

In this context, illustration is moving from a supplementary role to an essential component of planning communication, particularly in community engagement and design review processes. While technical documentation remains fundamental to ensuring compliance and precision, creative visualisation offers a means of elevating understanding, aligning stakeholders, and bridging the gap between regulatory frameworks and lived experience of place.

Moreover, well-crafted illustration can broaden community participation by helping to bridge language and literacy barriers, while also engaging those who might otherwise disengage.

Powerful examples of effective visual communication can be seen in some of Felix's commissions as featured below.

101 Design Ideas

In NSW, the State Design Review Panel (SDRP) is a formal program that provides impartial, professional design advice to State Significant and other complex projects. The process is managed by the Government Architect NSW (GANSW).

In 2024, the GANSW prepared a book of 101 design ideas based on lessons and principles learnt from the review of more than 300 projects over the previous five years.[1] The book is intended for a wide audience: everyone who is involved in the delivery of the built environment.

To make design knowledge accessible to the widest possible audience, Felix was commissioned to translate written design principles into instantly legible images. His graphic interpretations are designed to engage viewers and demonstrate flexibility in applying these design guidelines.

Idea 49: Good design is resilient and Idea 50: Good design is regenerative are shown in Figure 1 below. This image shows us that development should be robust, adaptable and future-focused from the ground up. It should maximise its ability to cope with extremes. Beyond minimising impacts, development should be restorative: enhancing biodiversity, water cycles and generate energy.

Figure 1: Felix's Saw's graphic for 'Good design is resilient and regenerative' from 101 Design Ideas (Source: State of New South Wales, Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, 2023)

NSW Pattern Book

Launched by the State government last year, the NSW Pattern Book is a catalogue of pre-approved home designs to allow for faster approvals.[2]

Figure 2: Felix Saw's graphic for 'Activated streetscape' from the NSW Pattern Book (Source: State of New South Wales, Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, 2023)

Felix was commissioned to convert the adopted architectural designs into a series of expressive styles for multiple purposes. Among these, he created quick-reference housing typology images and simplified map line drawing on a pictorial map to demonstrate the suite for designs available. These graphics are integrated into the NSW Pattern Book website to improve user experience and unify the content into a cohesive visual narrative.

As shown in Figure 2, he also created a storyboard format, illustrating the relationships between typologies and scales, and incorporating people and landscape elements to show how this mix of dwellings can create thriving neighbourhoods. In this instance, Felix's work communicates a feeling of community, interaction and vibrancy: what Jane Jacobs termed "the ballet of the street".[3]

Creative hoardings

Since 2016, the City of Sydney has had a policy requiring construction hoardings to display public art or local historic photography.[4] The policy not only enhances urban amenity but also supports local artists.

In line with this initiative, Lendlease commissioned Felix to beautify construction hoardings and provide a temporary gift to the city at its One Circular Quay site (as seen in Figure 3). Felix's piece references elements of the site, its architecture, and local retail and dining offering. The colour and energy of his work draws customers down scaffolded laneways to a reinvigorated food and beverage precinct in the shadows of tower cranes.

Conclusion

Felix Saw's work demonstrates that creative illustration is no longer simply an aesthetic addition to planning practice, but an increasingly important tool for translating complex urban ideas into engaging and accessible narratives. As planning continues to evolve toward more public-facing and participatory processes, creative visual communication will likely play a growing role in shaping how communities understand and connect with the built environment.

More about Felix and his work can be viewed at: linkedin.com/in/felixsaw and on Instagram: @felixsaw.

Figure 3: Felix Saw in front of his work at One Circular Quay, Sydney (Source: Hemphill, 2026)

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Beauty in my backyard: planning beyond the binary through better community engagement

Sean Perry MPIA, Associate Director (Social Planning and Engagement Lead), Mecone

Yes in My Backyard (YIMBY) and No in My Backyard (NIMBY) have become default community responses to change. Beauty in My Backyard (BIMBY) focuses instead on the conditional response: "Yes, so long as", or "No, unless". This article argues BIMBY is a more useful frame, moving communities towards constructive conversations about better growth.

Understanding the NIMBY versus YIMBY binary

In planning literature, NIMBY is used to denote local opposition to nearby land-use change, and there is strong evidence that opposition to change does increase by proximity to it.[1] However, the term can obscure more than it explains, flattening heterogeneous motives into a pejorative label. Critics such as Carissa Schively argue that what gets called NIMBY often includes defensible concerns about social inclusion, risk, accountability, and community participation.[2] YIMBY, too, may be understood in the same lens. It is flat but raises valid criticisms of a planning system that has not ensured genuine affordability.

In April of 2026 the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure released the *Draft Statewide Community Participation Plan*. The Plan signals a shift towards emphasising early engagement on upfront strategic planning over the statutory. The logic is sound. If communities have been engaged on setting the rules, then to engage again on every instance in which those rules are applied is superfluous, being both costly and time consuming. However, the draft Plan leaves much unresolved, focusing predominantly on public exhibition timeframes and processes instead of how to do effective, early engagement.

The adversarial public exhibition process, which orients submitters to a support or object response, is reflected not just in this Plan but is deeply embedded in the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*: through Division 2.6 (community participation requirements), Schedule 1 (public exhibition periods), and Section 4.15(1)(d) (which requires consent authorities to consider submissions in development assessment). The adversarial framing is clearest in Section 8.8, where a person making a submission by way of objection to designated development is legally characterised as an objector for appeal purposes.

Why BIMBY matters

"Today to talk of beauty in policy circles risks embarrassment: it is felt both to be too vague a word, lacking precision and focus...Yet in losing the word 'beauty' we have lost something special from our ability to shape our present and our future."
– Fiona Reynolds (2017)[3]

Long-term social licence is essential as housing affordability challenges intersect with an increasingly politicised planning environment.

Social licence is a community's acceptance of a project as legitimate, fair, and trustworthy. Conceptual work identifies legitimacy and trust as core ingredients, while research shows dialogue and procedural fairness are primary pathways to acceptance.[4] Social licence is created when a project is experienced not as an imposed density increase, but as a negotiated improvement in the quality, fairness, and identity of place.

This is the essence of BIMBY, an approach that serve as a middle ground between NIMBY and YIMBY by encouraging sustainable, place-based approaches to densification to build social license for change.[5] A BIMBY

Figure 1: Poster of desired planning outcomes developed by primary school participants at the Dungog Youth Planning Forum (Source: Mecone, 2026).

approach is useful to negotiate long-term urban densification objectives with, not against, a local community, ensuring genuine improvement to local areas through effective value capture while meeting housing targets. One does not need to come at the expense of the other, as evidenced in beautiful urban outcomes delivered across Sydney where this has been done well.

Genuine early engagement is BIMBY's most effective tool

But why early? When engagement occurs too late, there can be a perception that decisions have already been made. Late engagement also almost always sits within formal exhibition processes, which inherently frame respondents in a Yes or No dichotomy.

Early engagement has the benefit of:

1. **Building legitimacy and trust.** Trust is the backbone of social licence. I recently led early engagement for the Dungog Housing and Infrastructure Master Plan, where I saw the change in community tone when we told them we were there at the start with genuinely open minds. By building trust early, we negotiated better infrastructure, economic development, and character protection while reforming planning controls more ambitious than NSW Government housing targets.
2. **Reducing uncertainty and fear.** Communities often respond poorly to what they cannot visualise, resorting to worst-case assumptions. Systematic reviews of 3D and participatory visualisation methods suggest these tools improve community acceptance by reducing fear of the unknown.[6] Our experience using the newly developed Locall platform to share information with communities validates that sometimes it is simply about access to information.
3. **Reinforcing place identity.** Engagement is generally more credible and effective when residents are asked to genuinely shape a set of live choices that are meaningful and important to them. In early 2025, my team completed engagement for a Development Control Plan (DCP) for the Mortdale Town Centre with Georges River Council. Early engagement focused on community co-design: not just managing traffic, but how future development could complement the characteristics the community loved. Across two workshops, an architect-led walking tour, and online survey responses, we framed the conversation around how development could improve the town centre, rather than whether development should occur at all. The program was cited as a key reason Council progressed the DCP to public exhibition.

Doing engagement well does not have to add cost or complexity. Elevating community voices on design, built form, vibrancy, and street level activation can increase social licence and ensure better development outcomes.

In the current climate of reform, now is an opportune moment to move past a simplistic Yes and No to a community-informed BIMBY approach. Formal submissions during public exhibition will always have a role but should not be the only touch point.

To make an enduring impact on housing affordability, we cannot rely on communities simply saying yes. We need to give them a meaningful role in shaping what yes should look like. This is the promise of Beauty in My Backyard. ■

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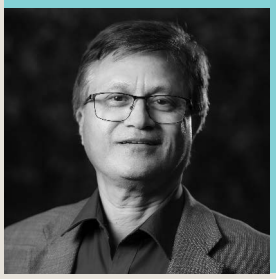
OVER THE FENCE



Bold, brave and beautiful megaprojects? The case of Queen's Wharf Brisbane

Dr Bhishna Bajracharya MPIA, Associate Professor in Urban Planning, Bond University

Dr Daniel O'Hare MPIA, Associate Professor in Urban Planning, Bond University

Megaprojects are playing an increasingly prominent role in reshaping South East Queensland (SEQ). Yet their scale, complexity and political significance also present enduring challenges. This article examines how Queen's Wharf Brisbane (QWB), one of the largest developments in Queensland's history, seeks to balance innovation, sustainability and heritage within complex delivery environments.

Megaprojects as brave ventures

Megaprojects, commonly defined as developments exceeding $1 billion, are characterised by long delivery timeframes, multiple stakeholders and complex governance arrangements. Their brave proponents face recurring risks, including cost overruns, delivery delays and coordination failures linked to institutional complexity and political pressure. Managing these risks requires close integration across planning, urban design, engineering and project management disciplines.

In SEQ, projects such as Cross River Rail, Brisbane Metro, Waterfront Brisbane and QWB illustrate the growing scale of both public and private investment. This trend will intensify through infrastructure associated with the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games, reinforcing the importance of drawing lessons from recent megaproject experience.

Queen's Wharf Brisbane: project overview

QWB is a $3.6 billion integrated resort delivered by the Destination Brisbane Consortium under a long term lease from the Queensland Government. The project occupies more than 12 hectares of Brisbane CBD land and extends to approximately 26 hectares, including riparian areas, comprising nearly 10 per cent of Brisbane CBD (see Figure 1).

The development incorporates hotels, a casino, entertainment venues, residential towers and around 50 retail and dining outlets, alongside more than 7.5 hectares of publicly accessible open space. A defining feature is the adaptive reuse of 11 heritage listed buildings, including the former Treasury Building and the Commissariat Store, embedding the precinct within Brisbane's historical and cultural context.

Figure 1: QWB PDA boundary (Source: Economic Development Queensland, 2026)

Too much boldness in planning and governance?

QWB was facilitated through the Queensland Government's Economic Development Act 2012, enabling the site to be declared a Priority Development Area (PDA) and assessed outside the state's *Planning Act 2016* framework – the equivalent of NSW's *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*. This streamlined approval process accelerated delivery but reduced the formal role of the Brisbane City Council and limited opportunities for community participation.

The state government largely assumed planning and assessment responsibilities, while the private consortium led design and construction. Although the PDA mechanism provided speed and certainty, it also raised concerns about transparency, accountability and the effective privatisation of public land. Community organisations and professional bodies questioned the adequacy of consultation and the project's alignment with broader strategic planning objectives, highlighting the trade offs inherent in fast tracked megaproject approval pathways.

A new consumption-based public realm in a historic government precinct

From an urban design perspective, QWB establishes a high density mixed use riverfront precinct supported by a substantial public realm. Pedestrian and cycling connectivity between the CBD, South Bank and the City Botanic Gardens has been strengthened, most notably through the Neville Bonner Bridge, supporting walkability and reduced reliance on private vehicles.

Figure 2: Built form development outcome – indicative skyline (Source: Bajracharya & O'Hare, 2025)

The public realm comprises a network of plazas, laneways, courtyards and riverfront spaces designed for year round use. Subtropical design responses, including shading and landscaping, enhance thermal comfort and usability. Heritage buildings in the former government precinct are incorporated through adaptive reuse and interpretive elements that link historical narratives with contemporary activity. At the same time, the scale and height of new towers have generated ongoing debate regarding skyline impacts and changing perceptions of Brisbane's river corridor.

Legacy, innovation and sustainability

The long term legacy of QWB can be argued as urban renewal, delivery of major public spaces, conservation of heritage assets and creation of a landmark destination that contributes to Brisbane's global identity. The project also sets an important precedent for PDA led megaproject delivery in Queensland.

Innovation is evident in the project's integrated mixed use model, Six Star Green Star Communities rating, extensive use of Building Information Modelling (BIM) and digital engineering, automated waste systems and complex structural design, including the cantilevered podium and publicly accessible Sky Deck.

Environmental, social and economic sustainability considerations are embedded across the project's design and operation. Environmental initiatives include water sensitive urban design, subtropical landscaping and energy efficient building systems. Social sustainability is reflected in improved walkability, increased public access to the Brisbane River and new civic spaces, while economic sustainability is supported through employment generation, tourism activity and strategic positioning ahead of the Brisbane 2032 Games.

Lessons for the brave and bold

Despite its ambitions, QWB highlights persistent megaproject challenges. Governance complexity and multi stakeholder coordination created delivery risks, while cost overruns – estimated to exceed $260 million – were driven by inflation, labour shortages, supply chain disruption and legal disputes, exacerbated by COVID 19 delays. Balancing large scale redevelopment with sensitive heritage conservation also proved difficult, and the privatisation of significant public land raised questions about public benefit.

The QWB experience underscores key lessons for future megaprojects, particularly those linked to the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Early and sustained stakeholder engagement is essential to building trust and managing expectations. Flexible planning frameworks and adaptive delivery approaches can help manage uncertainty, while bipartisan political support provides continuity across electoral cycles. Strong public–private collaboration remains critical to balancing commercial imperatives with public benefit, and the delivery of high quality, genuinely public urban spaces should remain a non negotiable outcome.

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IN THE COURTS

NSW court decisions on solar farms

New South Wales (NSW) has struggled with delays in renewable energy approvals. Local council pushback, sluggish assessment times, shifting State government rules and a persistent fixation on visual impacts have all overshadowed the pressing need to achieve an 82 per cent renewables target by 2030.[1]

Gary Peacock RPIA, Director, Outline Planning Consultants

This article examines two recent NSW Land and Environment Court (Court) decisions approving regionally significant solar farms. A third case, *IT Power (Australia) Pty Ltd v Mid-Western Regional Council [2023] NSWLEC 1800*, was discussed in a previous issue.[2]

Solar farms are defined as "electricity generating works" permissible with consent in prescribed non-residential zones under Section 2.36(1)(b) and (9) of the *State Environmental Planning Policy (Transport and Infrastructure) 2021* (SEPP Infrastructure). Curiously, the same policy prohibits such projects near 'declared' regional towns where they impact residential or commercial uses, views, scenic quality or future growth capacity (Section 2.42(2)).

***NSW Community Renewables (Gunnedah) Pty Ltd v Gunnedah Shire Council* [2022] NSWLEC 1581**

On 28 October 2022 Senior Commissioner Dixon approved, subject to conditions, a five megawatt solar farm involving 11,232 panels and associated works on approximately 15 hectares at No. 262 Hunts Road, near Gunnedah.

The development application (DA) was initially refused by the regional planning panel on 9 June 2021. A total of 13 submissions were received, all objecting to the project.

The solar project was subsequently approved by the Court on appeal having regard to the following:

- adequacy of water supply and no potential for contamination;
- permissibility under SEPP Infrastructure, which prevailed to the extent of any inconsistency with Local Environmental Plan (LEP) zone objectives;
- contrary to Council's claim of conflict with its draft housing strategy, the Court found the project would have minimal impact on future residential land supply. As Dixon SC noted, the draft strategy had merely identified "an opportunity for additional R5 land"– a potential rezoning that "has not progressed in 40 years" [at 65]; and
- the Court found that all views of the proposed solar farm

***Green Gold Energy Pty Ltd v Edward River Council* [2025] NSWLEC 1359**

On 21 May 2025 Dixon SC approved, subject to conditions, a 4.95 megawatt solar farm in Deniliquin, involving 11,232 panels over a 21 hectare cleared grazing property, with 11 neighbouring dwellings within 1.2 kilometres. The proposed development was permissible with consent under Section 2.36 of SEPP Infrastructure. The DA was initially refused by the regional planning panel citing various grounds, including noise impacts, inconsistency with the Deniliquin LEP 2013 and RU1 Primary Production zoning, rural character, site suitability, visual amenity, biodiversity impacts, "health impacts", and agricultural land use conflict. A total of 12 objections to the project were received.

The Court found the project complied with SEPP Infrastructure, the relevant provisions of the Deniliquin LEP and the provisions of SEPPs relating to contamination and biodiversity. The Court upheld the appeal by the applicant and approved the project.

Key take-outs

Both cases expose the absence of comprehensive planning guidance for regionally significant solar projects in NSW. The Victorian Government's *Solar Energy Facilities Design and Development Guideline* (2022) offers a useful model to compare against – imposing a four-month deadline for planning decisions, removing Court appeals and delivering faster approvals. Adopting the Victoria model in NSW could not only help in accelerating solar and other renewable projects, it could also provide much-needed transparency in the assessment of future solar projects.

It is perhaps not coincidental that these appeals often involve local council areas heavily reliant on coal mining. Solar farms face disproportionate scrutiny for visual impacts under SEPP Infrastructure compared to mining, which typically disturbs far larger areas. The Vickery Mine alone covers approximately 2,541 hectares of agricultural land north of Gunnedah.[3]

In contrast, solar farms tend to sit lightly on the land, allowing co-existent grazing and reversion on decommissioning. For instance, the Gunnedah solar farm occupied just 15 hectares of land, resulting in a much smaller impact on land use and low visual landscape impact overall.

SEPP Infrastructure lacks any comprehensive State Government planning initiatives and guidelines actually facilitating renewable energy projects. This is in marked contrast to mining projects, where clear statutory planning guidelines must be satisfied before a mining project can be approved as set down in Chapter 2 of the *State Environmental Planning Policy (Resources and Energy)* 2021.

There should be detailed design and 'best practice' development guidelines in any revised SEPP Infrastructure applicable to solar projects. ■

Endnotes

1. Department of Planning Housing and Infrastructure 2022, Large-Scale solar energy guideline, August, Sydney, including *Technical supplement for landscape character and visual impact assessment*.
2. Mulligan, L 2024, 'A place in the sun – the importance of site analysis and the public interest in solar energy projects', *New Planner*, vol. 139, pp. 30-31.
3. Whitehaven Coal 2018, *Vickery Extension Project Environmental Impact Statement*, Whitehaven Coal, Australia.

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