



Office glut puts a new complexion on Sydney plan

By LANCE NORMAN

KEEP TALKING — you have to be prepared to keep talking if you are going to introduce deep-down planning in a major city after 183 years (the life of the Sydney City Council) of normally haphazard and noticeably vibrant growth.

That is the main message of an "action planning forum" which the Sydney City Council held in the State Office Block theatre on Wednesday, as part of the implementation of the City of Sydney Strategic Plan.

The project directors of 15 of the "action plans" currently under way in giving effect to the overall strategic plan gave illustrated talks on the progress they have made so far with their particular assignments in the 16 months since the strategic plan was published.

There was no listing of beauty spots, inasmuch as action plans which are already accomplished facts such as the floor space ratio and the Martin Place Plaza were not included, and no shunning of warts.

People who were known to feel passionately that they could see warts were among the invited audience of 200 that filled the auditorium to capacity as well as real estate agents, developers, Government officials and professional rivals cum comrades in arms from the State Planning Authority, who could at any rate be expected to take a less personal view.

The rationale of the forum — and there will be others, but in a larger venue next time — is that if the people do not participate in the strategic plan and its component action plans then the plan cannot work.

So it was felt worthwhile gathering an informed audience to explain and discuss the state of play even though of the 15 ac-

tion plans dealt with, out of the 27 all told in the strategic plan, there was not a great deal of specific achievement to report, not to finality that is.

A consensus of the speeches shows that the action planning is pretty much in an information-gathering phase, finding out who the people are that inhabit the various precincts and what they think about the guiding philosophy for their locality and what they want for the future.

This has reached a stage where generally each project director knows what his precinct consists of in physical terms and what makes it tick as far as the people who live or work there are concerned.

In "hard news" terms, the main item is that a new City of Sydney Strategic Plan will appear in 1974, but one only has to look at the 1971 plan to see that that was coming up. The new plan will be a revision that will take account of all the information and experience gathered in the meantime, the rationale here being that unless the plan lives and breathes like the City it will crumble to dust.

The whole day was like a press background briefing with much more than the press there, and it was noticeable that top real estate men left only if they were called away by their office, though they must already have known most of what was being said.

For example, there is an oversupply of office space at present. But this became informative when Mr. George Clarke, the author of the strategic plan, explained the surplus's effect on the forthcoming 1974 plan.

It was likely to amend or postpone for the next five to eight years office projects not yet commenced, and appeared to have already affected many proposals, particularly the Rocks and Woolloomooloo.

These schemes, together with State Planning Authority forecasts, were sufficient to take the central business district (CBD) workforce to 360,000 from some 240,000 at present.

"New data now available to Council's consultants from surveys only recently completed indicate that the city office workforce may actually have fallen slightly between 1969 and 1972, and indicate that the Council consultants' lower projected CBD workforce growth rates of between 0.7 per cent and 1.3 per cent a year are likely to apply during the next eight years," Mr. Clarke said.

This is counteracted by the increasing space per worker. Some observers put the rising standard of floor space used per worker as high as 2 per cent per annum.

At the time the 1971 strategic plan was published, 360,000 was the lowest estimate of possible future CBD-type workforce that had ever been made by any authority or consultant, and the Building Owners and Managers' Association had urged the Council's consultants to plan for 600,000.

(The growth spreading up the North Shore line from North Sydney was not so apparent then, either.)

Mr. Clarke's speech was delivered on the same day that "The Sydney Morning Herald" reported that only one new

development application for the inner city area had been submitted to the Sydney City Council in nearly a year.

This was a \$3.5 million development at a corner of King and George Streets. In 1971, the council received 70 applications valued at about \$200 million.

"It is estimated that by 1975 there could be about 5 million sq

ft of vacant office space in the city area, and a further 2.50 million sq ft in North Sydney.

"There are 41 projects under construction in the city. About 80 have been approved but have yet to start," the newspaper report states.

Other information which Mr. Clarke said would influence the 1974 Strategic Plan, and which the

longer term implications of the emerging data and results of the Sydney Area Transportation Study (SATS), to which the 1971 City Strategic Plan was itself an input, and which can now in turn receive inputs from SATS.

Also, inputs would be requested from the State Planning Authority of new research data and regional policy guidelines relevant to the city's role in the region, in more precise terms and specific detail than could be incorporated in the 1968 Sydney Region Outline Plan or made available to council during the preparation of the 1971 City Strategic Plan.

Among the precincts, one of the interesting points was confirmation of just how blowy some of the neighbourhoods have become — something which anyone's eyes could tell them anyway.

Two or three speakers dealing with the Oxford Street-Darlinghurst areas referred to a preponderance of middle-aged men without families living in single rooms of what were once family terraced houses and the project director of the action plan on transport said that there might be a chance of re-integrating these localities, which were "more lively a few years ago."

The problem was how to retain residential use in view of land values these days. Oxford Street properties had been fetching \$16-\$20 a sq ft for the land and some recent sales had gone above that.

Comparable situations occurred in places like Pyrmont, where the residential population had fallen to an all-time low of little more than 2,000 people, and although land was still being bought for the sake of the building improvements upon it, "cost of the land may already preclude public housing."

"Any increase in residential usage would, therefore, have to be sustained through high density if it is to be produced by private development."

"The warehouses and associated office functions are likely to endure as the most economic use of many of the buildings," said the project director for Pyrmont, Mr. Terry Byrnes, of George Wellings Smith and Co.

"At this stage," said the transportation project director, Mr. Peter Casey, of Urban Systems

Corporation, "we have come to the conclusion that a major car park will be needed over the Kings Cross tunnels" (of the Eastern Suburbs railway and the Eastern Expressway which are currently reshaping the Cross).

"Because of the possible redevelopment on a large scale of St Vincent's Hospital, we also feel some provision will have to be made to provide parking to serve this major institution."

There is no doubt about the director of the Kings Cross action plan, Mr. David Conybear, also of USC, being sympathetic with the area's present diversity.

Answering a question, he said: "If there is an attempt politically, for example, to move prostitutes out of Kings Cross by not providing accommodation, I think these girls can afford the kind of money to pay expensive rents in bigger apartments anyway."

"In a sense one would have to do a more detailed study of this sort of thing since (laughter) . . . I mean the general problem of providing for cheap housing in the area."

"We have lost 610 dwellings through building the Kings Cross tunnel. I think we ought to be careful about losing too many more of the sort of houses that have single rooms and provide cheap rent for people who do not have much money, who give the area character."

"There are 5,000 people who live there at present. They have lost their only hardware store because a major hotel has gone up there. These are things we have to sort out."

Regarding preservation of good historic building, Mr. Barry Young, delivering an MSI Planning Consultants paper, said a preservation advisory committee would hold its first meeting on the 29th of this month, and thereafter monthly.

Represented are the National Trust of Australia, the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Royal Australian Historical Society, legal profession, NSW Public Works Department, SPA, Building Owners and Managers' Association, the journalist profession, Australian Consulting Engineers Association, the building industry, NSW Developers Joint Committee, Sydney City Council, Department of Tourism,

Labour Council of NSW and council's consultants, "who are supposed to do most of the work."

The second action priority is a register of places and structures.

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which now lists and initial 178 plans under the Strategic Plan.

The third action priority is control of demolition. "Australia is almost alone in not having legal control over demolition."

"Both the Institute of Architects and the National Trust have had a stay of demolition, and so has Jack Munday (Builders Labourers' Federation secretary), who has been doing it quite successfully."

"It is now well established that one of the most effective ways is to permit the owner to transfer from one site to another the floor space ratio he would be entitled to on that site."

This saved the New South Wales Club, which gives such a fine Georgian end to the view right along Castlereagh Street.

Also in the heart of the central business district, Martin Place provided one of the glamour spots in the forum proceedings.

With the top end already closed to cross traffic because of the underground railway station excavations, it is proposed that it never be reopened.

Uphill from the existing pedestrian plaza by the GPO and containing the Cenotaph, it is now proposed to close off the other blocks progressively and give them diverse purposes.

The Pitt Street to Castlereagh Street block would be converted in 1973 and become a terrace with open air cafes.

Phillip to Macquarie Streets, the "railway block," would be converted in 1974, with a fountain.

Castlereagh to Phillip Streets in 1975, encompassing the "market block" with an open-air flea market to replace the Paddy's Market likely to be lost when the "fruit and vegies" markets move from Haymarket to the suburbs, and the "grove block" farther up, with greenery and seats on terraced levels.

So far, the action plans which have been put into effect have worked.

Urban Systems Corporation Pty Ltd, of which Mr. George

Clarke is a principal, was chosen this week to prepare a master plan for the city of Adelaide, which Lord Mayor Hayes said would "take it into the next century." USC are expected to start work within weeks.