

Scaling the heights

Planning schemes are intended to protect cities against outrageous development, says **Jamieson Allom**

IS the shape of Hobart about to change?

The demand for more hotel rooms in Hobart has generated a conversation, until this month largely limited to planning and design circles, about how high Hobart buildings should be allowed to go, about what shape our city should take in the future.

The issue has been raised to a dramatic new level by the proposals from the Fragrance Group for the construction of two new tall hotels in the city's Sullivans Cove precinct.

More people are now asking: What shape do we want our city to take? Do we want to build on the city's unique setting, its powerful and memorable landscape by echoing the shape of the land, the hills, the ridges and the flat waterfront? By respecting too, the many venerable early buildings? Or do we imagine a sprouting of tall buildings in random locations, symbols of energy, growth, individuality and change? Of progress, some would say?

The answer to those questions should be found in our planning schemes.

Planning schemes come into force only after a lengthy process involving wide community consultation, and the rules they contain represent, or should represent, the community's considered aspirations for the future of their municipality.

Who decides what our planning schemes say?

Theoretically, we all do, collectively. In truth, however, few people apart from councillors and professionals and a few interest groups have the time, interest or understanding to have any

meaningful input into what a planning scheme says.

Effectively, a small cohort of qualified planners working for local government, guided by their councils and watched over by the Tasmanian Planning Commission and their professional peers, set the direction for planning in this state. They draw up the rules.

Under the relevant planning scheme — the Sullivans Cove Planning Scheme 1997 — neither of the two current proposals can, in my opinion, be entertained. A number of the objectives of the scheme and some of its detailed provisions are, in my view, clearly and irreconcilably contravened by the proposals.

The proposal for lower Collins Street is for a podium-and-tower building whose form is reminiscent of the slab block hotels of the 1960s. The podium would be of similar height to the apartment building opposite — One Collins Street — and the tower slab would rise another 16 storeys above that. The height to the main roof would be more than 70 metres, compared with the planning scheme's maximum "deemed-to-comply" height of 15 metres.

The other, well-publicised proposal is for a very tall (by Hobart standards), relatively

slender tower building on a confined site bounded by Davey, Despard and Brooke streets, at the edge of Sullivans Cove.

This tower building, of some 35 levels, would rise to a roof height of more than 120 metres above Davey Street. This compares with the deemed-to-comply height for its location of only 18 metres.

Ironically, the existing 14-level office building at 10 Murray Street, considered by many to be out of scale with its

Sullivans Cove context and soon to be demolished as part of the Parliament Square development, would be dwarfed by this new tower. So too would the nearby Executive and Aurora buildings.

Can council approve these proposals? Yes and no.

Once a planning scheme becomes law, the local council is obliged to act in compliance with that scheme.

When considering development applications,



councillors must put on a difficult hat — they must act as a planning authority, whose responsibility is to assess applications against the requirements of the planning scheme, like it or not. In this, they will be advised by their planning staff.

If council chooses to make decisions based on any other factors, such as political views, personal preferences, or even honestly held disagreement with the planning scheme, they do so at their own peril. Or perhaps I should say at the peril of their ratepayers, who would probably have to bear the awarded costs in the event

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COOKIE CUTTER: Unlike many glass and steel cityscapes, Hobart is uniquely charming.

development offers such overriding benefits that the limits applying to height may be varied.

But in exercising that discretion, council must take into account the scheme's objectives as set out in its schedules — which is where these proposals are likely to founder.

Surprisingly, there is no ultimate height limit, either in Sullivans Cove or in the city centre, where the City of Hobart Planning Scheme applies. This is despite the fact that local planners and urban designers have long held that Hobart's built form should

respect and reflect its natural setting and topography, and that a range of height limits should be set to that end.

Through the deemed-to-comply heights, the scheme translates these broad objectives into assessable, measurable values. What is lacking, though, are any absolute height limits.

By how much can a building be allowed to exceed the deemed-to-comply height?

The "pub test" might suggest that the maximum height of a building could be varied by up to, say, a fifth or a quarter, if it merited special treatment. Perhaps even half

as high again in truly exceptional circumstances.

If that is a fair reckoning of public expectation, then the proposed departures look outlandish. Their acceptance would render the scheme's present height figures meaningless.

Some will ask: Shouldn't projects such as these be welcomed? Doesn't their potential economic benefit outweigh any parochial misgivings about change?

It's easy to point to cities overseas, and indeed to our own mainland capital cities, where taller buildings are burgeoning. Brisbane, for

example, now boasts several of the tallest residential buildings in our hemisphere, often cheek by jowl with much older, smaller buildings. There can be a certain chaotic appeal in this juxtaposition, a certain energy and vitality. So why not here, too?

Why not? Because Hobart is different, a small city in an amazing setting, on an island at the bottom of the world — too precious to be put at risk by a laissez-faire approach to planning.

There are many small and not-so-small cities in beautiful settings around the world, where tall buildings are notably and deliberately absent, at least from their precious precincts.

These are special places that retain their own identity and stand apart from the relentless sameness that pervades our shrinking world. Hobart should stay in their ranks. Stay special.

If the people of Hobart and their elected representatives do decide they want to see taller buildings in their city, then they should move to change the rules — change the planning scheme so that it clearly and unambiguously sets out that new vision; removes the present uncertainty.

I, like many others, hope and expect that they will not.

I hope that, instead, the present planning scheme will be modified to include some fixed, absolute limits in height — limits for the different areas of the city; limits derived from a comprehensive, citywide urban design analysis; limits that help to safeguard the unique character of this place.

Jamieson Allom is a retired Hobart architect, and formerly served as national president of the Royal Australian Institute, as a member of the Tasmanian Planning Commission, and as a Hobart alderman.