

Stop the assault on our city's soul

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It is not too much to ask that new developments enhance their surroundings, says **Roland Browne**

THERE has never been a good answer to the question about who owns the space above a block of land.

In my view, past a certain undefined point, it is our space. At some undetermined height, a building blocks our sun and our views, especially of our mountain.

It shades our streets and it makes them wind tunnels.

No defined or dollar value is put on this lost amenity in the planning and economic development process.

To the extent that planning schemes take account of amenity, there is an unspoken starting point that a tall building is a good idea and the economic development it brings must be beneficial to all, even to those who reject the building.

Exacerbating the unspoken benefits is the unexplained urgency to it all. Council has limited time to assess the project.

We are given limited time to make representations and to appeal.

It's all done in a rush, which is, of course, the opposite of a good planning process.

Realistically, the developer of a skyscraper faces no particular hurdles.

Rather, the community bears the burden of having to explain why a skyscraper is not a good idea.

We are left to justify those nebulous values that are all too often taken for granted but

which make a place like Hobart such a wonderful city to live in.

I am talking about views, I am talking about a sense of space and I am talking about a sense of place and community.

I think the assessment system for larger buildings would ideally require proponents to first show how their proposals pass an "enhancement test".

That is, leaving to one side any claimed economic benefits from the proposal, how is the city's social, aesthetic, cultural, heritage and other non-economic values enhanced? Because if these values are not collectively enhanced, the building should be rejected.

In the last 10 years or so, Hobart has had inflicted upon it some awful high rise buildings. The concrete encased Woolworths and Vodafone buildings in Argyle Street are two examples.

So are the Myer building and the Uni building in Melville Street, and so is the new Fragrance complex in Macquarie Street.

These buildings have no soul. Functionality is their overriding characteristic. They are ugly.

They add nothing to the aesthetic or visual amenity of the city of Hobart.

Even worse, they act as a detractor from it because they obliterate views, cast long shadows and are simply ugly.

Against this background, the Fragrance Group proposes

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huge buildings in Davey Street and Collins Street. Fragrance has done the same in Melbourne, with three huge towers.

That these buildings could even be contemplated as suitable for planning approval in our City of Hobart is an indictment on our planning system. Hobart City Council

has abandoned or lost any sense of vision for what the city is going to look like.

Instead, the Council sits back and watches the development applications roll in.

These applications are judged not on their aesthetic or on what they can bring to Hobart's sense of place or

community. They are judged on plot ratios, building standards and the unspoken imperative of economic development, regardless of how such development costs us all in other ways.

The proposed Fragrance towers in their present form are utterly unacceptable.

It is not just a matter of

their height. They are out of place.

They fail to enrich the city. If the community, who appear to be largely opposed to these towers, just focus on the height of the towers we will inevitably see the system buckle towards a compromise. Perhaps two-thirds of the proposed height. Perhaps 50



AESTHETICS: University housing on the corner of Elizabeth and Melville streets is one of a number of recent developments that have changed the nature of Hobart's inner city.

Picture: MATT THOMPSON

per cent of the proposed height?

Either way, these towers will still fail to contribute to our city.

As has been said by many other authors, people come to Hobart for its small town feel. These towers would fail the

enhancement test described above.

If the justification for these towers is a need for hotel accommodation, there are many examples around the city of smaller scale accommodation options that are creative, unimposing and

sympathetic. I refer to the new Macq01, the Woolstore, and the Salamanca Mews.

The Fragrance towers should be rejected out of hand.

Their height should be rejected.

Their style should be rejected.

Moreover, what they stand for should be rejected.

We should not countenance an attempt to transform Hobart into a different city altogether.

Roland Browne is a Hobart lawyer.