

February 27, 2021

Are you Stoked by NSW planning vision? Don't be - beneath its friendly cloak lurks Jack the Ripper

Bold and beautiful? Sometimes it's hard to tell if they're stupid, or they just think we are. Planning Minister Rob Stokes says his new "Design and Place" State Environmental Planning Policy is bold. He says it will make our towns and cities "just get more beautiful" every year.

That's the spin. From what's available so far, which is the SEPP's EIE (explanation of intended effect), I'd bracket it with the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016, also from Stokes' watch. That act made its core purpose about future wellbeing, resilience and "[supporting biodiversity in a changing climate](#)". In fact, it allowed land-clearing to [multiply 1300](#) per cent.



*NSW Minister for Planning Rob Stokes with Government Architect Abbie Galvin at the Australian Museum.
Credit: Louise Kennerley*

Just as the Biodiversity Conservation Act was a pretty cloak for the undermining of both diversity and conservation, this SEPP fronts the relentless and consciously fast-tracked destruction of our urban and rural environments.

The website carries a weirdly fawning 45-minute [backslap](#) between Stokes and Government Architect Abbie "I couldn't agree more, Minister" Galvin. It's all very jolly. Galvin offers her boss Dorothy Dixers about affordable housing ("[we brought in a SEPP to deal with that](#)"), sustainability and so forth and he rabbits on endearingly about beauty and Jan Gehl and the importance of having design at the centre of – well – everything, while dropping more names than Zsa Zsa Gabor dropped husbands.

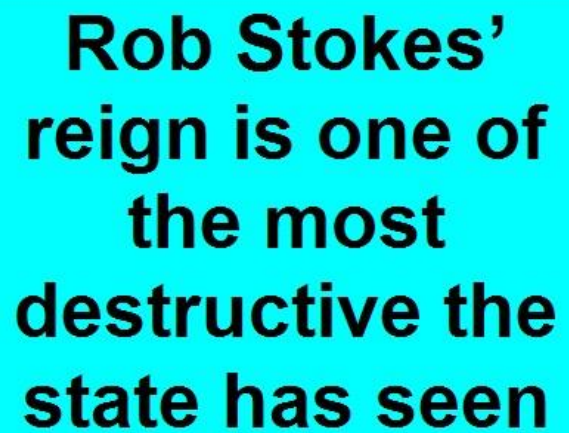
It's all bit "nothing darling, just darling, darling". Stokes' sweet-faced intelligence, his earnestness, make you want to believe him. I'd love nothing more. But do they think we're blind?

"Design-led development" sounds promising. Be not fooled. Design-led development was Chris Johnson's catch-cry as he slid in 2005 from government architect to advising planning minister Frank Sartor as they rezoned Redfern for 18 storeys, then finally to the dark side as chief executive of developer lobby-group Urban Task Force. Design-led development merely justifies gargantuan development as "good design". Viz, Barangaroo.

London's enormous \$27 billion, 50-plus-storey Nine Elms is such a "design-led" development. Much-loved by Boris Johnson, it turns the Thames south bank from Battersea to Vauxhall into super-luxury residential. An admixture of "affordable" housing means plebs-like-us can watch the penthouse set frolic in a glass-bottom swimming pool hung above the street. But they enter through the poor door.

Design-led? Stokes has been Planning Minister (or assistant planning minister) for [five of the past seven years](#). If he had any genuine interest in beauty, environmentalism, consultation or connection to country we'd be seeing it by now.

Instead, we have a city scarred by 10-lane motorways through parks and neighbourhoods, by endless toxic tunnels where signs warn not to breathe the air, by relentless metastases of 40-storey tower blocks jammed on every site a developer has been able to grab. We have public housing being rampantly redeveloped as private, sweet little train stations suddenly replaced by five-storey behemoths, bureaucrats sacked for refusing to fell thousands of highway trees, sprawl around virtually every country town, new coalmines approved apace and farmers forced to defend their land from huge mining corporates. Stokes' reign is one of the most destructive the state has seen.



Rob Stokes' reign is one of the most destructive the state has seen

Stokes' EIE is a verbose document, a hundred-page fatberg of repetition, redundancy and fluff. It begins, as all government documents now do, with an acknowledgement of country. Then, hidden in their grey lipid mess, your fingers touch on five ill-defined principles, and I quote: "1. Design places with beauty and character that people feel proud to belong to. 2. Design inviting public spaces to support engaged communities. 3. Design productive and connected places for the wellbeing of people and the environment 4. Design sustainable and greener places to enable thriving communities. 5. Design resilient and diverse places for enduring communities."

What? Each principle alone is a furball and in truth they're really just one. Even that – design good spaces – is also meaningless because what matters, if we're to have any chance of realising these, is how a good (resilient, welcoming, productive) place is defined. And that, Mr Minister, is why we have rules. To protect us.

So when Stokes says, blithely, that he's dumping rules and replacing them with performance-based principles, your hackles should rise. When he says putting design at the centre will make "the whole process of development ... cheaper and simpler and quicker" you should reach for your cudgel.

Good design is hard to do. It doesn't make things quicker. And we've had ever fewer planning rules for 25 years. Now, as you can tell by looking around, there are almost none, especially if you're a developer.

For, like Nine Elms, our planning system also has a poor door. If you or I want to build a granny flat we suffer a barrage of planning, heritage and environmental rules. But if you're a developer yearning for lunchtime access to the minister, where everything is negotiable, you need only make your proposal big enough or outrageous enough to be declared State Significant Development or Unsolicited. Then the door is wide open and held by a uniformed flunky.

Elevating principle over rule – replacing the planning system's few remaining *musts* and *shalls* with *shoulds* and *mays*, *considerations* and *guidelines* – can only make this worse.

The document is out for comment. There'll be no dissent. Of course not. "Motherhood statement" is a term of derision not because anyone hates motherhood but precisely because it's unobjectionable. Rob Stokes' "bold" is anyone else's wet fish. Yet its very harmlessness should cause alarm. Beneath this friendly cloak lurks Jack the Ripper.

Meanwhile, Stokes' [accelerated rezonings](#), [fast-tracked approvals](#), land-clearing and [expanded complying development](#) – all on a pretext of COVID-19 – continue apace. Consultation? Not likely.

Stokes himself may be either sincere but ineffectual, or insincere and disguising destruction. Weak or cynical. You choose. Regardless, one planning law is immutable. Words are cheap. By their deeds shall ye know them.