

Designing Better

Ideas for Improving Mixed Use and Residential Apartment Developments

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Introduction

Well-designed apartment buildings provide comfortable, welcoming and enduring homes that help to create better neighbourhoods and better streets, benefiting the whole community.

The Northern Territory Planning Commission's Designing Better project is exploring options for amending the planning standards and requirements to better enable best practice design outcomes to be achieved in mixed use and apartment design in Zones C (Commercial), MR (Medium Density Residential) and HR (High Density Residential) across the Northern Territory .

In July 2019 the Northern Territory Planning Commission (NTPC) commenced Stage One consultation on its Designing Better project. This stage of engagement was broken down into three sub-stages. Stages 1a and 1b targeted the development and design industries and Local Government followed by Stage 1c, which allowed the whole community to provide their views. By targeting industry and Local Government in the first instance, the Planning Commission obtained a realistic view on whether the suggestions and ideas are feasible for discussion with the general public.

The purpose of this report is to summarise feedback received from stakeholders during the entirety of Stage One stakeholder engagement. The feedback received is now being considered and will assist in the preparation of a suite of potential planning scheme amendments.

STAGE ONE

Engagement for Stage One was split into three sub-stages:

- Stage 1a targeted a select group of Industry bodies
- Stage 1b expanded on 1a to include the wider development and design industry
- Stage 1c engaged with the community

STAGE TWO

Feedback received by the NT Planning Commission will inform the next stage of consultation, which may include a recommendation to the Minister to consider exhibition of draft provisions as a proposed amendment to the Planning Scheme.

Consultation Objectives

Stage One consultation was undertaken by the Planning Commission as follows:

- Stage 1a - Select Industry Sounding Engagement
- Stage 1b - Industry Sounding
- Stage 1c - Broad Community Engagement

The purpose of Stage One was to gauge community feedback on:

- the elements the Planning Commission has identified as influencing the design of mixed use and high density developments; and
- a range of options for improve individual design outcomes in our places and spaces.

Consultation objectives sought to:

- recognise previous consultation and feedback in relation to built form outcomes;
- raise awareness, through educating stakeholders, of the potential to improve planning rules that influence mixed use and high density developments;
- elicit quality feedback from stakeholders to inform a future proposed planning scheme amendment (PSA); and
- present concepts, discussion and some detail of what might be included in a future PSA.

Stakeholders included:

- industry associations and representative bodies including:
 - o Urban Development Institute of Australia – Northern Territory;
 - o the Planning Institute of Australia NT Division;
 - o Australian Institute of Architects NT Chapter;
 - o Property Council of Australia NT Division;
 - o building certifiers; and
 - o developers;
- Government agencies and departments; and
- members of the public.

Figure 1: Stages of Engagement

Consultation Materials

There were two documents released as part of Stage One consultation, which were a Discussion paper and a Snapshot booklet.

The Discussion Paper presented:

- background to the project;
- the engagement process;
- identification of issues; and
- discussion of potential improvements.

The discussion paper was first released during Stage 1a engagement and was written with a relatively high level of technical detail given the intended audience of Government, Council and industry groups. The Discussion Paper was also made available to the public through Stage 1c engagement.

Stage 1c engagement centred on a project snapshot booklet that provided a simplified and accessible overview to the general public of the ideas that this project is seeking to implement.



Figure 2: Consultation material



Consultation Activities

Members of the community, industry groups, representative bodies, Government departments and agencies across the Northern Territory were engaged using the following tools:

- print advertising in the NT News, Centralian Advocate and Katherine Times;
- social media;
- interactive ideas and feedback boards on the 'Have Your Say' website;
- a dedicated page on the website;
- briefings to Local Governments including the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory;
- industry workshops held in Katherine, Alice Springs and Darwin;
- pop-up stalls;
- community forums; and
- booklets in MLA and local Council offices.

Pop-ups and Information Sessions

A number of opportunities were available, via pop-up stalls and forums, for the community to ask questions, and to provide verbal and written feedback to the Planning Commission.

During the consultation period for sub-stage 1c, approximately 200 people engaged with the pop-up stalls and community information sessions throughout the Territory. These events provided the community with the opportunity to learn about the project, engage with project staff, and share thoughts and ideas.

Pop-up stalls were held at:

- Coolalinga Central;
- Parap Markets;
- Nightcliff Shopping Centre;
- Casuarina Square;
- Gateway Shopping Centre;
- Palmerston Shopping Centre;
- Yeperenye Shopping Centre; and
- Katherine Central.

Community information sessions were held in Alice Springs, Darwin and Katherine.



Figure 3: Public consultation

Online Engagement 'Have Your Say'

The Planning Commission allowed the community to also learn about the project and provide feedback through the 'Have Your Say' platform, which included an ideas page and simple feedback form. The project page on 'Have Your Say' was visited by 311 people, with 53 visitors downloading a document and 22 people using the available feedback tools.

Social Media - Facebook

The Planning Commission used Facebook as a social media platform for advertising events and the availability of engagement materials. The campaign reached almost 10k people across the territory.

NT Planning Commission Website

A dedicated page on the Planning Commission website was employed. The web page included consultation materials, times and dates of pop ups and forums as well as contact details for the community to get in touch with the project team or make submissions.



Figure 4: Department Social Media posts



Figure 5: Pop up venue Social Media post



Media Coverage

Print Media

On 7 February 2020 Stage 1c consultation was launched by the NTPC issuing a media release (figure 7) via the NT Government newsroom and print advertising in the NT News (figure 6).

Additional print advertising was also placed in the Centralian Advocate and Katherine times ahead of engagement events in those localities. An editorial published in the NT News on 11 February also featured the cover of the snapshot booklet alongside NTG announcements.

NORTHERN TERRITORY PLANNING COMMISSION

Have your say on better design for apartments and mixed-use developments

Designing Better seeks to enable and promote quality built form outcomes for apartment and mixed-use developments across the Territory.

The Northern Territory Planning Commission is now seeking comments and feedback from the community on the recommendations in the Designing Better discussion paper.

Public information sessions will be held across the Territory during February.

The Designing Better Project Snapshot and the technical Discussion Paper are at haveyoursay.nt.gov.au, along with details of the public information sessions. Submissions can be made online, via post or in person until **Friday 6 March 2020**.

08 8924 7540 | planningcommission.nt.gov.au

Figure 6: Print advertising

Northern Territory Government

Visit NTG Newsroom »

Departmental and agency media releases

NORTHERN TERRITORY PLANNING COMMISSION

media release

Northern Territory Planning Commission (NTPC)

Better design ahead for apartments and mixed-use developments

7 February 2020

The Northern Territory Planning Commission is seeking ideas from the community for how to achieve quality residential apartment and mixed-use developments.

The Designing Better project seeks to encourage and enable residential apartment and mixed-use buildings that are designed to:

- respond to context and celebrate local and regional differences
- respond to climate and contribute to the Territory's built form character
- embrace innovation through flexible, best practice design solutions
- make great places that provide meaningful, vibrant and liveable spaces for people.

Planning Commission chairman Dr David Ritchie said the project will ultimately inform revised development requirements in the Planning Scheme.

"This stage of consultation is an opportunity for the community to participate by contributing their ideas and thoughts on the proposed recommendations within the Discussion Paper," Dr Ritchie said.

"Feedback received will help the Planning Commission further refine these recommendations, before consideration is given to changing the Planning Scheme."

The Designing Better Project Snapshot and the technical Discussion Paper are at haveyoursay.nt.gov.au, along with details of the public information sessions in Darwin, Katherine and Alice Springs. Submissions can be made online, via post or in person until Friday 6 March 2020.

ENDS

Media Contact: 0437 868 115

Figure 7: Media release published by the NTG Newsroom on 7 February 2020.

Briefings and meetings

Council

The NTPC briefed the following Councils on the project:

- Litchfield Council was briefed on 18 September 2019
- The City of Darwin was briefed on 30 September 2019
- Alice Springs Town Council was briefed on 1 October 2019
- The City of Palmerston was briefed on 8 October 2019
- Katherine Town Council was briefed on 23 October 2019

In addition to individual Councils, the Local Government Association of the NT was briefed on 2 October 2019.

Members of the Legislative Assembly

Two briefings were conducted by the Chairman of the Planning Commission on Tuesday 15 October 2019.

The intent of the briefings were to provide members with an overview of the project, the consultation stages and an opportunity to give preliminary feedback and suggestions on work underway.

Development Consent Authority (DCA)

As the DCA is responsible for administering the NT Planning Scheme, briefings and feedback sessions were offered as part of Stage One consultation. The NTPC briefed the following DCAs:

- Alice Springs DCA – 12 February 2020
- Litchfield DCA – 13 February 2020
- Katherine DCA – 18 February 2020
- Palmerston DCA – 19 February 2020
- Darwin DCA – 21 February 2020

Industry

Industry associations and representative bodies had several opportunities to be briefed on the project, and to provide verbal and written feedback.

During the consultation period, the following industry associations and representative bodies attended a briefing session:

- Australian Institute of Architects NT (AIANT)
- Urban Development Institute NT (UDIA)
- Planning Institute of Australia NT (PIA)
- Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO)
- Property Council of the NT



Stakeholder Feedback

Community Feedback

Comments and key issues raised by the community have been grouped into the key ideas identified in the Snapshot booklet released during sub-stage 1c consultation.

- Idea 1 – Fronting the street
- Idea 2 – Contextual response
- Idea 3 - Special Landscape Treatments
- Idea 4 - Making Great Places
- Idea 5 – Outdoor living
- Idea 6 – Innovation and variety

Out of Scope feedback

Many comments received were outside the scope of the Designing Better project, such as:

- Reviewing car parking rates for mixed use and residential developments.
This is out of scope as it would require an in-depth study by specialist transport planners and would be likely to yield definitive answers that would be able to be applied across the Territory-wide remit of the project
- Reviewing design criteria for single and multiple dwellings in zones SD and MD.
- Incorporating universal accessibility standards to the internal design of a dwelling to allow units to be adapted for the elderly and people with disabilities.
This is out of scope as this is covered under other legislation.
- Incorporating specific uses such as small medical areas or small child care / play areas within communal open space.
This is out of scope as the planning system is not such that it can mandate developers to include these.

Idea 1 - Fronting the Street

This idea was based around how buildings can relate better to their streets. Overall, community feedback supported the concept of buildings relating to the street through:

- people being able to look out onto the street
- clear entries and front doors
- ground level courtyard apartments
- attractive and appropriate fencing
- less parking in the front setback area.

Suggestions put forward by the community included:

- promoting shop-top living
- promoting design of unit development which would encourage unit complexes to be developed in a square and at its centre utilising this space for car parking and communal open space
- encouraging neighbouring developers to create more shared amenities at the street level
- encouraging mixed use and residential developments in suburbs to be better integrated into the suburb rather than being located adjacent to main roads.



Figure 8: Illustrations from the snapshot booklet

Idea 2 - Contextual Response

This idea related to improving how buildings respond to climate and the natural environment through:

- designing buildings that address, for example, seasonally high rainfall in the Top End and temperature variations in Central Australia
- developing the Territory character through materials, shapes and colours
- being good neighbours and respecting setbacks
- providing meaningful and sympathetic landscape between and in front of buildings
- taking cues from and responding to the streetscape.

Overall the community were supportive of this concept, making additional suggestions including:

- mandating the use of environmentally sustainable solutions such as solar panels and rainwater tanks into the built form to improve energy efficiency
- encouraging buildings to be better orientated to take advantage of natural breezes etc.



Idea 3 - Special Landscape Treatments

This idea related to buildings providing meaningful landscaping through incorporating existing and new plantings into their design, deep soil zones where trees can grow to maturity and integrating landscape features into and onto the building in innovative ways.

In general, there was support from the community to provide meaningful landscape that was appropriate to the climatic region e.g. using tropical landscaping in Darwin and semi-arid plants in Katherine.

Additional comments included:

- encouraging vertical gardens / edible vertical gardens as entry statements to buildings
- encouraging buildings to incorporate shaded areas at the entry to a building to provide shade for residents when collecting their mail, waiting for a taxi / friend.

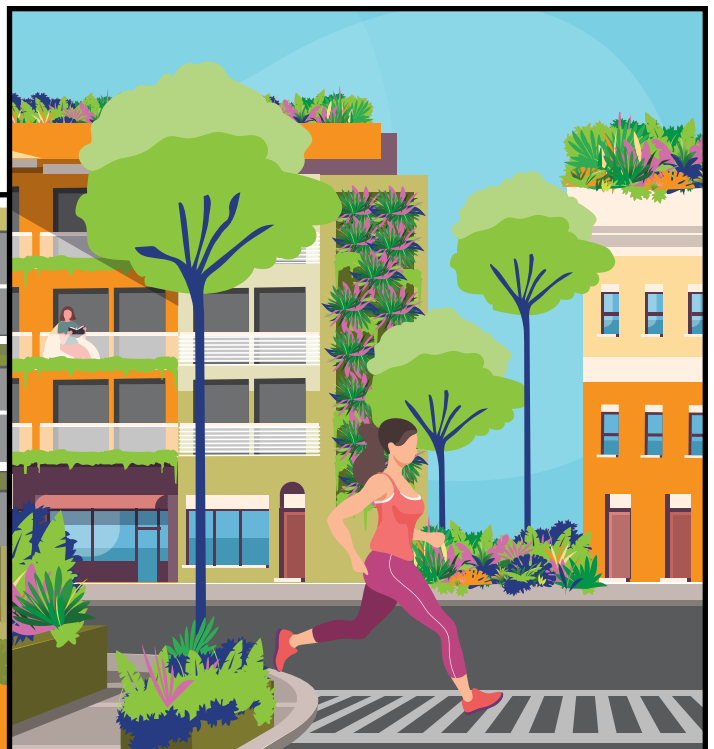


Figure 9: Illustrations from the snapshot booklet



Idea 4 - Outdoor Living

This idea was centred on how the built form can allow people to interact with the outdoors through:

- generously proportioned outdoor living spaces
- private and communal places for people to gather and interact
- outdoor living spaces that look out onto the public domain.

The community supported the principles put forward in the Snapshot booklet. Of particular interest to a number of community members was how outdoor living spaces interact with the public domain to achieve passive surveillance.

Ideas discussed included lowering the height of solid fences or replacing solid fences with permeable fencing to allow passive surveillance whilst still allowing security for residents of the building.

Other suggestions included providing more meaningful communal open space within a mixed use / apartment building with one person suggesting providing areas such communal vegetable gardens.



Idea 5 - Making Great Places

This idea discussed how buildings that are well designed can contribute to creating better places for people to live, work, play, create and socialise through:

- residential uses in and around commercial areas, where appropriate
- pedestrian activity, visual interest and interactions at ground level by providing shops and alfresco dining
- relating well to the street
- working with retail and commercial offerings in a complementary and mutually beneficial way to enhance peoples experience of a place.

While no specific feedback was received on this idea, discussions held with the public were supportive of the ideas suggested around making great places and the importance of adapting to the needs of the community.



Figure 10: Illustrations from the snapshot booklet

Idea 6 - Innovation and Variety

This idea suggested that well-designed buildings can be innovative and respond to people's needs through:

- providing a diverse range of apartment types
- accommodating a range of different lifestyles and activity levels in the same building
- providing a mix of affordable and premium products.

At pop up events the community was supportive of innovation and variety in design which supported people needs. In particular some senior Territorians made comment that they would support ground level apartments that are aimed at our aging population and meeting specific needs.



Figure 11: Illustrations from the snapshot booklet



Industry Feedback

Overall the feedback received through industry groups at each sub-stage was positive and provided the project team with confidence that Designing Better principles are practical and would be well received by industry.

The below summarises specific feedback received through written submissions from industry during Stages 1b and 1c consultation.

Improving streetscape

Suggestions were made around minimising the aesthetic impact of service infrastructure such as sub stations and fire boosters on the street environment and boundaries. The use of removable fencing panels was one suggestion received to address this concern.

Stakeholders identified the project does not specifically address the incorporation of air conditioning equipment into the design and layout of apartment and mixed use buildings. It was suggested that air conditioning equipment clusters should be designed and located to integrate with building design while also allowing for equipment servicing.

Landscaping

Industry noted the landscaping suggestions, however raised some concerns around longevity and ongoing costs of landscaping, particularly landscaping integrated into the building design,

Industry feedback also noted that any requirement for deep soil planting zones need to be balanced against other technical requirements such as the need to provide all required services in relatively confined spaces; noting this is particularly relevant in cases where a basement and/or waterproofing is required.

Setbacks

Some stakeholders provided feedback that in their view building setbacks in the NT need to be greater than urban areas in southern states, as the necessity for maximum cross ventilation and natural cooling of buildings is critical to residential amenity.

Guidelines vs requirements

Some industry respondents questioned the implementation of Designing Better outcomes. There were mixed views expressed, with some suggesting design guidelines would be

appropriate to allow flexibility and case-specific consideration of matters, while others felt that mandating requirements through Planning Scheme controls would be more effective in ensuring the recommendations of the project are implemented.

Local Government Feedback City of Darwin

The City of Darwin advise that they welcome the Planning Commission's Designing Better Project and broader Northern Territory Planning reforms.

The City of Darwin also provides the following comments for consideration:

- Council supports design for climatic differences across the territory through area plan provisions.
- To improve outcomes for local context and streetscape, Council supports a site context analysis and recommends that it should include details of all existing infrastructure within the road reserve, vegetation, crossovers and driveways, stormwater infrastructure.
- Council supports the reduction in front setbacks from 7.5m to 6m in Zones MR and HR, and it also supports the further reduction in front setbacks for balconies. However, Council notes that in some instances the recommended reduction down to a 3 metre setback for balconies may not be suitable (ie. where there is a significant change in density) and this could be controlled through area plans.
- The increase in side and rear setbacks to 3m is supported as it would improve the amenity between buildings.
- The existing provisions for upper level setbacks does not necessarily provide the best outcome for reducing bulk;
- In regards to the landscaping and deep soil plantation, the provision of green walls and vertical planting in lieu of ground level plants should be required to demonstrate how they could be maintained and what the building would look like without the landscaping. City of Darwin could support this measure provided that vertical and green wall landscaping on upper levels, over or adjoining the road reserve was subject to a detailed maintenance schedule/agreement.

City of Palmerston

The City of Palmerston advised that they support the initiatives behind the Designing Better document and the fundamental objectives therein. Further, the City of Palmerston believe that given future growth aspirations, Council acknowledges the need to ensure mixed use apartments meet a high quality of design.

The City of Palmerston also provides the following comments for consideration:

- The NT Planning Scheme contains no urban design provisions for the Palmerston area, although it is acknowledged that the proposed Central Palmerston Area Plan (in the context of the intended role of Area Plans under the Planning Reform process) may be intended to address this. Specific design provisions for the City of Palmerston are essential for development in the Palmerston CBD, and other residential and commercial areas within Palmerston.
- Given the purpose of the Designing Better document and the Planning Reform process currently underway, it is unclear how resultant policies will be incorporated into the Northern Territory Planning Scheme and in turn applied in either a strategic or statutory setting.
- The identification of the Key Controls and Design Elements should be expanded to include the relationship of site layout and building design with the public realm. Designing mixed use and residential development to respond to the regional and local context should include responding to the public realm, which can impact pedestrian access to the site, outlook, access to public open space, the retention and protection of community space and positively integrating with public area landscaping.
- City of Palmerston suggests that the capacity of public infrastructure to accommodate any potential increase in density through the introduction of plot ratio controls should be considered.



Figure 12: Stills from animation used for consultation



Litchfield Council

Litchfield Council broadly supports the proposed design improvements suggested by Designing Better and also recommends the below:

- Although Council acknowledge industry concerns that requirements may be too prescriptive, Council is concerned that the guidelines will fail to produce good design outcomes. As such, Council supports minimum design requirements such as: a requirement for trees or awnings in commercial car parks. For other design ideas, if they are desirable, then the additional cost of implementing the requirement could be considered in determining if the proposal becomes a guideline or requirement.
- When addressing the landscaping required on a site, it would be beneficial to consider whether the requirement should be for a minimum amount of landscaping or for a maximum amount of non-permeable site coverage. Ambiguity can be reduced by requiring a maximum non-permeable site coverage requirement instead of landscaping.
- The proposal to locate parking at the rear of sites rather than along the street frontage is common for good practice design outcomes. However, complementary proposals should be included to ensure that the street frontage remains active, with windows and doors to the commercial spaces that are accessible to the public. Additionally, access into the business, either through awnings from the rear parking area to the front doors or through safe and attractive rear entrances near the car park, should also be required.
- Council is unclear how the adoption of plot ratio would result in the removal of the current density requirements.
- In regards to the adjustment to set backs and that they are still provided as an exact number. Often, a reliance on an exact number can result in many similar looking buildings. As an alternative, imposing an average requirement can encourage the designer to have a wider variation in building design. Council recommends limiting reliance on hard standards and offer options for averages, where possible.
- Council supports the protection of private open space areas to keep these areas as private

as the occupiers' desire, as long as the design elements utilised are of higher quality (i.e. plastic or shade cloth is not desirable).

- In regards to the recommendation for fencing to be transparent over 1.2m this may allow for undesirable views into private open space areas and homes. Paired this with the option for ground level dwellings raising courtyards by 0.6 and the outcome could be only 0.6m of screening, which is not appropriate. Also, the ability of sites to have appropriate and affordable stormwater drainage to the street, if courtyards are raised above the street level or if balconies have solid balustrades, warrants further investigation.
- Consideration should be given to allow single dwellings to be developed on the upper floor of a commercial uses.

Development Consent Authority

Verbal feedback was provided from the various divisions of the Development Consent Authority, the following summarises comments provided during briefing and feedback sessions:

- Solar spaces and solar access of existing buildings could be impacted by new development, and should be given further consideration.
- Concerns were expressed in regards to promoting ground floor apartments. It was considered that there is a lower market demand for ground level apartments.
- There is a gap in the market for aged care – well-designed mixed use developments could incorporate aged care accommodation and associated facilities.
- It was raised that often developers do not account for who will be living in buildings or having regard to what amenities may be preferred. For example, having conscious consideration to the increase of children being raised in apartments. Sometimes it's not just a matter of space for residents to use; the space and facilities within it need to be the right for the building occupants.
- Adding an additional storey to an existing building in zone C could be promoted as an option and translated to reuse or renovate existing buildings.

Summary

Stage One consultation has allowed the Northern Territory Planning Commission to consult with stakeholders on the ideas and concepts and reforms suggested by the Designing Better project. This occurred through a series of pop ups stands in public places, briefings, information sessions and Have Your Say online engagement tools.

There was a high level of support for the ideas suggested as a whole, with a number of additional specific suggestions made by stakeholders on details including:

- streetscapes
- landscaping
- setbacks
- car parking.

While there are mixed views on the best way to achieve the Designing Better project outcomes, there appears to be general agreement with the project principles and objectives.

It was clear to the Planning Commission that overall, stakeholders are keen to see functional, viable, context responsive building design contributing to functional and vibrant communities.

Next Steps

This report covers only consultation and engagement during Stage One.

The next step is to assess the responses received to assist in preparing a suite of potential planning scheme amendments, which once complete, will provide another opportunity for feedback before possible inclusion in the NT Planning Scheme.

For more information

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