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On the Fast Track to “Better Placed”



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Abbie Galvin is the 24th Government Architect of New South Wales. She is a member of the GANSW State Design Review Panel, sharing her experience and expertise to support better design outcomes for State Significant projects. Prior to this, she was a Principal and Director at BVN, and has worked on projects globally and across Australia. She has worked for over 20 years on public, educational, health, research and workplace projects that have been recognized internationally for bringing fresh approaches to common project types.

Abbie Galvin is the 24th Government Architect of New South Wales (NSW) state in Australia, which incorporates the Sydney metropolitan area, joining the role after serving as a principal and director at BVN Architects. The role of the Government Architect, in place since 1816, is to promote design excellence in the state, foster public and private sector partnerships, and provide advice and quality review on design projects. The Government Architect also chairs the State Design Review Panel, which reviewed AU\$4.8 billion worth of projects in the first 14 months after its establishment in April 2018. Daniel Safarik, CTBUH Editor-in-Chief, interviews Galvin.

It is clearly significant that the office of the Government Architect has selected a woman as its Chair for the first time in its history. What does that mean to you?

I'm incredibly proud to be appointed the 24th Government Architect of NSW. As architects, we are given a huge role shaping the built environment, creating buildings and spaces that serve as places to live, work and be in, that sit within our cities and become a part of our world. So, after almost 30 years in private practice, it's a privilege to be able to work in Government shaping that environment in a slightly different way. It's an incredible opportunity to advise on decisions, to help deliver strategies and policies that constantly advocate for quality design across buildings, precincts, cities, urban areas and regional areas and public spaces, and to help articulate what “quality design” actually means, and its benefits.

It is important to consider the different perspective I will bring to the role; not because I am a woman, but because I have different skills, experiences and approaches to the people around me. The roles we have in our societies need to be representative of the wonderful and diverse mix of people they comprise.

What are some of your immediate and long-term goals for your tenure, and how long will that appointment be in effect?

Our key goal at GANSW is to embed design quality and design-based thinking in making beautiful and enduring, sustainable and accessible spaces and places.

We've developed five key priorities to achieve that:

- Promoting an **integrated approach to urban design**—where place and climate sit at the very center of decisions, rather than coming in at the end once the transport and infrastructure and economic overlays have been done.
- Helping make **Government a Smart Client** by looking at the criteria established at the very beginning of a project in the Strategic Business Case. Looking at how briefs are developed, how projects and design teams are procured and how design evaluation criteria is present at all the gates in the process. We can embed ourselves in agencies and help give them the tools to do this.
- Teaching us all how to begin the process of caring for and **Designing with Country**, which is about improving the health and well-being of Country, led by Aboriginal cultural values.
- **Design Assurance**, which includes strengthening and broadening the reach of the State Design Review process for all state significant projects, as well as implementing a networked system of design review processes across government-led projects.
- **Environmental Stewardship through Design**. To help the NSW government achieve its goals of net zero emissions by 2050, we will be working to develop strategies and, ideally, policies about built environment targets and performance. That will need to range from urban

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planning decisions about density and sprawl, transport, connectivity and resource use, through to a specific focus on buildings, their performance and their materials.

There is no specific tenure identified for the role.

Was it a requirement you leave your position at BVN to take on this role?

It was. Potential or perceived conflicts of interest would have prevented me from maintaining my role and shareholding as a Principal at BVN.

What are your other responsibilities as Government Architect, beyond chairing the Design Review Panel?

As the Government Architect, I'm involved in a wide range of projects across government, from providing strategic advice on major precincts within the Sydney region, through to chairing and/or participating in a number of design review panels. The particularly exciting project for the GANSW team at the moment is the development of a new Design and Place SEPP (State Environmental Planning Policy), which the Minister for Planning and Public Spaces has asked GANSW to lead. SEPPs are legal instruments given effect under the Environmental Planning & Assessment Act, and address matters of state or regional environmental planning significance. This is an extraordinary opportunity to help shape policy that will embed design and place in the formation of our built environment.

Can you advise on how the Design Review Panel will ensure design quality is kept to a high standard, even as projects are fast-tracked and construction methodologies are likely to change somewhat due to the need to “socially distance” and prevent COVID-19 transmission on-site? What kinds of projects will be fast-tracked? Is it only public buildings, or is there some protocol for promoting certain private works as “essential”? And how does this overlap or differ with the traditional definition of “State Significant Projects”?

It is critical that design quality of our built form and public spaces is part of the fast-tracking of projects. Decisions made now will leave long legacies, and we need to retain the systems we currently have in place, such as the State Design Review Panel for State Significant Projects (GANSW run), Design Review Panels for State Significant Infrastructure and Precincts (GANSW often chairs these panels or is a member), and Design Review Panels within Local Councils or Design Excellence Competition Policies.

Design review can give greater certainty to, and expedite the planning process if run well, and as such we are focused on maintaining our program for both the State Design Review Panel and any other Design Review Panel we chair or participate in.

The Department of Planning, Industry and Environment is prioritizing projects that will support the recovery of the NSW economy through job creation and employment precincts during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a focus on projects with tangible and direct public benefits—it is not about approving projects without merit. This can include fast-track assessments of State Significant Developments, rezonings and development applications, and supporting councils and planning panels to fast-track local and regionally significant design applications while still meeting planning requirements.

Can you comment generally, or specifically, on how you expect construction of high-rises in Sydney and other cities to be affected by the fast-tracking?

The fast-tracking process is not about approving projects without merit that would not ordinarily have received approvals. It is about identifying the best projects to promote jobs and opportunity in the right places and applying the resources to get them approved.

What kinds of actions can the Design Review Panel or Government Architect take to ensure that there will be no more “Opal Tower”-type scenarios in the future? Would a project like that have fallen under



Opal Tower, Sydney. © Simon Clancy (cc by-sa)

your purview in the first place? It must be front-of-mind for many Sydneysiders—the double nightmare scenario of a structurally unsound building in which residents are being asked to quarantine themselves.

Building construction quality or construction procurement doesn't fall directly under the purview of the State Design Review Panel. The SDRP reviews State Significant Developments in their early design phases before they are submitted for planning approval. Residential apartments don't generally come to the panel unless they are on a scheduled State Significant Development Site. The concern about speed and quality often not being natural bedfellows is being addressed through significant legislative reform of the building and construction industry that is being proposed by the NSW Building Commissioner. The reform will impose new obligations to improve documentation and compliance with building standards through the Design and Building Practitioners Bill.

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Urban Australia is transitioning from a low-rise, auto-oriented scenario into a more high-density, transit-integrated environment. Clearly, projects like the Sydney Metro and associated mixed-use, transit-oriented developments are not going to simply be scuppered. But in the context of the emerging guidance about “social distancing” and controlling the spread of disease, how, if at all, has that affected planning or design for these mega-projects in NSW, which are obviously a huge source of investment and employment?

There has been no impact on the planning of projects like Sydney Metro. To the contrary, the focus has been to ensure they are charging full steam ahead. But the implications for public space planning will be something we will learn about and adapt to in the future.

What is the relationship, if any, between NSW guidance emanating from the Government Architect and Design Review Panel and that of the Sydney Design Excellence program? How are their activities and goals coordinated? What are the thresholds for the NSW Design Review process?

I assume you are referring here to the City of Sydney’s Design Excellence process, where, under the City’s Local Environmental Plan, all public and private developments in the CBD are subject to the competitive design process when they meet at least one of three thresholds: height (55 meters), site area (1,500 square meters) or capital value (AU\$100 million (US\$65.5 million)).

The State Design Review Panel reviews State Significant Projects with a capital value of over AU\$30 million (US\$19.3 million), such as

cultural, recreation and tourist facilities, hospitals, health research, air or rail transport or new education facilities.

If there is a State Significant Project sitting within a Local Council that runs its own Design Excellence Competition process, we will defer to the use of that process and generally participate in the competition as a jury member.

In addition, the City of Sydney has a Design Advisory Panel, of which the Government Architect is a member. This panel reviews policies, development applications and projects that may have a significant public domain, public interest or heritage impact, and provides advice to the assessment process.

How does the NSW SDRP liaise with other cities in its urbanized area, such as Parramatta, which is building up something of a “second CBD” for Greater Sydney as we speak?

Parramatta Council has developed a similar Design Excellence process for their major developments, and if the development is deemed as State Significant, we defer to the use of that process as noted above. Parramatta Council also has a Design Excellence Advisory Panel for all projects where SEPP 65 applies, and the GA is a member of this panel also.

What is the process for admitting members of the SDRP, and how often are they appointed or must they re-apply? What kinds of obligations or performance objectives are they held to during their tenure?

State Design Review Panel panelists were appointed through an open tender process

and drawn from a pool of independent and highly-qualified members with expertise in different types of development, including architecture, landscape architecture, urban design and heritage.

Panelists serve a two-year term and represent a variety of skills across design in the built environment, bringing a diversity of experience and insight. They are required to evaluate projects against the Objectives for Good Design as defined by “Better Placed”—an integrated design policy for the built environment of NSW written by GANSW.

At the end of the tenure period, SDRP members may be invited to accept reappointment. Additional panel members are recruited as required, including specialist experts, where the complexity of a proposal warrants in-depth specialist evaluation.

How many applications for projects does the SDRP typically review in a year, and how does the plan to “fast-track” affect this?

At the completion of its first year, the State Design Review Panel had reviewed 84 projects, held 151 review sessions, covering approximately AU\$7.7 billion (US\$4.9 billion) worth of projects. We currently run sessions every fortnight, with two panels running concurrently. We have the ability to hold more sessions if required by running panels on a weekly basis.

How has the COVID-19 outbreak affected the SDRP’s ability to review projects and meet?

The State Design Review Panel has now run multiple virtual panels using collaboration software—and they’ve been extraordinarily smooth... almost unsettlingly so! ■