



ODASA Consultation

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Local Design Review Scheme for South Australia

The Norwood Residents' Association (NRA) represents 2,700 households of Norwood, one of the State's oldest suburbs and a suburb with many state and local heritage buildings. These, along with neighbouring buildings built in the first half of last century, create a strong suburban character.

Commercial pressures and State government plans suggest that Norwood will see significant new development alongside the existing buildings. The NRA naturally has a strong interest in seeing that this design contributes to and does not detract from Norwood's character.

With this in mind, we welcome the proposal for a Local Design Review Scheme. We endorse the benefits mentioned in the discussion paper: an early positive contribution from an independent source of professional expertise will hopefully save a lot of heartache, as well as money, for the developer.

For us, the biggest potential benefit is the broadening of input into the design of buildings that will be with us for a long time.

Transparency

While the potential benefit to the developer is clear, we endorse the importance of the principle that the design panel "should be clearly seen to be supporting the public's interest". We note the discussion paper's recommendation that in order to service this end, there should be "transparent Information about Design Review, panel membership, funding and governance". The obvious missing item here is the advice itself. Is there a good reason why this also should not be available to the public?

A broad input?

This lack of a reference to the advice itself being made public raises some concern. So also does the mention that the design review "panel" could consist of one person. With regard to local heritage matters, this may result in no improvement at all on the current situation that applies in our council area, where a single heritage advisor has so much influence on what can and what can't be built.

The fewer the people involved, the more likely it is that individual biases will intrude. This applies to decisions made by professionals, where professional ideologies can dominate the discourse.

Architecture is not immune to professional ideology. For example, it is apparent that in South Australia, for the last 30 years at least, the prevailing belief is that contemporary building that complements or is adjacent to heritage buildings should

be quite distinct from the heritage buildings. Contemporary design in the vernacular is dismissed as “phoney”. We note:

(1) that the emphasis on contemporary (i.e. fashionable) design suits the self-interest (not to mention egos) of architects and

(2) it is quite counter to the approach taken in Europe, where rebuilding has lovingly re-created what was there before, with only subtle distinctions between contemporary and old buildings.

We also don’t want “phoney” buildings, but neither do we want buildings that look out of place and spoil the character of a location. (We can give you several examples of this in Norwood.) Of course the distinction between what is designed with respect for the vernacular and what is phoney can be quite fine, and is best made when there are multiple inputs into the process.

We therefore support the idea that the panel should be “multi-disciplinary”, but were dismayed to find that that what the authors of the discussion paper regard as multi-disciplinary is quite narrow. The paper notes that “design review should combine the perspectives of architects, landscape architects, urban designers and other specialist experts to provide a complete and rounded assessment.” The three listed professions could all be taught by the same academics at the local universities.

We do not know what the authors had in mind when referring to “other specialist experts” but the wording, combined with the requirement of at least ten years of professional experience, suggest to us that those on the panel will have to belong to a narrowly-defined club. Or as expressed by the discussion paper: “Design advice is most effective when carried out by the professional peers of project designers.”

Principles of good design

The authors might think that a panel constituted in this way can provide a “complete and rounded assessment” but we suspect that such a view is from inside a disciplinary bubble. This impression is reinforced with the list of features of good design that appear in the discussion paper. We don’t disagree with any item on the list, but the fact that the list does not include the one feature that those outside the paradigm would believe dominates architectural design – aesthetics – reminds us of fish that don’t recognise water.

And more pertinently, we urge the addition of another principle of good design – that it fits in with its context; that it shows respect for its neighbours.

Cost

The discussion paper is coy about how these panels will be funded. Will it be funded by the developer, in which case will the developer be obliged to use the service? Or will it be funded by the Council, that is, by the residents and businesses of the council area. Assuming it will be the latter, and assuming that Councils have a choice in whether and in what form the Panel will be constituted, we would be pressuring our Council to only use the Panel to the extent that they have a demonstrated benefit.

Summary

In summary, we recommend:

- Design Review Panel advice be made public in the normal course of events.
- References to particular disciplines and professional experience be deleted, or at least broadened.

- The list of good design principles be extended to include a consideration of the context of the proposed building.

We support the concept of broadening input into the design of buildings that could be made possible by the panels. But the discussion paper leads us to fear that the creation of the panels will not broaden input at all.

If the latter, we would only support design review panels if they genuinely broadened input into the process and produced better design outcomes, including demonstrating respect for the local built heritage.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ian Radbone', written in a cursive style.

DR Ian Radbone

President