

PARRAMATTA ROAD - A NEW IDENTITY FOR A BYWORD FOR URBAN BLIGHT

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Introduction

Parramatta Road has been a by-word for urban blight for generations. And yet it is an important and historic transport corridor between Parramatta and Sydney, there since colonisation and probably before. It is still the most direct link between the two urban nodes of Sydney, Sydney city and Parramatta, and increasingly significant given the growth of Parramatta and western Sydney generally.

In part as an outcome of the development of Westconnex and the M4, the NSW government has provided significant funding to “improve the amenity” of Parramatta Road.

One might see this as a once in a generation opportunity to address the ugliness of the Parramatta Road corridor, and one might assume that, with the massive investment in the alternative, parallel freeway routes, that the traffic environment of Parramatta Road might become more friendly and locally focussed. Visions come to mind of tree-lined boulevards, regional cycleways, pocket parks, public art ...

But, of course anything this expensive, this contested, this controversial, this important – to all sorts of people – won't be simple. Dreams, and even modest aspirations, will need to be re-calibrated, fights fought, and concessions made. The challenge for the designers is not so much in the conceptualisation of great ideas, but more in keeping focussed on the identification of the important worthwhile changes and championing them through the often-turgid approvals processes.

In this presentation we share the journey that we have taken over ten months on this project and reflect on the bewildering complexity of the city and the bureaucracies within it. It's a story of hope, disappointment, cunning strategies, heroic interventions, and vast amounts of money.

PRUAIP & WESTCONNEX

The following is a presentation of a significant project that we have been involved with this year and last – the Parramatta Road Urban Amenity Improvement Program. PRUAIP.

PRUAIP came about as a consequence of a massive infrastructure project being undertaken by the NSW state government, Westconnex. Westconnex is a system of motorways and tunnels joining western Sydney to the central, eastern parts of the metropolis, designed to relieve high levels of traffic congestion.

Parramatta Road is the traditional traffic route – even since before white settlement – between the city centre and the western suburbs which has gradually and incrementally been consolidated, paved, and widened over generations. As Sydney has leap-frogged over itself to burgeon further

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west again, the congestion through the middle ring suburbs – through which Parramatta Road runs – has become impossible.

The Westconnex route approximately parallels Parramatta Road and is intended to bypass this congestion. It might be expected that this new capacity would reduce the load on Parramatta Road, enabling things such as lane reduction, commuter cycleways, and trees. But, unfortunately, the traffic volumes on Parramatta Road have actually gone up since the motorway was opened.

Westconnex is infrastructure on a massive scale. This word, infrastructure, seems to be the new Motherhood. It is frequently put forward as the solution to any economic problem being experienced. But not everyone believes that all infrastructure is good. Many councils along the Westconnex route for example were not supportive of the project. They saw problems during construction, the possible demise of sections of strip retail and they feared that their local roads would become rat-runs for motorists avoiding the motorway fees.

The state remained, however, committed, so the answer was to compensate in an effort to deflect the criticism and to ameliorate the problems. The answer was PRUAIP. This would provide to councils the cash needed to put back in some “amenity” to their suburbs.

The idea of improving Parramatta Road also resonated more widely since it, Parramatta Road, has for decades been seen as the exemplar of urban blight, characterised by used car lots, empty shops, broken down infrastructure – and endless traffic snarls.

After some pockets of resistance to the overall program, all councils ended up taking what was offered. Some high-level planning, project identification and budgeting was undertaken by the state instrumentalities – mostly by Urban Growth and the Greater Sydney Commission. Funding was then provided to the councils, who were charged with detail planning, construction documentation and implementation.

What Is Amenity?

The word Amenity is somewhat open-ended. Beauty is certainly lacking on much of Parramatta Road by any measure and so making the road look better would be one component of the definition. But our ambition with the project was to go beyond aesthetics and address other aspects of the design challenge, and direct the substantial funding in that direction.

We have prioritised safe, mobility-focussed facilities. An example is the raising of road levels and the introduction of new stormwater drainage at a major intersection. This will make the grades compliant in universal access terms and it will mean that people crossing the road do not have to wade through knee-deep water during heavy rainfall.

We have looked in detail at what could be done for a large primary school with a long frontage to Parramatta Road. One outcome has been to introduce new lifts to access a pedestrian bridge across the road at the school entrance. This has also involved getting the kids involved in an associated public art project. also, in acknowledgement of the importance of the school within the community,

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the project scope was enlarged to include improvements to a side street to the school, with improved provision for a “kiss and drop” zone.

Other examples of this view of appropriate priorities include,

- Introducing better lighting
- Providing pedestrian and cycle refuges at a major roundabout on the site
- Undergrounding power

And - we have included a significant number of new trees.

Can Parramatta Road Actually Be Saved?

Large scale change to Parramatta Road is problematic to say the least. Indeed, Westconnex could be seen as an acceptance of this – the realisation that it is all too hard leading to the proposition of building another, bigger road next to it.

The characteristics of Parramatta Road that make it so difficult to change are many and they include,

- Complex ownership and constant re-development, occurring at different times
- The need to maintain traffic capacity
- Rapid population growth
- Multiple authority responsibilities

To make use of the opportunity presented by PRUAIP, improving Parramatta Road has had to be interpreted laterally. There will be improvements to roads which join the main road and drainage upgrades. Facilities which front the road such as sports fields will have works done, cycle/pedestrian paths which cross Parramatta Road are being developed and public art projects have been identified and funded.

So, Parramatta Road itself, yes, but also improvements,

- near the road,
- over the road,
- under the road,
- beside the road, and
- nowhere near the road but related to it.

Conclusion

PRUAIP made a large amount of money available for the works described - \$198 million in total, with \$17 million allocated to the Cumberland Council works – but only a small fraction of the greater cost of the Westconnex undertaking. This was offered at least in part as compensation with the stated aim of fixing a problem – Parramatta Road - which on the surface looks unsolvable. In the effort of providing good value outcomes we had to think around the problem, get in close, look for useful things and not dwell on dreams of shady boulevards and beaux arts axes.

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For a project of its size, PRUAIP was surprisingly light on in overall physical master planning guidance. However, when combined with the money and the ambition that this should become a flagship cross-agency project, looseness equated with flexibility and meant that good ideas that emerged during the process could be considered and adopted if supported by the project group.

It strikes me that, to this project, we could apply the term “trickle-down” urban planning. A behemoth project happens, of a scale only affordable in the higher tiers of government; then, through negotiation, bargaining, and cage rattling of various kinds some of the action trickles down to local streets and institutions by way of better paths, flatter ramps, safer access to school, reduction of nuisance flooding – and more trees.

Author Biography

Paul Knox



Paul is a Registered Landscape Architect, celebrating 34 years post graduate experience in 2019.

He studied at The University of Sydney and at the Ryde School of Horticulture. Immediately after graduation he undertook a one-year contract with Ashfield Council, in the inner west of Sydney. In 1986 he established his own practice, Knox & Tanner, which later became re-branded as Knox + Partners Landscape Architects Pty Ltd. The company enjoyed 27 years of operation until 2013 when Paul merged the business with COMPLETE Urban.

Paul's proudest professional achievements include planning and design work for the University of NSW, The University of Sydney, The Australian National University, and parks and town centre designs for several local governments throughout Australia.

As Principal Landscape Architect for COMPLETE, Paul is involved in major park designs, cycleway planning and design, and urban renewal projects.

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