

Parramatta vision

Parramatta Road, like William Street, has deteriorated to such an unloved and unlovable condition that it is periodically proposed as a candidate for a makeover. Fanfares are sounded, plans produced with a flourish, but nothing happens on the ground. As the proponents of the latest scheme shrewdly observed, Sydney's obsession with its eastern harbour frontage relegates the city's demographic heart to little more than a dumping ground. In the past 15 years, Circular Quay has been reworked at least twice but the neglect of Parramatta Road has continued.

The latest scheme, however – the result of an international competition won by a local consortium of Stanisc Associate Choi Ropiha Architects and landscape architects McGregor Partners – provides not only a seductive vision of what could be but also a number of practical initiatives. These include enhanced transport strategies, “shop-top” housing, the creation of public spaces and the provision of cultural facilities. All are achievable, given the right political mindset, within the scheme's target date of 2020.

The Sydney Central team, as the consortium called itself, poses a serious and fundamental question: Can Sydney be more than the harbour? It would be difficult to argue with their proposition that, at present, the city's west is little more than “a disadvantaged, alienated suburb”, with Parramatta Road representing 23 kilometres of “decay and unrealised potential, smack in the middle of the demographic heart of Sydney”. Any correction of the harbour-centric view of Sydney could be to the benefit not only of the west but also of the overhyped and overwrought metropolis on the harbour. Last year's scheme for a “coffee table” enlargement of the Museum of Contemporary Art at Circular Quay were symptomatic of the insane insistence on maximising the returns on every available piece of harbourside land, often to the detriment of the harbour itself and its built surrounds. With that in mind, Sydney Central's slightly tongue-in-cheek suggestion for a Museum of Contemporary Art at Granville acquires an appealing logic.

The major stumbling block to the planned makeover will always be Sydney's notorious dependency on the private car and here the Sydney Central team proposes upgrading rail and ferry services, providing a light-rail service and dedicating rapid transit lanes for buses along the M4 as well as providing for medium- and high-density development to extend outwards from the railway stations. If that seems overly idealistic, it is worth remembering that research last year by the University of Sydney's Warren Centre showed that politicians, bureaucrats and local government officials overestimated the public's faith in roads and freeways as the solution to traffic congestion. Seventy-three per cent of respondents to the survey said there was not enough investment in public transport.

Responsibility for election comment in this issue is taken by the editor-in-chief, Alan Revell, 201 Sussex Street, Sydney 2000.