

How Sydney set its plans in concrete

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jotted down a list of about a dozen points. That list formed the basis of the Living City blueprint, released in 1994, an ambitious manifesto laid out in a modest booklet. "It was a heart and soul document," declares Sartor. "It was a belief document."

Among its aims was that Sydney should boast a "high-quality public realm" with parks, plazas, footpaths and streets, that there should be a retail renaissance, more restaurants and cafes, abundant facilities for the arts and a "critical mass of permanent residents".

Sartor went into battle mode to push Living City through, earning friends and enemies in equal portions. His plan to widen footpaths nearly sparked a war with city retailers, and the Cook and Phillip Park swimming pool was seen as a "rape" of the public parkland. His street kiosks-cum-billboards were maligned for turning the city into a giant advertising site. But that was mere piffle compared to "The Toaster", the mother of all architectural eyesores, which was pelted with tomatoes when its Circular Quay facade was unveiled.

AT THAT same time, the State Government was embroiled in a series of architectural bunfights over developments at the Finger Wharf at Woolloomooloo, Walsh Bay and the Conservatorium of Music. Too big, too bulky, too much concrete, not enough green, too tacky, the critics cried. It was nothing less than heritage vandalism. But then a funny thing happened — the city started to come to life. The Opera House colonnade under the Toaster was an immediate success, ditto the Finger Wharf at Woolloomooloo and Cockle Bay, which finally gave Sydneysiders a place to enjoy alfresco dining.

The blossoming of the city's night-life continued during the Olympic Games. At the end of 2001, the remodelled Overseas Passenger Terminal opened and again, it was an overnight success story. There seemed no limit to the number of people the city's new bars and eateries could absorb. As soon as a new venue opened, the people followed. It seemed as if, after years of pent-up demand, Sydneysiders had discovered a hot new place — their own city centre.

Slowly, people trickled into the CBD to live, led by Generation Xers inspired by their trips to overseas cities. University of Technology senior lecturer in urban planning Glen Searle says TV shows such as *Seinfeld* and *Friends* helped by portraying apartment living as sexy. "There's no doubt there has been a spin-off from those shows, which show the city as the place where all the action is," he says. But virulent critic of high-rise living Monique Wakelin — who is, ironically, a property investment adviser — says there was still a paucity of infrastructure for city dwellers.

Despite the growth of the lively Broadway and Chinatown districts, the CBD still lacks what the great cities of Paris and New York have in abundance — the florist shops, shoe repairers, bakeries, schools, corner stores and cafes, the

A DECADE OF DEVELOPMENT > THE TOP 10



FINGER WHARF, WOOLLOOMOOLOO

Paul Keating called the Walker Corporation and Multiplex's redevelopment of the 1915 Finger Wharf "the most cynical and undemocratic development of its kind that Sydney has seen". Many said the wharf building should have been demolished and the wharf left as open space rather than reborn as a glitzy hotel and apartment complex. But people have thronged there and the wharf is a lively hub of alfresco dining and dining.



RENZO PIANO'S AURORA PLACE

The man who designed Paris's Pompidou Centre brought a touch of class to Sydney when he took on Lend Lease's Aurora Place tower. Opened in 2000, it has been universally praised for its architectural quality. Leo Schofield, one of its many fans, calls it one of Sydney's major assets. "New York doesn't even have a Renzo Piano building yet, and we've got one," he says.



FOOTPATH WIDENING

Frank Sartor names his footpath widening project as his greatest battle, and greatest achievement during his time as mayor. "Retailers opposed it. State ministers didn't like it. They all thought it was taking away traffic capacity," he says. Despite the pedestrian and traffic upheaval Sydneysiders endured around Pitt and George streets in 1999, the footpaths have reclaimed more of the streets for pedestrians.

minutiae of daily life that make up the lifeblood that circulates around the city's main organs. Sydney has, instead, that paean to American blandness — the convenience store. "A 7-Eleven is not a supermarket," says Wakelin. "It just ain't."

The bid to entice residents into the CBD has come at a high price, aesthetically. Many of the residential towers that shot up were geared to profits, with dubious architectural merit, containing what Wakelin calls "shoebox" apartments. Leo Schofield agrees there has been a lamentable "Meriton-isation" of much of the city. "A huge amount of the city has been done by one developer, so there is a sameness," he says.

Even Frank Sartor admits the wall of

Meriton towers on Campbell Street, approved in his time, are less than ideal. When pressed on other development failings under his reign, he acknowledges the Cook and Phillip Park above-ground design did not come up to expectations. Schofield is more scathing, calling it Sydney's "most extravagantly situated skateboard park".

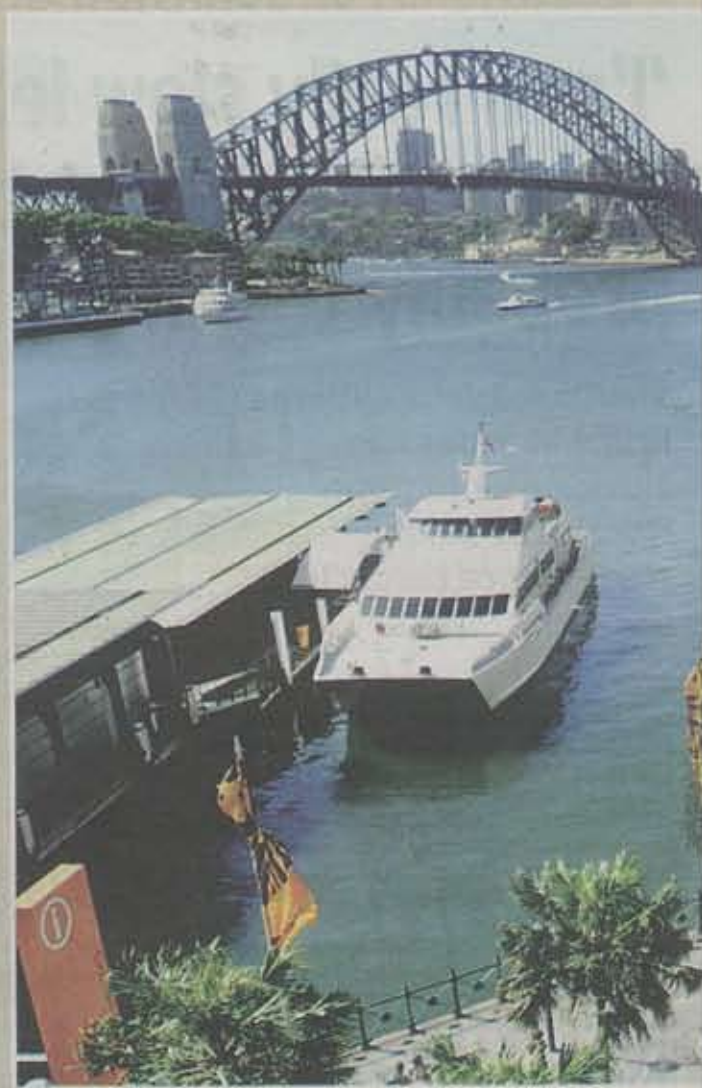
Sartor admits to having some long, dark nights over East Circular Quay — not the colonnade, which has been a public success, but the giant electrical appliance above it. Today it is chief among his regrets from his time as mayor. "I would have driven a harder bargain. The architecture did not meet expectations.

"Ideally, I would have gone down four or five stories, improved the architecture and

had a hotel. We should have fought harder."

Jack Munday, who campaigned against the demolition of the Finger Wharf at Woolloomooloo and is credited with saving The Rocks with green bans in the 1970s, says Sydney's facelift had come at the expense of its traditionally working harbour, and the socio-economic mix it encouraged. Today, wealthy investors and developers have a monopoly on waterfront land. "If we allow more and more of our foreshore to be used by the mega-rich, we will lose the character of Sydney altogether," he says. "Millers Point is the next battleground. The developers have their eye on it already."

Privately, he is nostalgic for some of Sydney's pubs such as the Ship Inn at Circular Quay, which have disappeared only to be replaced by



OPERA HOUSE COLONNADE

Sydneysiders may still grumble about "The Toaster", but the colonnade, an elegant covered walkway with cafes and restaurants, has been a hit with the public since it opened in 1999. Edmund Capon says: "Isn't it amazing how there was such a hue and cry at first? But the life around the buildings has just blossomed. Walking to the Opera House is just fantastic now."





Pictures: LEE BESFORD; FIONA-LEE QUIMBY; JACKY GHOSSEIN



COCKLE BAY

Once condemned as a "Disneyland by the sea" (by University of NSW professor of landscape architecture James Weirick), this collection of steel domes with timber overlays was an instant hit when it opened in 1998. Chris Johnson says: "What it has done to the city lifestyle is very good. It has connected the city to the water with a series of cafes. There's some rooftop greenery there, and it's got a human character."



KINGS CROSS UPGRADE

Sydney's traditional home of tarts and touts is finally getting cleaned up. The City of Sydney started its upgrade last year, pledging to rid the area of its overflowing rubbish bins, clean up graffiti, improve lighting, upgrade footpaths and replace awnings. The idea is to make the long-time red-light district safe and friendly. Schofield predicts the area will boom as a place for walking and dining: "They've got this one right."



OVERSEAS PASSENGER TERMINAL

The revamped Overseas Passenger Terminal with its bars and restaurants opened at West Circular Quay at the end of 2001 to a merciful lack of controversy. The \$20 million redevelopment took clever advantage of an under-used space, and helped link The Rocks with Circular Quay.



KING STREET WHARF

This former working wharf was revamped in time for the 2000 Olympics. For the first six months, tenants feared it would become a white elephant because of its somewhat remote location on the city's western fringe. But the Malaya Restaurant soon had the crowds flocking, the Loft has become a hip venue for the young and groovy and Cargo Bar is the pick-up joint of choice for young office workers.



COOK AND PHILLIP PARK (left)

Another controversial development, the \$50 million aquatic and fitness complex was decried as "parkland rape" by architect Phillip Cox when it opened in August 1999. Cox and many others thought Sydney had missed out on an opportunity to connect Hyde Park and The Domain with continuous green space. The design was criticised for creating a windswept concrete platform that no one, except skateboarders, would enjoy. However, the complex has been a hit with city residents and office workers.

WALSH BAY

A protracted and agonising battle over Walsh Bay started in the 1980s, pitting heritage conservationists against government bureaucracy. Eventually, a compromise was reached, whereby only one wharf (6/7) would be demolished and the rest preserved or adapted. The \$650 million Walsh Bay development, home to the Sydney Theatre Company, looks set to charm the city. The company's director Robyn Nevin says: "Once it is completed, it will be a very exciting place to be."

glitzy new cafes and bars. "There are about 20 waterfront pubs that have just vanished," Munday says. "When there were hundreds of working seamen it was a very different place. That's gone forever."

NSW Art Gallery director Edmund Capon says despite the advances made under the Living City era, Sydney is yet to become a great "walking city". "There are some lovely parts, then you come to a horrible hiatus where you want to close your eyes. Look at William Street. You want to blow it up and start again don't you? And [in] part of George Street, there are buildings that look like something out of a cornflake packet."

And then there is the moribund atmosphere of Central Station, central only in terms of its

position in terms of intersecting train lines, but bereft of any life. In the dynamism of the past decade, there was a prime opportunity for that most-hated blight on the CBD, the monorail, to be ridded from the cityscape. Yet, no one had the will to tackle its removal. "It's hideous beyond all words," says Schofield. "It serves no purpose. The removal of the monorail would be the most dramatic improvement that could happen to the city."

Unlike Sartor, new City of Sydney Mayor Clover Moore is not one for grand gestures and sweeping plans. She happily admits her focus for Sydney is on making the new expanded council area more liveable, more human, by bringing in light rail, integrated ticketing, cycleways and pedestrian access. She wants more trees.

Some large projects initiated by her predecessors will continue, such as the upgrading of the city's gateways: William and Oxford Streets, Darlinghurst Road and Broadway, to look more like the handsome boulevards they should be.

But the last, tumultuous decade of development and change is over, perhaps not to be repeated in our lifetime. The upshot of the period is that the gradual transfer of power and prestige from other cities to Sydney is complete. Like a magnet, it has sucked wealth, jobs, and even culture into its orbit. "As much as I like Melbourne, there is now no question that Sydney is the city," Schofield says.

"It is now the true glamour capital." NSW Institute of Architects president

Caroline Pidcock says the Sydney that has emerged is older and wiser. "The city has grown up, from being a kid," she adds.

NSW Government architect Chris Johnson sees Sydney in 2004 as a city with a unique "yin-yang" intersection of the natural and built environments - an occasionally scruffy, partly chaotic mix of Asian, American and European influences. "Sydney has a richness to it," he says. "Cities that are too much of one single thing are a bit dull."

It is just as well that extreme makeovers never really succeed in masking all the flaws. The last thing we want, says Capon, is for Sydney to be perfect. "Perfection is so desperately uninteresting."