

## Unit sweet (or not-so-sweet) unit

Units, units everywhere - but are they fit to live in? With so many residential developments around Sydney today you would think potential buyers are spoilt for choice - but think again!

On various design review panels for local councils, including some recently 'amalgamated' ones, I and several colleagues get to see the latest and frequently not so greatest of the crop. Many developments unfortunately are 'designed' in a development system that often discounts the product to achieve savings that we believe are counterproductive in sacrificing architectural quality that would benefit future residents and the community as a whole.

Some developer builders employ architects who can get them a product that can just scrape over the bar of local planning or SEPP 65 Apartment Design Guide controls for the minimum amount of extra cost. Others use designer draftsmen with CAD skills to churn out cookie cutter plans and details from their magazine files, and then 'buy' a required Registered Architect signature meant to signify professional authorship of a Development Application.

There is an approval system in play that still allows the lowest common denominator of design to pass through the planning matrix sieve, and many residential projects on the market are out of this stable, leading to a surfeit of poorly conceived and under-performing units.

While unit living can have many advantages – less maintenance, communal pool and/or gym, good views, proximity to local cafes and public transport, the downside is sometimes less obvious.

With many more neighbours comes the potential for increased awareness of their presence, as suggested in SMH Domain 15/7/16 –

*"What's that banging next door? Oh, it's neighbour one assembling their Ikea furniture. What's that thumping from the ceiling? Oh, it's neighbour two practising tap dance... well, hopefully."*

The deficit in design quality for units falls into three broad categories - contextual, communal and internal - and I offer a few classic examples of where they may fail to deliver.

### CONTEXT

- Proximity to good public transport infrastructure, local amenities and parks that requires an Uber account to access
- Overlooking by the next block of unit cookies that purport to meet setback controls, privacy and solar access but have negotiated a private certifier's 'alterations'
- Design features meant to signify the latest elements from 'starchitects' via magazines or blogs, but ignoring local relevance and character
- Orientation based on maximising views or the developer's yield and profit, but compromising solar access, acoustic exposure to main roads and cross ventilation.

### COMMUNAL

- Entry foyers with room to enter a lift but not much more other than an over-stuffed mail box
- Double loaded access corridors that feel like 1 star hotels, with no natural light or ventilation and offering titillating atmospheric cameos of the life behind the walls (see above)
- Landscaped open space meant to encourage community life but right on the road boundary, overshadowed most of the day, or in full view of the thirty units next door
- Waste or storage rooms next to the main entry, or tucked away in a spot that gives residents a chance for parkour lessons en route to access

- The feature fire hydrant booster valve ‘sculpture’ at the main entry that compensates for the bike stand missing in the car park
- Single lift buildings higher than 4 storeys that require fire stair use on maintenance days – but those stairs can also be a great exercise or social catalyst if designed as an attractive alternative to the lift that never comes, or has troublesome passengers!



#### INTERNAL

- Efficient spatial planning that allows direct views from living or dining rooms into a bedroom or bathroom, or worse if it's the neighbours!
- Entry into a corridor that gives a guided tour of the bedrooms, laundry cupboard and kitchen before arriving at the back of a living room couch looking onto a narrow balcony with feature a/c condenser, hot water unit and clothesline array
- Ceiling heights that just meet the minimum standard of 2.7m using a sculptural play of bulkheads, claustrophobic corridors and capsule bathrooms
- A front door that requires instructions for visitors (and again from SMH 15/7/16)

*“The entrance is behind the bus stop, on the street that’s parallel from my building, when you get outside, solve the Rubik’s Cube at the intercom and a secret door will then be revealed – call me if you have any problems ...” – and by the way mobile reception may be poor due to the local shadow.*

If higher density living is to deliver on the often promised access to a new urbanity, then the quality must improve. Perhaps the Greater Sydney Commission needs to shine a light on poor performance in this sector, and at the same time look at how affordability can also be a by-product of quality architectural design.

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