

Public vs Private Open Space

Privatisation of public space is one of the major threats to urban renewal at this time when the focus on civic design is at last getting much deserved attention at the local village level. This was one of a multitude of issues addressed in the Australian Institute of Architects 'Colloquium', a forum held in Parramatta, and in the UTS/Arup sponsored 'Regenerating Sydney – Why Now' at the Opera Playhouse during November.

Lane Cove Plaza is now dressed up with a slick new wardrobe that has cost well beyond the original budget - an outfit that would make a Westfield centre mall proud! Such excess could be justified where the civic realm is truly enhanced and significant public benefit can be seen, but is this the case in the plaza? Reaction seems rather muted, and main beneficiaries seem to be cafe and restaurant owners who now have extensive corralled outdoor terraces, but the 'public' areas and seating has dwindled at the expense of commercial gain. Yet again a piece of patchwork quilt has been added to Lane Cove's 'public' domain that is without a coherent, well designed vision or suite of street furniture and public art.

Is this approach about to continue on the Rosenthal site? An expensive exercise in 'public' consultation and a competition have taken place to put some icing on the layer cake of car parking and big box retail intended in a 5 level development that could be a real game changer for Lane Cove.

The Rosenthal site has wonderful catalytic potential that could fulfil a number of local needs - multi-purpose cultural facilities, a vibrant lane way with multiple small creative start-up shops to help build local business and seed redevelopment of the rear to Longueville Road buildings, a new public place truly connected to the rest of the surrounding village. But such big ideas need to be conceived within the vision of the Lane Cove Village Structure Plan (that seems to be languishing on a shelf) while a limited competition has generated a hybrid of leafy ideas looking for a tree to hang out in.

Scheme A, the most relaxed and flexible concept, has good site analysis and vision for activation, a sense of village extension and character with legible connections and idea of how Birdwood Lane might be a catalyst for future development and the Rosenthal Ave edge transition softened with landscape.

Scheme B is very formal with a pleasant looking fountain and sculpture garden, but its primary focus is on the entries to below ground retail space and basement car park, separating active uses from Birdwood Lane to overlook Rosenthal Ave traffic, and pulling life away and diminishing potential integration with the village edges.

Scheme C appears the least convincing and most contrived design approach, big on hard surfaces and features but not relationship to the context, suggesting token use zones but little sense of the opportunity for them to link with or enhance the perimeter sites.

Scheme D also shows good understanding of the context and potential interaction with the edges, and a mix of passive natural and active urban elements, but the resolution seems overly organic and complex which diminishes its legibility and catalytic scope for the precinct.

Unfortunately, perhaps due to the brief and a pre-determined development outcome, all schemes have overlooked the significant potential for the northern end of the site to create a facility that could be a mix of retail, commercial and cultural – a wonderful chance to generate real civic qualities that could include a number of features and strategies as part of a real village vision, proposed in a way that is not possible with an iced layer cake.