Background to the Princes’ Quarter development, Glebe, NSW, Australia

By Ian Stephenson, Planning Convenor

The proposal involves excising 2A-D Wentworth Park Rd and 17-31 Cowper St, Glebe from the St Phillips Heritage Conservation Area in order to change the existing height limit of 9 metres to 36 metres. This is to allow the demolition of a two story flat building and four 1980s terrace houses and their replacement by two 8 storey apartment buildings and five row houses.

The St Phillips conservation zone comprises the area bounded by Campbell Lane, St. Johns Road, Wentworth Park Road, Cowper Street the eastern boundary of 52 Glebe Street and the rear boundary of properties 64-92 Cowper Street.

Fig 1: Glebe Conservation Areas, City of Sydney LEP, 2012, a detail of the St Phillips Heritage Conservation Area is on the right

In 1985 the Glebe estate was transferred to the NSW Government. The NSW Housing Commission’s in-house architects designed infill housing which reflected the form and scale of the Glebe townscape. They brought great skill to the task. The two buildings proposed for demolition are part of their work.
The scheme at 2A-2D Wentworth Park Road provides four three-bedroom terrace houses which have been designed to fit in with the adjoining row of six mid-Victorian terraces, Premier Terrace.

The neighbouring flat building at 17-31 Cowper Street, Glebe is an unusually sophisticated response to the aesthetic of place in the way it uses scale, texture, modelling, pattern, vicinity and variety to respond to the historic townscape. It is also well considered in terms of amenity and livability. It is beautifully detailed and provides it tenants with private open space, as well as shared open space. It reperesents a level of care, imagination and respect for both residents and the townscape which is unusual. It should not be demolished.
The Physical Context

Fig: 8: The boundaries of the St Phillip's Heritage Conservation Area are represented by the dotted line. The 11 level John Byrne Court at the right of the image was built in 1959. The buildings in the bottom left of the image outside the conservation area are late 1940s Housing Commission flats and a depot. They have now been replaced by 6, 7 and 8 storey apartment buildings. Source: City of Sydney Archives.

Fig 10: The St Phillips Heritage Conservation Area in 2020. The high-rise apartment buildings to the left are outside the conservation zone, (source: Ian Stephenson)

Fig 11: Looking into the conservation area from across Cowper St, (source: Ian Stephenson)
The Proposal

The elevation of the proposed new buildings, the Princes’ Quarter

Fig 13: One building will be for housing department tenants and one for private housing, (source: Prince’s Trust Australia)

The existing buildings comprise 4 x 3 bedroom houses at 2 Wentworth Park Rd, and flats with a total of fifteen bedrooms at 17-31 Cowper Street, making a total of 27 bedrooms. The social housing component of the proposed development will include 42 bedrooms, a net increase of 15. The existing accommodation includes private open space, public open space and fits in with the context of the neighbouring houses. These features, which add to the liveability and amenity of the dwellings, will be absent in the new scheme.
Its Impact

One of the things which gives Glebe its identity and makes it a place of exceptional heritage significance is, that with a small number of exceptions, its late 19th century scale and topography remain intact. The controls for the St Phillips Conservation Area identify the 1959 eleven story John Byrne Court as a detracting element and provide height limits to prevent new buildings destroying the scale of Glebe.

Fig 14: John Byrne Court from St Johns Road, (source: Ian Stephenson)

The construction of two 8 storey buildings within the St Phillips estate changes John Byrne Court from being a non-conforming element to one of three high rise buildings and opens the way to more high rise being built on the Land and Housing Corporation infill sites, the buildings designated as neutral on the above map.

There has been an attempt to make the scheme more acceptable to the character of the Glebe by designing the buildings to look like Edwardian brick warehouses. Such buildings are characteristic of Ultimo and Pyrmont not Glebe. Their construction in the St Phillips estate is quite contrary to the planning goal of nurturing Sydney as a city of villages drawing on the unique character of each area, including topography, landscape, street and park layout, setting, public buildings, heritage, streetscape, land uses and buildings as it blurs the distinct identities of Glebe and Ultimo.
The Prince’s Trust Australia, who were commissioned by the NSW State Government to work on the project state in their website that the development responds to the local character of Glebe and shows how new housing can be sensitively built in an established inner-city neighbourhood. This project will be sustainable, respect local character and create a mixed-income community which includes social and affordable housing. It is bitterly ironic that the infill housing which is being demolished is an exemplar of how new housing can be sensitively built in an established neighbourhood and the scheme proposed to replace it does not respect local character.

The scheme is undesirable for many reasons. These include: the demolition of post 1974 public housing, which is recognised in the LEP as being of heritage significance (this is particularly regrettable in respect of the building at 17-31 Cowper Street which is of high architectural merit); destroying the scale of this part of Glebe by creating a precinct of three high rise buildings; creating a precedent for more high rise development on the 1980s infill sites and blurring the architectural character of Glebe and Ultimo.

In addition, it only provides an additional 15 social housing bedrooms and these with less amenity than the 27 currently on the site.

Other Options
The present proposal can be summarised as being the wrong thing in the wrong place. A better option might involve relocating the two 8 storey towers to the Land and Housing Corporation site at 45-51 Bay Street, Glebe. This large site is not in a conservation zone and adjoins Edwardian brick warehouse style buildings so that the new buildings will better match the identity of the neighbourhood.

[Image: Fig 16: The buildings proposed would be better located on the Land and Housing Corporation property at 45-51 Bay Street Glebe, (source: six maps, the author and Prince’s Trust Australia)]

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