

### **Comments on *Thinking Outside 'The Box'* – Key design elements for apartments in Ku-ring-gai**

As someone familiar with Ku-ring-gai who has trained as an architect, I read *Thinking Outside 'The Box'* with dismay. This document reduces the public debate over new apartment developments in the area to a series of superficial criteria, many of which are trivial indeed. When considering urban density, it is essential never to forget the bigger picture, the broader questions which this document so assiduously ignores. The history of architecture teaches us that there many different ways of increasing urban density which would be more suitable in Ku-ring-gai than the “boxes” mentioned in the document’s title and illustrated relentlessly throughout. In endorsing 5-6 storey apartment buildings as its preferred form of new medium density housing, Ku-ring-gai Council has made a very specific choice of a very particular building typology, one which, among the many possible forms of higher density, is perhaps the most damaging to the area’s unique charms. It is an understatement to point out that the very buildings praised in the document remain highly controversial in the community.

These apartment buildings, variously criticised as “shoeboxes” or “egg crates,” seem designed to destroy the area’s greatest physical assets – its largely intact tree canopy and its fine old houses and gardens – while offering none of the potential benefits of increased density. It seems insane to many in the community that irreplaceable canopy trees and precious top soil are being removed not to house people, but to house their cars in underground carparks. There are many other typologies which would have increased population density without such a brutal impact – terrace houses could have been staggered amongst the trees, apartment buildings could have been restricted to the footprint of the former houses on their sites. These are genuine alternatives (and with the recent demise of the Town Centres LEP, and a bit of imagination, they still could be).

The point in relation to *Thinking Outside 'The Box'* is that community objection to the new apartment buildings goes far beyond such details as glass balustrades or sandstone cladding. For Council to issue such a document is insulting to many in the community because it ignores their most substantive and legitimate grounds for objection to the new developments. Council’s motivation for producing the document is unclear. As stated in the introduction, it is not statutory and is not intended to be used in development assessment. At the very least it is then highly confusing for it to exist in addition to an LEP, a DCP, SEPP 65 and BASIX, all of which have greater legal status. Even if a developer could divine clear design guidance from the document’s many vague and sometimes conflicting points, they would have no reason to use it as a design guide since it has no status.

Though the introduction makes it clear that the contents of the document carry no legal weight, many local residents would quite reasonably think that by producing and endorsing it, Council intends its “key design guidelines” to actually be followed. More disturbing is its statement that

*The major challenge that Ku-ring-gai Council faces is to promote community understanding and acceptance of higher densities in the local area. This document is intended to play a key role in promoting the awareness of well-designed buildings that are responsive to community expectations and local character (p. 2).*

“Promoting community understanding and acceptance” sounds very close to propaganda and much of the document reads like a developer’s promotional brochure. It is disappointing that after years of fighting the undemocratic imposition of such developments by the Ku-ring-gai Planning Panel (KPP), Council now seems to be endorsing them in this document. Those in the community who oppose these new buildings for the substantial and demonstrable destruction they have wrought, with or without “entry statements” and “framing devices,” might describe Council’s “major challenge” as preserving irreplaceable trees and gardens in the face of an onslaught by developers with no appreciation of the area. Given the ambiguity of its intention and the vagueness of its contents, a reader could quite reasonably reach the final page asking themselves the question at the head of the introduction – “What is the purpose of this document? (p.2)”

*Thinking Outside 'The Box'* reduces good architecture to a hodgepodge of cherry-picked and sometimes contradictory details. To say the least, it fails to see the wood for the trees. Designing a good building requires an architect to succeed at every stage and scale of design – the initial concept, the site plan, the overall building form, the internal layout, construction details and materials – simultaneously. Ideally these criteria complement one another to create a whole which is more than the sum of its parts. Consider an architect designing an apartment building who wants to preserve every tree on the site. This concept might suggest svelte buildings scattered among the trees, which in turn would aid the natural ventilation of the apartments and might then be realised in a lightweight, framed form of construction. The whole equation is what matters in architecture.

While good architecture often requires restraint or well-reasoned challenges to over-prescriptive planning provisions and client expectations, the buildings praised in *Thinking Outside 'The Box'* are the physical result of developers seeking to “max out” their sites to the limit of the law. They do not seek to be great works of architecture, or even architecture at all. By praising them for whatever superficial details they might do better than the worst allowable design standard, Council is creating even less incentive to create genuinely imaginative architecture which preserves and celebrates what matters most in Ku-ring-gai. The examples in *Thinking Outside 'The Box'* could be built anywhere. Is this truly Council’s vision of the “desired future character” of the area?

Compounding the problem is the vagueness of the document. There is no hierarchy; important criteria such as ensuring natural ventilation appear to have the same weight as such utterly trivial baubles as an “entry feature” mailbox and an apartment foyer with some decorative pebbles. To take a typical example, the document praises a facade for its “variety of horizontal and vertical elements” and “varied combination of external materials, finishes and colours (p. 41),” when any number of buildings, good, bad or ugly, would meet these criteria. What is Council really encouraging here? There is hardly a shortage of masterpieces in the history of architecture made from only one material and an excessive and undisciplined variety of materials is one of the recurring failures among the recent apartment buildings in Ku-ring-gai.

The document’s method is to apply highly disputable captions to highly selective photos. In many cases one could just as easily criticise what is spun into praise by the caption-writers. The garage entry shown on page 40 is praised as “well integrated with the overall street facade design,” when it could just as easily be criticised for completely dominating the streetscape. A “contemporary design” on page 42 is applauded for the “openness” of glazing which appears nearly black in the photo. To say that “bronze coloured vertical balcony frames... complement the vertical trunks of the surrounding trees (p. 27)” would be laughable if the destruction of the real trees which formerly graced such sites were not so tragic. Page 15 shows a remnant eucalyptus isolated from the canopy and surrounded by five story buildings, and yet the document praises the development for retaining the tree which “softens the buildings and improves amenity for the residents (p.14).” One cannot help but wonder whether this construction similarly improved amenity for the local kookaburras and possums. Most of the document’s assertions are subjective and highly debatable. What is not subjective is the destruction of trees, gardens and architectural heritage caused by the buildings held up as examples in its pages.

*Thinking Outside 'The Box'* gives the impression of having been produced in a rush, and suffers from both a lack of focus and a perilously limited frame of reference. That the document appears to have been produced without input from eminent architects and urban designers outside Council undermines its persuasiveness. If a document of this nature is to be successful, then it must seek out the best examples of apartment design wherever they are. There are many excellent apartment buildings both overseas and elsewhere in Australia which would be helpful precedents for Ku-ring-gai. A phone call to the Australian Institute of Architects or one of the local universities would have helped guide Council staff toward such examples. A useful version of this document would analyse carefully chosen case studies to show how they

work at every level of their design. To praise some small detail on a building which might otherwise be deplorable is at the very least confusing.

By limiting itself to recent buildings constructed in the local area, Council has confined itself to cherry-picking the less-terrible details from small pool of extremely poor architecture deplored by a majority of its constituents. Ku-ring-gai's problems are compounded by the low quality developers and architects working repeatedly (and repetitively) in the area, even compared to other parts of Sydney such as the eastern suburbs. Council's goal in creating such a document should be to show that it is serious about good architecture and about attracting a higher quality of architect and developer to the area. If I were such an architect, I would despair at this document for the way it endorses an unacceptable status quo. By reducing architecture to superficialities, it fails to push developers beyond their comfort zone and makes it even harder for the good architects out there to argue the case for real architecture to their clients.

If Council intends to "promote community understanding and acceptance of higher densities in the local area" then it needs to demonstrate that it will not accept bad design. The community will not be brought on side by glossy documents. Council must demonstrate to the community that the supposed benefits of higher densities are in fact being realised. Density is often proposed as a panacea for our urban ills, but it has never been demonstrated that the kind of density being built so relentlessly in Ku-ring-gai – buildings which, for example, encourage car dependence, accompanied by no improvements to an already stretched rail system – will result in anything but the destruction of a once beautiful and unique area. Rather than tacitly endorsing these buildings in a document such as this, Council should be evaluating the actual performance of these developments. What has been their actual impact on biodiversity, traffic and environmental quality? Do the inhabitants actually use public transport? Is housing becoming more affordable? What is the embodied and operational energy cost of these buildings? The answers to these and other questions demand rigorous analysis, not spin. After only a few years of such development, Ku-ring-gai has become a byword for increased density at its most destructive and unimaginative extreme, the opposite of the Manhattan or Paris often held up as exemplars of the lively, sustainable, dense city. In this situation the last thing Ku-ring-gai Council should be doing is endorsing the status quo.

The non-binding status of this document suggests uncertainty on the part of Council. If the word "box" in the title betrays an admission that recent development has been unimaginative, then it is all the more disappointing that a document seeking to illustrate "key design elements" is filled with nothing but boxes. Because of the vagueness of its contents, the poverty of its examples and the ambiguity of its purpose, the document should be withdrawn by Council.

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This critique of Council's *Thinking Outside 'The Box'* document is published on FOKE's web site ([www.foke.org.au](http://www.foke.org.au)) with the author's permission.