

TURNING THE MATRESS FOR LIVABLE MIXED USE VILLAGES TO BED DOWN

Sydney is undergoing a massive urban revolution that is seeing High Density Living emerge in a multitude of locations along public transport routes, in various prime waterfront locations, and around existing town centres where up-zoning can benefit from existing retail, community fabric and service infrastructure.

But to fully realise potential public open space benefits often touted in the case for High Density Living, the built fabric must provide for active transport, connectivity and vibrant ground planes via mixed-use zoning that can support the urban life beyond residential needs. This will require much improved consideration for the relationship of buildings to each other, and the broader context of streets and precincts that are not seen just as the mattress for residential bulk to lie on.

The interface between buildings and the public open space at ground level in which they sit is the critical communal zone in which so much of our civic activity occurs, yet this is so often treated in isolation or as an afterthought - the passage to a foyer or front door, retail frontage to be maximised for commercial return alone, space where services and infrastructure are squeezed without compromising the ROI for unit sales above. This is where a huge potential exists for shared zones, laneways, arcades and courtyards to provide frontages for commercial, retail, community and educational uses that need proximity to the public.

As more opportunities and technologies for flexible workplace and communal life emerge, the potential in podiums that are so often treated as 'too hard' and 'not commercially viable' for mixed use activities is being lost in maximising return on residential units. The NBN rollout will generate huge opportunities for small business to work in smaller collaborative environments that will be less dependent on physical proximity to existing commercial centres, and capable of integration in smaller clusters within emerging TODs along the transport routes. This creates the platform for new work/live relationships whereby commuting distances can be all but eliminated for so many who just need a small accessible space linked to the telecommunications network within walking or cycling distance of home.

So much real estate jargon for new development is focused on lifestyle, village character, precinct benefits without really looking at what can be added to a growing community potential for flexible workspaces or hubs, start up business centres, recreation, culture, childcare, seniors exchange - activities that can provide real life extras at the doorstep, scope for flexible shared economy places that can serve a broad demographic across age and ethnic spectrums.

Zoning or planning code changes to allow for more mix in the mixed use definition are necessary, along with design thinking around how to better shape these large envelopes that are able to generate so much in support of local vertical village life. Start up shared creative business spaces, pop up artist studios and/or galleries, educational exchanges, technology or repair workshops - so many small business uses that are usually pushed into

the ubiquitous light industrial or business park zones could be right below a huge customer base, and occupied by locals.

Many examples of these mixed use zones exist in Asian cities like Singapore or Hong Kong following a shop-house tradition, but their often messy character and servicing needs are seen as detrimental to the need for a clean, secure and presentable residential neighbourhood. But in our travels it is so often these areas that we are drawn to, that exhibit a sense of concentrated and vibrant urban life that excites and supports activation of the surrounding public domain in ways that help reduce negative social or security issues through generation of more foot traffic, eyes on the street and contingent surveillance.

Effective networked connection of walkable precincts is critical to the success of such areas, and is directly linked to public domain that surrounds transport nodes.

The long overdue light rail systems and Sydney Metro will have major impacts on how the future movement between home and workplace/amenities/cultural/recreation destinations, and between workplace and other related business locations. Where the stations are situated is going to be critical in generation of new opportunities for public domain activation around denser residential areas envisaged around them.

Sydney does have examples of such mixed use centres:

- Central Park on Broadway has a range of varied uses in its base buildings that add to a sense of village life beyond - envisaged as a major urban infill, it has achieved an admirable balance of active commercial, cultural and community uses in the podium levels, and a fine grain of walkable connections
- St Leonards has emerged as a nexus of commercial and residential development on the Pacific Highway, over a major railway station and at the intersection of 3 local councils - a concentration of poorly conceived projects that fight the existing infrastructure and urban forms that are a legacy of limited planning vision
- Rouse Hill is a regional centre within a new growth corridor and establishes a new vision for how a mixed use centre can be configured from scratch with active shared ground planes, and new planned centres such as Schofields

Conversely some regional centres, although having some degree of mixed use, see limited street activation due to the typology of residential development that often has minimal ground level provision for other uses. In some other cases the ground or slightly elevated residential is screened from the street for privacy, and results in loss of dialogue or engagement with the public domain.

Then there are the carparks, many of which may become redundant very soon with the increases in car share, Uber use and the arrival of autonomous vehicles. So much space now locked into basements may be looking for reinvention as a range of other uses.

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