Planning Institute of Australia (NSW Division)
Submission: Draft Centres Design Guidelines & Draft Good Design for Medium Density Living

The Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) is the peak body representing professionals involved in planning Australian cities, towns and regions. The Institute has around 4,500 members nationally and around 1,300 members in New South Wales. PIA NSW plays key roles in promoting and supporting the planning profession within NSW and advocating key planning and public policy issues. This submission has been prepared on behalf of PIA NSW by Members of the Institute.

Introduction

The Planning Institute of Australia (NSW Division) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Draft Centres Design Guidelines and Draft Good Design for Medium Density Living. In order to prepare a thorough response, comments have been sought from members of the Institute who are Urban Design professionals as well as comments from the Institute’s Local Government Planners Network (LGPN) group. The comments from the LGPN group provide a contribution from non-metropolitan based planners on the two documents. This submission paper has been divided into four sections; the Planning Institute and urban design; general comments on the urban design documents; specific comments on Draft Centres Design Guidelines; and specific comments on Draft Good Design for Medium Density Living.

The Planning Institute and Urban Design

The Planning Institute has taken steps to raise the profile of urban design in NSW by establishing the Urban Design Connect Group earlier this year. The purpose of the group has been to meet as a forum and to workshop important urban design issues to convey to the new NSW Government. The first workshop held on 31st March 2011 had over 40 attendees with a second workshop held on 3rd May 2011.

The Institute has already advised the new Government that it would like to see an independent urban design unit established in NSW that focuses on improving the quality of successful sustainable places. The ideal entity would be one where experts work cross functionally advising organisations which influence the built environment from transport agencies to planning departments and from health experts to local communities.

The key services provided by this unit would include best practice design guidance, independent design review, particularly on major projects, and provide expert education and training. It is recommended that the urban design unit be fully funded in order to ensure its independent status. It would work closely with State agencies, Councils, major project proponents and agencies such as the Metropolitan Development Authority to provide world class urban design advice.
General Comments on the Urban Design Documents Currently on Exhibition

Positive comments have been provided from the Institute’s members about the presentation quality of the two documents in terms of layout and the balance between text and imagery. The inclusion of the ‘design principles’ within the Draft Centres Design Guidelines was also supported. The question has arisen however, about the purpose of these documents. Are they ‘stand-alone’ or will they dovetail into a suite of design guidelines. Also, how does the Draft Centres Design Guidelines document relate to the Government’s proposed ‘Centres Policy’? The broader strategic policy document for ‘Centres’ should be made clear first, otherwise the Draft Centres Design Guidelines may not always be compatible.

The suggestion was made that a ‘toolkit’ / checklist section could be provided for both documents, so that they could also be used for reference when planning projects, and also as an evaluation tool for when schemes are completed. However, it is considered that the Draft Centres Design Guidelines could almost be used as a toolkit because the principles in each section can be easily extracted. It is considered that the Draft Medium Density Living design document is more subjective in that the text talks about aesthetic and architectural quality, and does not clearly pick out the urban design elements that make a given scheme successful.

One of the key questions arising is clarification about the intended user / target group for the guidelines. In terms of the guidelines for medium density living, practitioners such as architects would already have this information in hand, so is it intended for use mainly by Councils, planning practitioners or the general public?

Specific Comments on the Draft Centres Design Guidelines

- The Draft Centres Design Guidelines provide a good outline document but not a good resource document. The document would benefit from the inclusion of good case studies from both metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas and these could be included within an appendix to the report.
- The guidelines, while containing good principles, would be more user-friendly if they were reduced down to the key issues in local centre design. Currently there are over 450 principles in no particular order of importance. The importance of establishing high quality public domain for example is not explicitly mentioned. In essence, it is felt that there are too many principles which are all good ideas, but no guidance is given about how they should be used.
- It would be helpful to be able to link this document to a strategic hierarchy of centres. The document introduction talks about the hierarchy of centres from city to village, but fails to link the individual principles back to the hierarchy.
- A suggested approach to identify key issues for centres is, as follows:
  - Undertake a thorough analysis of the centre from the broad strategic context to the detailed level and determine what the key opportunities and constraints are.
  - Establish land ownership patterns as fragmented land must be acknowledged as a fundamental part of, and sometimes a constraint to, the design of centres.
  - Develop the basic street pattern that connects the planned catchment to the public transport node or network. Establish what key connections are required to achieve this.
  - Establish the ‘capacity’ of the centre, it could be limited by access, transport or a target set by a strategy.
  - Develop land uses compatible with the role of the centre and supported by economic research.
  - Develop built form based on the above as well as taking into consideration overshadowing to public places etc.
• The guidelines would be greatly improved with some case studies, for example, for a new centre like Oran Park and for an existing centre like Kogarah Town centre.
• The document could provide clearer guidelines for establishing new centres.
• High density residential development is also a key component of larger centres, and therefore a guidelines document for high density residential within centres could be produced.
• The water sensitive urban design section could mention wetlands and bio-retention in street tree pits.
• The sustainability section could be more detailed, and include energy efficiency targets for buildings, such as Greenstar ratings.
• The ‘hierarchy of centres’ on page 22 includes information on walking circuits and cycle catchments for centres, but it is recommended that driving catchments are also included for the purpose of regional centres which draw from a wider catchment.
• The guidelines are focussed on the metropolitan context and not so much the regional area context. The issues in the regional centres will be different from the metropolitan area. For example, one of main problems in the regional centres is to protect the central shopping strip from fringe development where the land is cheaper. Also the Chambers of Commerce in regional areas would like to see their centres as being car friendly, as many people need to travel to the centre by car.

Specific Comments on the Draft Good Design for Medium Density Living

• The document could include an introductory section that talks about design principles, for example, what is a setback or floor space ratio? These principles could be illustrated using simple diagrams. The case studies for medium density housing could be very useful in assisting a council to identify what sort of housing/ built form is required, and would benefit from data to assist councils in setting floorspace ratios etc.
• The structure of the document could be improved so that the key data can be identified more easily. At the moment all the facts are given the same weight, it would be nice to see the key data presented in a hierarchy of importance.
• The purpose of the images on page 9 is not clear and more information is needed to put the images into some context within the report.
• The document should acknowledge that design issues in metropolitan and regional areas are quite different. For example, a medium density development in a regional / rural town may be of a much smaller scale, rather than much larger multi-unit developments in a metropolitan area.
• The Centres document has Principles for each sub set. It would be useful to have a set of Design Features or the like that explains why a given scheme was good; this could be the relationship to the street, the housing mix etc. This information is in the Project Description text but could be pulled out as bullet points to emphasise particular qualities.
• The Draft Good Design for Medium Density Living document includes quality developments and a good range of design solutions. However, all of the examples are from the Sydney metropolitan area, with the exception of one from Newcastle. There are no regional examples provided.
• The document includes an example of a 2 bedroom medium density development in Mosman. However, regional areas do not have the land values to build in this type of style. Regional developers would be looking at more cost effective options and the examples included would not always be relevant to the regional areas. Development costs can already be at the margins in regional areas.
• The document is also very light on examples from Western Sydney and this may be a reflection of the different land values across Sydney. The guidelines tend to focus on top end of the market designs, but affordable ‘best practice’ guidelines are needed for designs at the lower end of the market too. Ideas and examples should also be simplified for the lower end of the market otherwise developers / designers may not try to achieve them as they become out of reach.