

# Meet you downstairs for a coffee? Strategies for Successful Mixed Use

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Not long ago, on a cold wintery morning, I found myself standing on the corner of a windswept suburban Sydney street, huddled with lawyers, a developer, a bemused Commissioner of the Land and Environment Court and Council planners.

We were discussing the merits, or not, of a vacant commercial tenancy on the ground floor of a recently constructed and now occupied mixed use residential apartment building. The Council DCP had required the inclusion of this non residential floor space in the development and the developer had dutifully complied. However efforts to lease the tenancy had proved unsuccessful and it was now looking forlorn and abandoned. The vacant shopfronts contributed little to resident amenity and streetscape character. An application had been lodged to change the use to residential and rejected by Council (as bonus floor space had been granted for the inclusion of the ground floor commercial space). Que sera sera .... there we all were.

With romantic visions of La Rambla in Barcelona and Seinfeld type New York diners in mind, this type of development control is common throughout DCPs in NSW. The objectives behind ground floor retail / commercial space in residential developments are admirable. Such uses



*This café is hidden from major pedestrian paths and surrounded by empty tenancies in a central courtyard.*

can activate the streetscape and building frontages, enhance social interaction, employment and amenity as well as offer convenient access for local residents to shops and services without the need for car trips.

In places, where intensity of pedestrian activity and incomes are high, mixed use developments have proved successful.

Elsewhere however, it is a different story. Rarely are the objectives realised; in fact the uniform application of DCP controls and guidelines that seek such

outcomes can often result in built forms and streetscapes that erode, rather than facilitate, good urban design outcomes.

With greater scrutiny being placed on our existing urban areas to accommodate redevelopment at higher densities, it is worthwhile to look at some of the lessons that we can observe to date:

1. Infill and targeted re-redevelopment precincts are not homogeneous. Controls should not be uniform across all streets and precincts. Only apply controls where ground

# Residential Development



*While this DCP map focuses mixed uses on main roads, it also extends to a single frontage of a side road, which is a cul-de-sac.*

- floor uses offer real benefits to amenity and streetscape and have some potential for viability, such as adjoining busy bus stops or parks with playgrounds. Furthermore such uses should not be isolated. They should be focused onto an agglomeration of alike tenancies and activities to attract visitation and encourage the development of a neighbourhood scale centre.
2. Don't offer bonus floor space to attract such uses. Generally ground floor residential space has the least value and upper level residential space the most. Therefore developers will often write-down the value of ground floor space in their financial feasibility models in return for more valuable floor space elsewhere, encouraging the abandonment and neglect of such spaces on completion of projects;

3. Consider the nature of pedestrian and car use in the area. Think twice about applying mixed use in precincts with low pedestrian activity, high car use and where dominated by popular car oriented shopping centres. It is unlikely that ground floor commercial uses will be viable;



*The need to accommodate flood levels defeats active frontages in this example.*

4. Question the applicability in suburban (i.e. non inner Sydney) contexts. Think twice about applying it in suburbs, regional centres and fringe CBD areas. Limit the application of such controls to major economic and activity centres;
5. Be alert to the RTA. Alfresco dining and on street parking may be popular and a great amenity and streetscape outcome, but they are repugnant to the RTA on its roads. Many good urban design outcomes have been defeated by traffic engineers with no vision or understanding;
6. Be aware of finished floor levels. The need to accommodate flood levels, elevated basement car parks and landform may separate the tenancy shop front door from the footpath. If the shop must be elevated above the footpath and reached by ramps and / or steps then abandon the approach. The urban design objective may be unachievable and such built outcomes further jeopardise viability and the achievement of attractive streetscapes;
7. Match size of tenancy to context. On busy main roads, with high speeds and 'clearway' type parking restrictions on parking, recognise that most commercial uses that will be attracted to these locations will be retail, bulky goods or service type tenants that require large floor areas, good exposure and good access good (preferably off street) parking. Keep small tenancies suitable for small bars, cafes, newsagents and the like to neighbourhoods with demonstrated walkability and good on street parking opportunities; and

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