

DESIGNERS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

**The high impact, hidden practice
improving local places.**

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Rothwell Resident in Urban Design | 2022-23



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research study explores the roles and responsibilities of architects, landscape architects and urban designers (referred to throughout this report as designers) within NSW local government. Its aim is to shine a light on the organisational context and nature of their work and gain insights into their impact.

The study was informed by a series of interviews undertaken with Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), General Managers (GMs), and senior designers in local government, together with the review of literature, census data, case studies, and the author’s ongoing participation in the designers in government (DiG) group, established in 2021.

Improving the quality of design within places was identified as a key driver for in-house designers. Designers’ ability to ‘join dots’, spatially integrate, problem solve, provide design leadership and direction – to places and within organisations – fills an important skills and functional gap within Councils.

This gap coincides with the place-shaping role that communities value most from local government (Ryan et al., 2015, p.ii). While external design panels and consultants can service specific needs, they cannot replace the unique role designers can play within Councils.

While the argument for ‘good design’ adding social, environmental and economic value to places has been made for at least 20 years (CABE, 2000), interviews demonstrated different levels of understanding, and varying levels of design maturity within local government.

The concept of guiding design outcomes – known as “design governance” (Carmona, 2016) – is not new, however the benefits of design, known as the “design dividend” (Freestone et al., 2019, p. 81) are only recognised in a limited number of Councils. While the value is clear to the leaders interviewed, the value of design governance is not consistently known or understood at senior levels of local government.

Design governance is not a new concept, but the design dividend is not consistently known or understood at senior levels of local government.

KEY FINDINGS

Interviewed CEOs and GMs saw value in designers' ability to capture the imagination and positively articulate a future that the public can engage with, whether it be about a city, precinct, neighbourhood, a street, park, building or public space. They identified the following positive impacts to having designers on their teams.

1. **Improving places on multiple levels**, from basic function and accessibility to the creation of interesting places and experiences.
2. **Adding value to planning**, by understanding the design process, speaking the same language as other designers and being able to differentiate between good and bad outcomes.
3. **Bringing a critical skillset**, driving innovation, challenging existing methods and lifting the performance of others within Council.
4. **Championing good design** which improves civic pride and perceptions of place to both encourage and raise expectations of quality investment.
5. **Catalysing change** through big ideas which can carry momentum, capture the imagination, encourage partnerships and investment.
6. **Ability to co-create** and collaborate with communities, translating their aspirations into tangible outcomes and communicating the positives.
7. **Bringing an integrated approach** to numerous place-based factors by understanding process and working across disciplines.
8. **Demanding higher quality** in third-party development (private or state) which attracts better architects and project outcomes and better-quality future development.
9. **Showing the community** that it is cared for by lifting aspirations, expectations, and increasing the quality of public buildings and public spaces.

Designers described their own roles within Council as many and varied. They include design leadership, strategic design, design policy, design advice, design excellence, project and design management, in-house design services and speculative design work.

Unlike traditional local government functions of planning and engineering – which have evolved over time into clear workforce streams and directorates within Councils – designers have emerged gradually, often at the behest of a design champion advocating for someone with design training to perform a specific in-house task.

Several designers interviewed talked about the mismatch between their title, position description, assumed roles and responsibilities. The ad hoc nature of their employment, combined with the cross-functional nature of design work has tended to result in designers being dispersed across organisations, and given rise to a series of specific cultural issues which need to be addressed.

While in-house designers and design governance provide significant opportunities to improve the quality of built and natural environment outcomes within NSW local government areas, this study identified a number of challenges which guided recommendations in the report, including:

- Low levels of understanding about design within the general public and local government;
- A workplace culture which sidelines design;
- An emerging sector with evolving organisational structures few positions and career paths;
- A lack of design champions at the leadership level;
- Design governance between state and local government jurisdictions.

A key finding of this study is that in-house designers bring substantial value to local government.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

This research study identified a range of benefits to places and organisations arising from designers within local government. It also draws attention to the lack of knowledge, understanding, advocacy and cross-sector change required to progress and improve the context for good design to occur.

Local government-facing

- Ensure every Council has access to executive-level design leadership and in-house design advice.
- Ensure every Council seeks Chief Executive Officers / General Managers support to lead cultural change.
- Provide onboarding training to all Councillors about the benefits of 'good design' to places, and the important role of in-house designers.
- Engage with industry groups and LGNSW to increase awareness of designer's skills and capabilities, and build pipelines into local government.

State government-facing

- Support and reinforce efforts by local government to grow internal design expertise and implement City Design / City Architect teams.
- Address the opportunity and challenge of design governance across jurisdictions.

Research and education-facing

- Support ongoing research and education of architects, landscape architects and urban designers in public practice to inform capacity building and advance practice.
- Increase interdisciplinary awareness of 'good design' and the roles played by architects, landscape architect, urban designers, planners and engineers.

Industry-facing*

- Support public dialogue about 'good design' and what designers do in plain English.
- Advocate for interdisciplinary education between designers, planners and engineers.
- Increase engagement with local government and advocate for 'good design', executive-level design leadership and in-house design advice.

* With peak bodies including the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA), Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) and Urban Design Association (UDA).

WHAT COUNCIL CEOs HAVE SAID

“The advantages of having designers inside your organisation is that they influence everyone else, to see what the possibilities are. They help you understand good urban design and built form, which is essential in Council – because ultimately, we are land managers.”

—David Farmer, CEO Central Coast Council

“It’s about demonstrating to the community that Council cares about delivering quality places for them. It’s also helping change perceptions about Blacktown more broadly through good design.”

—Kerry Robinson OAM, CEO Blacktown City Council

“We use our design professionals to creatively express the vision and values of a place. Most of us will understand a picture much more than we will understand words.”

—Monica Barone PSM, CEO City of Sydney Council

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PART I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background and objectives

This research project is informed by my experience as an architect in NSW Public Works / Government Architect's Office (2000–2012), and an urban designer in local government (2012–2023). This period of my career has been committed to public projects, and I have worked alongside many architects, landscape architects, urban designers and engineers who have also chosen this path.

Most have done so for the satisfaction from the level of impact that working in the public sector can provide, and generally don't seek the limelight or enter these roles for recognition. Perhaps because of this – or the general confidentiality constraints surrounding most government work – whenever I am in professional forums I have been struck by how little understanding there is about what designers in government do, and how hard it is to explain.

Abbie Galvin, current NSW Government Architect spoke about the feeling of invisibility experienced in the move from the private to public sector: “I've gone from being in some ways an invisible architect doing very visible work, to being a very visible architect doing invisible work.”

For many years I thought the private nature of public work didn't matter. I watched and cheered as I saw former NSW Government Architect colleagues Barbara Schaffer and Dillon Kombumerri champion to high impact the Green Grid and Connecting with Country frameworks they had been quietly working on for many years.

It wasn't until I entered local government that I started appreciating how little awareness there was in the sector for good design or the skills brought to the sector by architects, landscape architects and urban designers. On reflection it's unsurprising, as ABS data (2021–22) reveals there are around 400 occupations working within the local government sector.

This study seeks to shine a light, not only on the work that architects, landscape architects and urban designers in local government do, but why it so important to local governments and their communities. If you know where to look, there is State-wide evidence of the powerful impact designers in government can have.

From major city-shaping strategies such as Sustainable Sydney 2030 (and 2030–2050 Continuing the Vision) to Maitland's Riverlink and Levee project (the most creative interpretation of a public toilet brief I have ever seen) the contribution of public designers is particularly significant. Not just for the community outcomes, but because of how little understanding there is of these design skillsets in the sector, and how isolated many of these designers are in their work. It's time this changed.

In 2019 I started a group called Designers in Government (DiG). Its aim was to connect and support public design practitioners (architects, landscape architects, urban designers) in their work. I now co-chair this group with

Kate Rintoul, and it has over 90 members across NSW state and local governments, with approximately 50/50 membership across jurisdictions.

What I learnt from our first annual general meeting – with only a few notable exceptions – is that my personal experiences within this sector were not unique. Across NSW there were committed designers championing and achieving important outcomes for their communities with minimal support from the profession or the government agencies they worked for.

Feedback from the group showed there is a lack of understanding about design, and the work of this cohort was buried deep within organisational structures. Many within the group were led by planning and engineering disciplines unfamiliar with the skillset or capabilities of design practitioners; and a further challenge was the absence of educational and professional pipelines into the sector.

The situation motivated me to conduct this research study and lead a group of Masters of Architecture and Urban Design students on a journey through best practice design in government. I have always taken an expansive view on how architects can contribute to public life, so it was both insightful and rewarding to hear independent views from the next generation on this hidden sector of practice.

This research seeks to expand industry and government knowledge by investigating the NSW practice and impact of architects, landscape architects and urban designers – henceforth referred to as designers – in local government. It is by no means conclusive, but reveals a hidden practice by exploring their roles and the organisational context and nature of their work, as well as reporting on the practice and impacts of designers

in local government. Its purpose is to better understand and support their contribution to the built and natural environment across academia, government and the built environment professions.

I note that engineers are also designers, but are not included in the definition of designers for this study. The critical need for engineers – like planners – is clear and unequivocal. The engineering disciplines have long been the mainstay of local government, while designers on the other hand are largely hidden, their skills unique and their value yet to be fully realised and acknowledged.

B. Methodology

This research project has been informed by:

- Desktop research;
- Field trips with students;
- One-on-one interviews with Local Government Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), General Managers (GMs) and senior designers in government;
- A public talk of designers in government (November 2022) as part of the Festival of Urbanism, supported by the Henry Halloran Trust;
- Ongoing professional talks and engagement with practitioners through the Designers in Government (DiG) group.

Interviewees were selected based on representation across the areas designers currently work within (metropolitan, fringe and regional town/city local government areas) and willingness to participate in the study. For the most part CEOs/GMs were comfortable with having their views and opinions shared publicly, for the most part designers were not. I am grateful to both groups for their contribution.

Transformation of George Street CBD with Sydney South East Light Rail.
Image: courtesy News.com



PART 2. THE CONTEXT FOR DESIGN INSIDE LOCAL GOVERNMENT

A. The focus on New South Wales

This research study focuses on design within local government in New South Wales. It adopts the position that local government has an important role to play in shaping the relationship people have with places and asserts that good design and the skill of in-house designers should be a key part of local government place-management strategies, planning and infrastructure delivery.

While aspects of this research may be relevant for other jurisdictions, the focus on New South Wales local government is deliberate. The planning and legislative context differs between state and local government and in each state, and the argument for design is strongly associated with the contribution that designers can make to specific places within their jurisdictions.

Places are complex constructs of the built and natural environment, their specific communities, their past, current and future inter-relationships, including traditional Aboriginal custodianship of Country.

Spatially, NSW has a complex governance construct. There are 128 local council areas within NSW, 120 Aboriginal Land Councils (Aboriginal Affairs NSW, 2023)

and over 20 Aboriginal nations within NSW and the ACT (AIATSIS, 2023).

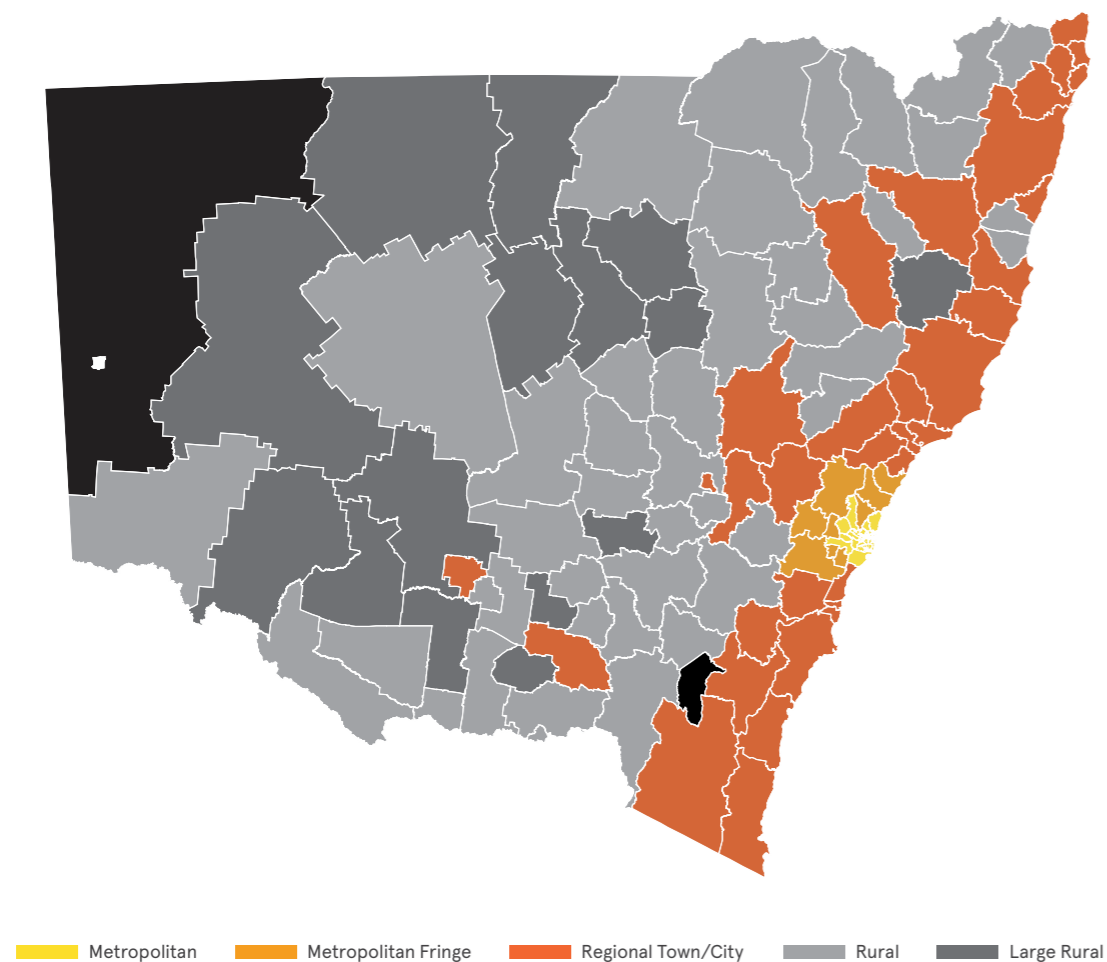
The Office of Local Government has further grouped the 128 local councils into 25 metropolitan Councils, 37 regional town/city, 9 metropolitan fringe, 15 rural and 42 large rural Councils (OLG, 2020).

While these classifications give a broad sense of population and density, the groupings suggest little else about the diverse communities that live and work there, the qualities or Country that characterise these places – all of which intersect and impact the nature and role of each local government agency and the focus of its elected representatives.

The author also acknowledges the variety of different services, financial, resourcing and governance arrangements which exist within NSW local Councils. This study draws on interviews with a limited number of local Councils – metropolitan, metropolitan fringe and regional town/City Councils.

This only reinforced how varied the local government context is. It is the diversity of places – socially, culturally, environmentally and economically – which leads to the focus on the design skills needing to be embedded into

Figure 1. NSW Local Government Areas by NSW Office of Local Government classification



(Source: NSW Office of Local Government)

local government. Each place is unique and evolving. This requires an internal skillset which can adapt to local conditions, rather than project-specific consultant advice or a static one-size-fits-all approach to place making.

Even with a New South Wales focus, the context in which design operates is broad, so this section of the report also includes:

- **A short history** of local government in NSW looking at legislative framework, functions and evolving skill sets relevant to the role of designers in government;
- **Community perceptions** of local government's role in place-shaping, from Ryan et al.'s foundational (2015) study, *Why Local Government Matters*;
- **An overview of "design governance"** – a term coined in the UK to describe government intervention into design of the built environment – with points of relevance for Australia;
- **Commentary on** the similarities, differences and overlaps between disciplines.

B. Local government's changing role in relation to design and place

Local government in New South Wales pre-dates the establishment of state government. Local government commenced with the establishment of the Sydney Corporation in 1842 to provide street lighting and drainage to the fledgling colony. Over the next 60 years it evolved in its definition and statutory standing, culminating in the NSW Local Government Act (LGA Act) of 1906 which began to legitimise this sector of government.

In the beginning, the needs of private property owners drove public coordination of roads, bridge building, drainage, waste collection and other "low key activities" that the state was less interested in (Kelly, 2011).

State government – and its relationship to local Government – was developing in parallel, with NSW not considered a responsible self-governing body (distinct from British imperial rule) until 1856. Without

the benefit of the state's constitutional recognition or a taxation-based funding scheme, local government was heavily reliant on ratepayers for funding and service to properties that paid these rates.

Perhaps naturally, given the focus on civil infrastructure, engineers were one of the first professions to serve within local government. In 2019 the Local Government Engineers Association (now known as the Institute of Public Works Engineers Australia or IPWEA) celebrated its centenary year.

The IPWEA notes "from the earliest days, Councillors and aldermen (they were all men in those days) sought and received advice from the person they respectfully addressed as Mr Engineer (because this role was also invariably held by a male)" (IPWEA, 2018). Local government engineers were responsible for the design of much of the early civil infrastructure in NSW, and have remained an integral part of local government to this day.

As local needs changed over time, the relationship with the state evolved and the NSW Government further developed the LGA Act. In 1919 local Councils were given responsibility for subdivision and rudimentary land-use zoning, largely to protect residential amenity.

While many local government commentators have remarked little else changed until the 1970s (Kelly, 2011, p. 7), Kelly points to two significant functional shifts – an increase in Council's provision of welfare and cultural services (supported by Federal funding), and the NSW Government's introduction of a land-use planning system through changes in the LGA Act 1919 to insert part 12A in 1945.

This change gave Councils the ability to determine development potential by preparing planning scheme ordinances (PSO) for regulating and deciding on the use of land. Kelly, Wilcox and Burdess describe the initial response by their professional cohort. "Councils were at first reluctant. As Wilcox cited (1967), '[t]o direct a scheme is one thing; to have a scheme actually prepared is another' (p. 211).

Although the legislation required appointment of a qualified person to help prepare the PSO, many Councils relied on their in-house engineers (Burdess, 1984) who may have seen planning as a sideline or needless function." (Kelly, 2011, p. 7)

While the "political purchase" (Harrison, 1972, p. 7 in Kelly, 2011, p. 8), financial benefit and alignments of this role, with other functions, were soon realised and accepted by Councils, the NSW Government retained ultimate control of the planning system.

Regional planning also began during this time, with the preparation of the County of Cumberland Plan (1948) by the newly formed Cumberland County Council (CCC), embedded in legislation through the Local Government (Town and Country Planning) Amendment Act of 1962.

The CCC ultimately found itself "a political compromise between two battling spheres of government" (Spann, 1975 in Kelly, 2011, p. 10), and was dissolved in 1963. Kelly notes "it was the first and final plan placed in Council hands" (Kelly, 2011, p. 10).

Regardless, the formal introduction of planning into local government had commenced and the discipline of planning began to mature in parallel. Freestone and Pullen (2018) describe the cross-disciplinary origins of the Town and Country Planning Institute (TCPI) in 1934, a precursor to the modern Planning Institute of Australia.

Originally an amalgam of architects, surveyors and engineers, the Institute relied on support from key members of the Australian Institute of Architects (NSW Chapter). The multidisciplinary group formed and galvanised around the NSW Government legislation of 1945 and provided expert commentary on the County Cumberland Plan. Planners began to join the professional cohort of local government and like engineers have since become an integral part of its operation.

The next major wave of functional change within Councils occurred during the 1970s in response to growing calls for increased community participation and environmental protection. Green bans and grass-root campaigns in urban areas ultimately persuaded the NSW Government to review outdated planning legislation.

In 1977 the NSW Heritage Act was introduced and part 12A of the Local Government Act was replaced by the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act in 1979 (EP&A Act). Council planning functions became more sharply focussed on environmental impact and with this, considerations of heritage and biodiversity came into play.

This brought new professionals into local government "with environmental scientists and/or conservation officers joining the professional Council echelons" during the 1990s (Keen et al., 1994, and Taske 1992 in Kelly, 2011, p. 9). Political leadership during the 1990s also brought architecture and urban design into focus for the City of Sydney, NSW's oldest and largest Council (further described in Part 3, Section C).

Ongoing regulatory reform and additional reporting requirements have continued to enlarge local government responsibilities and increase pressure on Councils to deliver more with less.

"Cost shifting" – where some of the state's requirements are initially paid for, then funding removed and the function retained – has become a significant issue for local government (LG NSW, 2018). Ever-tightening fiscal management has in turn influenced local government's

professional cohort, resulting in “more sophisticated management activity” (Kelly, 2011, p. 10).

Some commentators fear the combination of financial pressures and managerial interests come at the expense of its community services and environmental management responsibilities (Munro, 1997, Jones 1993, Marshall et al. 1999, in Kelly 2011, p. 12). Perhaps as a consequence, local government has had to become more enterprising, given its reliance on its own revenue.

Led by the NSW Government, significant change over the past 30 years have shaped the contemporary functions and authority of local government. Milestones over this period include:

- 1988 passing of the City of Sydney Act, giving the CBD a higher rate base and level of autonomy;
- 1993 revision of the LGA Act, expanding the ability of Councils to deliver place-specific services;
- 2004 introduction of the Building Sustainability Index (BASIX);
- 2006 introduction of standardised local environment plan (LEP) for all Councils;
- 2009 requirement to for an integrated Community Strategic Plan (CSP);
- 2009 introduction of Independent Planning Panels to determine certain developments over \$5 million and regionally significant development over \$30 million;
- 2014 ‘Fit for the Future’ program which led to many Councils amalgamating throughout 2015-17.

While these reforms were designed to improve the functioning of local government, the associated obligations and ongoing change management diverted resources from local responsibilities. In some cases (such as the standardised Local Environment Plan), this made a place-based approach more challenging for Councils to achieve.

Two more recent pieces of NSW legislation are noteworthy for their potential to impact and influence local government over the next decade:

- 2018 update to the EP&A Act, which increased community participation in the planning process, and recognised (for the first time) Aboriginal Cultural Heritage, good design and amenity as objects of the Act (EPA Act 1979, 1.3), and
- The draft Design and Place SEPP, embedding Connecting with Country and good design into legislation.

While the draft SEPP was controversially discontinued (akin to legislative changes of 1943), it did serve to galvanise NSW urban designers to form the Urban Design Association (UDA) in 2022. Many of these legislative changes were championed by the NSW Government Architect (GA NSW), whose relationship and role in government has also shifted in recent years from design implementation to policy and advocacy.

C. Community perceptions of local government

Local government is the third tier of government in Australia, and while it is not constitutionally recognised, it has a significant impact on people’s day-to-day lives.

“Local governments matter because of their role as ‘place-shapers’ and their importance in meeting the needs that drive people’s attachment to, and satisfaction with, the areas in which they live.”

(Ryan et al., 2015, p. ii)

In 2015 the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government at the UTS Centre for Local Government released a major social research study investigating ‘why local government matters’ (Ryan et al., 2015). The research aim was to gather community attitudes towards local government and rectify major gaps in empirical evidence to better understand and inform the sector.

A key concept underpinning the study was that place attachment is an important emotional and psychological bond between people, personal identity and place. A key area of enquiry was “local government’s role as a place shaper and its importance in meeting the needs of citizens that drive attachment and satisfaction with the area in which they live.” (Ryan et al., 2015, p. 11). Key findings from the study were that Australians:

- Feel strong emotional connections to their local area which are linked to their personal identity and sense of wellbeing;
- Want to be involved in decisions about their local area;
- Think local government is best placed to make local decisions but also want all tiers of government to work together;
- Want more than basic government services and see ‘planning for the future’ as one of government’s most important roles;
- Are generally less satisfied with the local economy and infrastructure than local services.

Importantly, the researchers noted that people’s expectations of local government are shaped by the role of local government in their local area (Ryan et al., 2015, p. iii), with only “a surprisingly small degree” of variation in people’s views based on political affiliation (Ryan et al., 2015, p. ii).

D. Design governance: an overview

In 2016 Matthew Carmona, a professor of Planning and Urban Design at University of College London (UCL) Bartlett School of Planning, UK, theorised a new urban design sub-field known as “design governance”, which he defined as:

“The process of [government] intervention in the means and processes of designing the built environment in order to shape both processes and outcomes in a defined public interest.” (Carmona, 2016)

He postulates the driver for the field being “rooted in the sub-standard quality of many of our urban areas” (Carmona, 2016, p. 23) and defines four types of design quality which design governance could be seeking to achieve – aesthetic, project, place and process – summarised in Table 1, below.

Table 1. Design quality measures for design governance
Source: *Aspects of design quality, Caroma, 2016*

Design quality measure	Description
Aesthetic <i>Does it look good?</i>	An artistic, visual and/or aesthetic based assessment. “The most limited conceptualisation of design, but often the headline”. (Carmona, 2016, p. 6)
Project <i>Does it look good and perform well?</i>	An object-based assessment on build quality, fit for purpose and attractiveness. Soundly built, fit for purpose and attractive. Focuses on individual elements (eg. a building, bridge, street furniture) in isolation.
Place <i>Does it look good, perform well, and respond appropriately to changing context?</i>	An assessment of the project and its response to place. Considers both the whole and the parts and how they interact. Incorporates broader and more complex considerations of place regarding use, activity, resource, and physical components.
Process <i>How was the process shaped? Was it integrated and appropriate? Would it set a valid precedent?</i>	An assessment which encompasses the process – how design is shaped, by whom, when and why – as well as the outcome.

Carmona describes the challenge of design being limited to considerations of visual appearance. “Discussion of design will immediately raise issues of visual appearance in many minds. [...] Yet [...] quality in the built environment is not just a visual concern, as even the most visually chaotic of city spaces can work in a whole host of other ways: they may be comfortable, engaging, safe, social, efficient, sustainable and so forth. Even in aesthetic terms, what for one person may be a satisfying visual harmony, for another may be simply boring.” (Carmona, 2016, p. 6).

While aesthetic quality cannot be abandoned, limiting design or designers to the realm of aesthetic consideration is a significant issue and misconception about the relevance of design (refer Part 4.). Design encompasses both the shape of the public realm and the act of shaping the public realm so it works better – the outcome or product of design, and the process of designing.

There is nothing new about governments intervening in design and Carmona lists several motivations for this (Carmona, 2016, p. 3):

- Welfare – protecting the public from health and safety concerns;
- Functional – ensuring design is efficient and fit for purpose;
- Economic – stimulating local growth which can occur as a result of well-designed environments;
- Projection – projecting a particular image of a place to encourage investment, attract people and/or establish a clear identity;
- Fairness – to ensure private interests do not unduly impact public interests including considerations of universal accessibility and social inclusiveness;
- Protection – conservation and/or enhancement of important places – historic, environmental;
- Societal – increasing liveability, improved amenity, civic pride, crime reduction, inclusion, health;
- Environmental – ensuring built environment is adaptive, responsive, energy efficiency, public transport, mix and intensity of use, greening;
- Aesthetic – visual considerations and the creation of beauty, often considered subjective.

While Carmona lists these as state motivations for design governance, in an Australian context, these issues cross terrain applicable to both state and local government, highlighting the fact that design is a multidisciplinary, cross-functional activity that requires designers to consider, integrate and respond to numerous factors including jurisdiction. This is particularly pertinent when practicing in the public realm.

Given that scale of design variance – from state-wide to city, town-centres, precinct, street, site or individual building sites – Carmona notes that design governance should ideally operate in an ongoing way as a responsibility of government, in the public interest, through multiple processes of design.

Carmona describes interventions in the design process as a type of regulation, achieved with formal and informal tools that shape behaviour by ‘controlling’, ‘incentivising’ and ‘guiding’ design processes. The more successful informal tools are at ‘incentivising’ and ‘guiding’ design, the less prescriptive the formal tools of ‘control’ need to be.

Guidance can be direct or indirect. Indirect modes focus on shaping the decision-making environment, while direct modes target specific projects and sites. Incentives can be process-driven (trade-offs) or outcome-focussed (financial). Controls can be development or construction-related depending on the government activity, however include legal contracts or statutory systems.

Individual ‘guidance’, ‘incentive’ and ‘control’ interventions can be used separately or in unison to achieve the desired outcome.

Table 2. Summary of guidance, incentive and control tools used in design governance

Source: Carmona, 2017, p. 7, p. 12, p. 15

Guidance	Indirect	Direct (area or site-specific)
Prescriptive	Design standards	Design codes
Performance-based	Design policy	Design frameworks
Incentive	Process Oriented	Outcome focussed
Government contribution	Subsidy	Direct investment
Government encouragement	Process management	Bonuses
Control	Development Related	Construction Oriented
Contribution	Developer contribution	Asset handover/ adoption
Authorisation	Development consent	Certification

Key considerations for effective design governance include:

- Understanding the design process;
- Understanding the governance framework;
- Knowing which design governance tools to use where and when;
- Ability to monitor and evaluate design outputs, adjust process and adapt degree of intervention needed in an ongoing way;
- Striking the appropriate ‘regulatory’ balance to ‘frame’ not ‘dictate’ design outcomes.

Tiesdell and Allmendinger (2005) argue that the way different tools are used will impact the behaviour of different participants in the development process and therefore “the public sector also make some actions more likely than others,” (Tiesdell & Allmendinger 2005 in Carmona 2017, p. 4), further suggesting “there is little point in having sophisticated governance infrastructure if those tasked with its operation lack the competence, confidence, information, alliances or resources to manage it effectively”.

“Government functions with a direct impact on how urban areas are shaped should be operated by appropriately skilled staff in the clear knowledge of how their decisions will impact on local place.”

—Jonathan Barnett (1974) *Architectural Record Books*

Carmona cites Barnett’s seminal 1974 book, *Urban Design as Public Policy*: “His call for design influence and expertise to sit as an integral part of the formal functions of urban authorities is a powerful one and expresses a need that is just as significant today as it was 40 years ago: that government functions with a direct impact on how urban areas are shaped should be operated by appropriately skilled staff in the clear knowledge of how their decisions will impact on local place. The fact that often this does not happen has already been implicated in why we continue to create sub-standard places.” (Carmona, 2016, p. 21)

The tendency to rely on policy and regulation to control outcomes is contemporary critique of planning processes (Carmona, 2016, p. 21) and potentially a symptom of this skills deficit. Given the complex environment design governance occurs in today, a maze of overlapping and competing interests of sustainability, heritage, densification and growth of cities, housing affordability, local character, liveability, economic prosperity and urban identity – now more than ever is the time to reflect on the importance and deployment of design skills within government.

E. The similarities, differences and overlaps between disciplines

This study focuses on the contribution that can be made to local government by architects, landscape architects and urban designers. For ease, we refer to all three as designers. Engineers are also designers, however their skills, focus and training differ, as do those of planners, who also work alongside urban designers and architects.

Each has an interest in achieving quality public domain outcomes, however their skills, training and capabilities prepare them for a different role and contribution.

NSW design policy (GA NSW, 2017 p. 33) and design governance literature points to the distinct need for the skillsets of architects, landscape architects and urban designers (Carmona, 2016 and 2017, Freestone 2018). In the broadest sense, built environment design professionals are trained to understand, define and adjust spatial frameworks. They look at how everything interacts and combines in a physical and spatial way, not just how it looks.

Architects generally specialise in the design and arrangement of built form, landscape architects look at the overall spatial landscape including the interface between built and natural environments (streets, public and open spaces). Urban Designers focus on how both these disciplines (and others) come together, often at the larger city or precinct scale.

Designers fundamentally look at how places physically and spatially function across scales and are trained to understand the impact of different interventions. Good design aims to create productive sustainable and liveable places for people and by arranging how different components of the built and natural environments come together spatially.

Planners, like designers, are trained on a broad range of issues, however within councils their specialty is preparing and administering strategic planning and development assessment frameworks. They are trained to understand basic building, public domain and urban design principles, however their specialty is the legislative frameworks they operate within.

While some planners have a design or architecture background, those who don’t may have difficulty understanding how designers work or what they are trying to achieve. Not knowing how and why something is created makes it challenging for a planner to provide design advice, and is also why planning frameworks have unintended design consequences.

Once the spatial intent for a place has been agreed, planners can work alongside design colleagues codifying this into the legislative and regulatory frameworks within which councils operate. Development assessment planners can also benefit from design advice when it comes to specific development proposals in providing advice to applicants. One of the key design governance challenges – balancing prescription with flexibility (Carmona, 2016) – can be much more challenging to administer for a planner than a designer.

Engineers are also design trained and understand the design process, however their training is focussed on specific areas of technical knowledge rather than the overarching/combined spatial context in which their work comes together.

As a result, Councils may have traffic engineers, hydraulic/drainage engineers, flood engineers, flood risk engineers, environmental engineers, civil design engineers, mechanical engineers, etc, all of whom have specialist knowledge in these fields. Each of these engineering disciplines can work side by side within their areas of expertise addressing individual issues and problems related to their knowledge areas on a street or public space. However it is most likely to be architects, landscape architects or urban designers who will see important areas of confluence or conflict in advance.

All built environment projects require a multidisciplinary team that includes planners, designers and engineers. In most cases the designer – typically an architect or landscape architect – will be the lead consultant to coordinate and integrate the work of the other disciplines to achieve good design outcomes for Councils and their communities.



Woodcroft Community in Blacktown City Council. Image: Alex Niass, courtesy Carterwilliamson

PART 3. WHY DESIGN SKILLS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTER

A. Integrated approach to problem solving

Place-based approaches are collaborative, focus on partnerships, shared custodianship and have a geographic focus. They are also considered foundational in addressing many complex social and environmental challenges. As local government organisations are place-based, they can harness local knowledge and take a place-based approach in delivering services to their communities. It is the collective local knowledge of Councils that make them best placed to make local decisions.

However, Councils are typically organised by functional area rather than place (refer Part 4, Section A), so while a member of the community may not understand why (for example) the same people are notified separately about three separate Council initiatives on the same street, it makes sense when you realise that the three initiatives might originate from three different departments within Council (eg: tree planting, kerbs and gutters and public art).

“It’s vital to integrate the various elements of design because the outcome – the urban environment – is an integrated system. We need to work collaboratively to get all the inputs right.”

—Kerry Robinson OAM, CEO, Blacktown City Council

This example illustrates the challenge which can occur at all scales within a Council – from having separate social, environmental and economic planning strategies to maintenance programs for individual engineering asset classes such as kerbs and gutters, footpaths, roads etc. Within most Councils, the ‘place’ within the organisation where these various functions come together is at the executive level.

“I absolutely understand the way people with a design capability and mindset can solve problems. It’s people working together that play off each other and improve as a consequence of asking questions and challenging each other.”

—Monica Barone PSM, CEO, City of Sydney Council

Local government also sits at the interface between numerous overlapping issues which require a connected approach. CEOs and GMs interviewed for this study were asked about current focus areas, and their responses included big-picture issues across multiple functional areas that express themselves differently across place and scale. Issues cited most frequently are:

1. The importance of creating great places that reflect community values;
2. Equity and affordability;
3. Climate change, impacts and resilience;
4. Challenge and opportunity of growth and change;
5. Supporting local centre vibrancy and renewing public infrastructure;
6. Engaging with First Nations communities, cultural heritage and values;
7. Creating an attractive proposition for investment, bolstering brand and civic pride;
8. Working collaboratively with the State Government;
9. Ensuring good governance and financial sustainability.

Designers in government can play a leadership role in bringing many of these overlapping issues together, with best practice examples illustrated in Case Studies 1–8 on the following pages.

Several of the focus areas raised include complex challenges (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007) that require adaptive leadership across Council. An adaptive leadership style recognises that no one expert knows the solution, its definition changes over time and requires a space being created where different stakeholders can come together, challenge one another, and explore different solutions (Heifetz and Laurie, 1997).

Holistic rather than linear thinking is needed to grasp the interrelationship of factors at play “there is an ever-present danger in handling wicked issues that they are handled too narrowly” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007 p.11). For ‘adaptive’, ‘complex’ or ‘wicked’ problems, an over reliance on technical skills can obscure the challenge (Snowden and Boone, 2007).

Flexibility, adaptability, and ability to adjust direction over time are considered necessary. An approach

suggested for the public sector is to “blur the traditional distinction” between policy development and program implementation (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007 p. 14). Design thinking is seen as a helpful way of approaching complex problems as it allows ongoing experimentation, iteration and adjustment.

Design trained professionals within local government – such as architects, landscape architects and urban designers – are trained to approach their work within the natural and built environment through the lens of design thinking. Interviews with designers suggest this skill is not fully recognised as a strength that they bring to local government and could be used more broadly, given it is a tool taught in many business schools to stimulate creativity and innovation. One designer interviewed reflected on the value of these skills, saying:

“By training, designers are incredibly agile, in terms of thinking about how things can be configured and pieced together and what relationships can be set up and what’s a beneficial relationship and what’s not.

“Design thinking skills are a high value add for any organisation because they either give you a better outcome or help you arrive at a better outcome much sooner. They also give you the ability to recognise a good outcome when someone else sits it in front of you.”

(Designer 3)

The combination of design-thinking and design skills in built environment disciplines mean designers bring valuable skills to Council’s place management. Undertaking site analysis, drawing out social, cultural, environmental and economic factors, and embedding this knowledge into an integrated design response, is a key aspect of an architect, landscape architect or urban designers training.


As design work comes together in place it can be a vehicle for addressing a variety of Council objectives in an integrated way. The Maitland Riverbank and Levee Case Study is a tangible example of this. While this report does not suggest designers can replace other disciplines, through the lens of specific place-based projects they can play a key adaptive leadership role in seeing the ‘big picture’, facilitating cross-functional conversations about specific place-based objectives and challenging traditional approaches.

In addition to integrated design responses to places, these skills are also of assistance within organisations. This was expressed in different ways through CEO and GM interviews, some of which are quoted here.


CASE STUDY 1. Creating great places that reflect community values

Eora Journey, Sydney	Critical role that designers in government play
<p>A program of public art installations (temporary and permanent) across central Sydney responding to a request by more than 200 members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community as part of the Sustainable Sydney 2030 plan. Part of the City Art public art program, it is underpinned by First Nations curators, the program involved careful design, brief writing, procurement, project and public art management as well as ongoing input from City of Sydney's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Panel.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work with Council colleagues to translate community values into the design of places. - Create visual communications to engage with the community on planning and design frameworks. - Co-create ideas at the big-picture scale or for individual places – a street, public space, public building. - Understand proposals by others and advocate for local interests when working with State Government agencies, developers and/or external designers.
Images: courtesy City of Sydney Council	
	


CASE STUDY 2. Equity and affordability

Bathers Way, Newcastle	Critical role that designers in government play
<p>A proposal to connect public bathing spots along a 6-kilometre foreshore walking and cycle route in the City of Newcastle. The designers' vision to connect and make more accessible these well-loved public bathing spots, recreational areas, heritage and cultural landscapes, attracted flow-on investment to the waters edge, including traffic calming measures to help realise the long-term plan to open the foreshore up to the public.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review and make recommendations on the design of third-party proposals. - Champion good design outcomes in Council projects. - Advocate for changes to streets, community buildings and public places to improve design, address local needs, and ensure accessibility to all.
Image: courtesy City of Newcastle Council	
 <p>Public Bathing locations Bogey Hole Soldiers Baths Cowrie Hole Ocean Baths Merewether Baths</p>	


CASE STUDY 3. Climate change, impact and resilience

City of Parramatta River Strategy	Critical role that designers in government play
<p>This overarching plan for Parramatta's City River corridor connects the city back to its river, improves pedestrian and cycle links into the precinct and improves public spaces along the river corridor. Parramatta is subject to flooding and embedded in the strategy are precinct evacuation routes, flood levels considerations and ideas to improve water quality. These are further developed through the City River Program of capital projects along the corridor including the design of the Escarpment Boardwalk and Charles Street Square.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Help create a more resilient built and natural environment, across scales (precincts, streets, open spaces, buildings) through embedding responses in policy, planning, process, and projects. - Inform place-specific controls and guidelines for precincts, buildings, and the public domain to ensure they address key issues (energy, water, urban heat, flooding, biodiversity etc) as well as addressing place-based challenges which are intersectional. - Embed resilience into the way community facilities and public spaces are designed through effective brief writing and design management of consultants.
Images: courtesy City of Parramatta Council	
	


CASE STUDY 4. Challenge/opportunity of growth and change

Liverpool City Centre Public domain Master Plan	Critical role that designers in government play
<p>Consolidates the ambition of different government jurisdictions into a 10-year, integrated, place-specific plan for the structure of public space in Liverpool's city centre. It outlines priority projects and interventions that can be delivered by Council or third parties, providing a clear framework for delivery, advice, and investment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leverage the opportunities offered by growth to improve the design of places at multiple scales and as growth occurs. - Prepare an overarching vision that communicates direction to third parties and attracts Council partnerships and investment.
Image: courtesy Liverpool City Council	
	

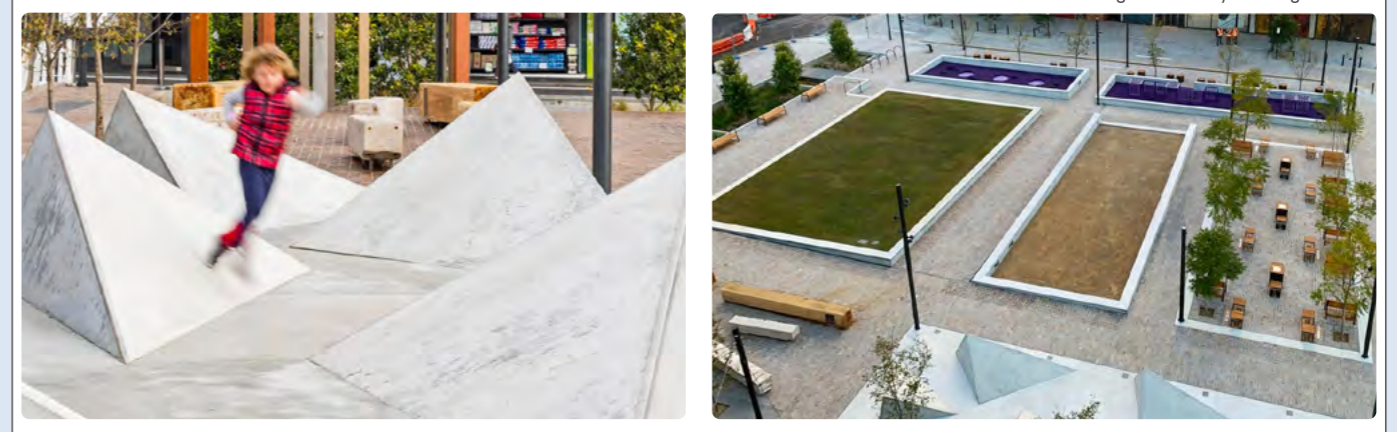
CASE STUDY 5. Supporting local centre vibrancy and renewing public infrastructure

Warrawong District Library and Community Centre	Critical role that designers in government play
<p>A capital works project currently in design at Wollongong City Council. The project was identified in the Warrawong Town Centre Master Plan, bringing together a variety of social and community services for the local area and catalysing renewal of the local precinct through the provision of a high-quality public building and adjoining public spaces for community use.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Work with planners, engagement professionals and engineers to prepare and renew town centre plans and make recommendations for improvements to local places and the renewal of public infrastructure at a strategic design level. – Lead project and design management of public domain and community building projects, site assessment, writing functional and performance briefs and procure external design consultants. – Manage and evaluate the work of external designers ensuring design decisions align with stakeholder and community needs.
<p>Images: courtesy FJC Studio</p>	
	

CASE STUDY 6. Engaging with First Nations communities, cultural heritage and values

Woollahra Aboriginal Heritage Study	Critical role that designers in government play
<p>An initiative to identify, record and protect significant Aboriginal Cultural Heritage sites within the Woollahra LGA. The study involved research by a local historian, a multidisciplinary Council team, input from a range of First Nations and State Government stakeholders, site inspections across public and private property and broader public engagement. It resulted in the discovery of new sites, sensitivity mapping, informed planning controls, the update of existing listings and heritage management across Council.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lead both policy and capital projects that seek to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander views, cultural heritage, and values, both within planning frameworks and in the design of places. – Work with colleagues across Council – including Aboriginal liaison officers or leaders on-co-creation exercises with communities – identifying design approaches to important sites, embedding culture into external design briefs. – Review and provide advice on proposals to ensure high quality design outcomes are achieved
<p>Section of Woollahra LGA and its suburbs. Image: courtesy Woollahra Municipal Council</p>	
	

CASE STUDY 7. Creating an attractive proposition for investment and bolstering civic pride

Warwick Lanes Precinct, Blacktown	Critical role that designers in government play
<p>The redevelopment of Warwick Lanes in the Blacktown City Centre is an important transformational project for Blacktown City Council. It reimagines an on-grade car parking as a new public space and civic heart, with new streets, laneways, development sites and publicly owned commercial and retail buildings able to be leased by Council towards financial goals and other public objectives. The attraction of Australian Catholic University to the precinct and the delivery of high-quality buildings and public spaces has created a popular precinct for community gatherings and future investment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Collaborate with others in Council to consider land and property assets and how these might be leveraged to achieve public ambitions through the delivery of new or renewed public buildings and facilities, streets, laneways and open space. – Clarify Council and community ambitions and objectives by working through the feasibility of different design options before engaging external architects. – Increase civic pride and attract investment by advocating for good design and championing its implementation.
<p>Images: courtesy McGregor Coxall</p>	
	

CASE STUDY 8. Working collaboratively across state and local authorities

Parramatta Ways	Critical role that designers in government play
<p>A pilot project of the Green Grid focussed on the Parramatta LGA investigating how a NSW policy initiative – Greener Places – could be implemented locally. The City of Parramatta initiative reflected state ambitions to reduce urban heat, increase tree canopy cover, provide ecological habitat, connect open spaces and waterways and improve local amenity. The local strategy identified priority corridors which in turn informed the NSW Government’s Parramatta Light Rail (PLR) tree offset strategy, enabling local neighbourhood planting to realise the ambitions of both state and local government agencies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Share a commitment to good design and working in the public interest, and – Can collaborate across jurisdictions to achieve common objectives at different scales and through design governance mechanisms.
<p>Plantings undertaken as part of the Parramatta Light Rail Tree Offset Strategy. Image: courtesy Transport for NSW</p>	
	

Monica Barone PSM (CEO, City of Sydney Council) recognised the important role designers played in working together to solve City problems. David Farmer (CEO, Central Coast Council) spoke of the positive experience he had with place-based town centre plans pulling together different functions of Council – “we had this team that people wanted to play with, because they were doing cool things and you could append yourself to that work”.

Bryan Hynes (former acting CEO City of Parramatta Council) spoke of the way design-led projects in the Parramatta CBD integrated the objectives of various teams across Council “Civic Link is a great example – where strategically looking at that and saying we’re going to drive that green spine to connect transport throughout the city and deal with urban heat and connect the [Powerhouse] Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences and the river to the city.”

Kerry Robinson OAM (CEO, Blacktown City Council) noted the design skillset was central to organisational changes he brought in at Blacktown to improve collaboration and achieve integrated design outcomes.

When designers interviewed for this study were asked about their practice in local government, these skills were described as both a contribution and challenge. One designer reflected:

“We’re much better at seeing the big picture, seeing all these different parts that need to come together. Council is full of technical specialists who have one job to do and they do it and pass it on to someone else. A lot of the time our job is to get everyone in the room and talk about [whether] we’re even doing the right project.”

(Designer 4)

Another designer working in Council reflected:

“I feel like what designers bring is [the ability to] operate through the lens of space and place and in that sense are making connections across teams within Council and bringing pieces of place together – assets and infrastructure, social infrastructure strategy, the location of community buildings or distribution of parks or playgrounds. We have a system that’s so compartmentalised, the unwritten part of the job is re-knitting all of those contributors back together.[...] There is the spatial complexity of creating place, but there’s also the complexity of the organisation and it’s probably the harder one to read. I’ve always felt like our job is being integrators. And then bringing in the community, of course.” (Designer 2)

One designer expressed the challenge which comes from being a minority discipline within Council asking hard questions.

“I think we are rufflers in a lot of circumstances, and we need to be really careful not to be too annoying and get ignored. Where I get traction is when I use that critical thinking brain that design trained us for, to lead people on a thought journey to help them see [what I see]. Because there aren’t many of us you really see that you think differently about things. A lot of that comes from our design training, because that’s how we were always taught to think.” (Designer 4).

B. Places need vision, direction and design leadership

One of the key contributions Chief Executives and General Managers interviewed saw designers making to local government was their ability to capture the imagination, articulate what could be possible and describe a plausible future that people could engage with in a positive way. This might be for a whole precinct, building, street, park or public space.

The designers interviewed spoke about the need for joined-up thinking to guide the future of places and spaces. The reasons given related to low levels of spatial awareness, the tendency of different disciplines to focus on roles in the process at different scales (broadly strategic planners – big picture, development assessment planners – compliance, engineers – detail) and the segmentation of Council functions.

This was felt to result in a poor appreciation of how various efforts came together physically in place and a lack of overarching direction. Within this context designers can lead the shaping of places by envisaging both the outcome and the process of arriving at that outcome in collaboration with other disciplines.

“At a very basic level we’re able to tell a story about what better would look like and articulate why. So maybe that community centre that we built 20 years ago, which may host the local ballet class and give out meals, could have done a lot more. We’re able to define a problem and we’re also able to paint a picture of what might be better. So there’s a leadership role in terms of vision.” (Designer 4).

When designers lead visioning exercises from within Council they can be informed by a deep understanding of the qualities of a place, the values of the community, the ambitions and objectives of the organisation and the existing environmental context. The way designers achieve this draws on their:

- Creativity and technical training in analysing, ideating, conceptualising and implementing proposals for places;
- Visual communication and spatial thinking abilities;
- Experience working with and across different stakeholder groups and disciplines.

Crucially, design skills and training enable a response to issues at different scales – from planning objectives set at the LGA/City scale to localised flooding at the detailed scale, and throughout the process from idea generation to implementation or delivery.

This strength expressed itself in a variety of ways through study interviews. Some of the CEOs spoke about the important role designers already play, others spoke to the need. Examples of how design leadership manifests or is needed in different places is provided below.

Translators, expressing community vision and values in place

Monica Barone PSM, CEO, City of Sydney Council, articulated the role design professionals had played in Sydney 2030 and Sydney 2030–2050 continuing the vision, the key strategic document guiding the City of Sydney towards a ‘green’, ‘global’ and ‘connected’ city. She described the process of preparing the vision in consultation with the community, as a process of listening, understanding and articulating community values; expressing these values through Council policy and controls and then allowing the design teams to express these values in place.

“When we start work with the community, we say what is it that you value? And then we develop a plan that shows people how we will maintain or enhance what they value.”

Monica Barone PSM, CEO, City of Sydney Council

“We convert it from a series of emotions and descriptions and we use our design professionals to express it as a place. And a big part of that is the physical place because that’s what resonates for people. When people see it, they can understand so much more than if you just talk about it or describe it. Most of us will understand a picture much more than we will understand words.”

Promoters, communicating how places could be improved with tangible examples

David Farmer CEO, Central Coast Council, spoke about the challenge of increasing density within an area of natural beauty but (generally) low quality buildings and urban form developed around car dependency. He saw the opportunity for redevelopment to create “vibrant towns and villages that show good urban form while preserving our natural areas and bushland – improving the character of the area and re-injecting some of the character it might have had when private transport options were less viable or less available.”

He also pointed to the challenge of an area with few good design examples that people could relate to and a belief that “public transport is only for the poor”. Farmer

identified a need for “smart growth and increasing density in a way that creates good models to encourage other people that its not a bad thing”. He saw the need, initially for designers to be “almost missionaries, to create a mindset” operating “at that very broad level telling people what things can look like, and how it can be, and explaining to them at that real leadership level”. Then the need “to model good design, to show areas where design, good design has worked, and ideally have some good examples locally”.

Co-creators, bringing new ideas to life within Council and with the community

Greg Doyle CEO, Wollongong, discussed the need for designers to be onboarded early in the formulation of ideas, at the conceptual stage of projects – “with the community” – recognising their ability “to see opportunity” and bring things to life; “you can walk in parts of the city now that you never could and they are fully accessible. We did a shared pathway between two of our beaches which was less than 1,100 width and now I could just about land a 747 there. And everyone said, why are we designing that? And the designer said to me, you build it and seriously, they’ll come. And they have.”

Doyle also describes how these skills can tangibly unite Council “we’ve got some amazing boardwalks in the city that were achieved on the basis that the designers were able to support that reality. I got a video from a parent of a 17-year-old person who lives with significant disability saying it’s the first time they’ve had their feet wet. Because they were able to get down on this ramp onto a rock platform and put their foot in a rock pool. So I flick that around to everyone in the organisation and say, that’s the reason we’re here. Whether you’re the person that put the form work down or you’re the designer or you’re the person that cleans the concrete at night or whatever it is. That’s why we’re here. And that’s part of what I think designers bring. They bring things to life.”

Advocates, lifting existing standards, community expectations and civic pride

Kerry Robinson CEO, Blacktown City Council, spoke passionately about the role he saw designers playing in lifting quality, community aspirations and civic pride as part of a broader agenda to change perceptions of Blacktown. From leadership of transformational, city-shaping projects to world-class community amenities at the neighbourhood level, Robinson described his deliberate positioning of design at the executive level enabling “transformational projects which are truly changing people’s perceptions of Blacktown,” providing architectural advice “mitigating the worst of some of the poorest developers” and Council projects leading to “far better, quality embellished spaces than we had in the past”.

In this case designers within Council are part of a bigger advocacy agenda – “part of our approach is very deliberately trying to change perceptions of Blacktown

and Western Sydney by delivering quality design that the community deserves. Western Sydney shouldn't be the repository of boxes that have no design merit. And it's about changing perception of Council and demonstrating to the community of Blacktown, the Council cares about them and can deliver quality for them, and it's about changing perceptions of Blacktown in the broader community's mind through good design."

Change-makers, reimagining places and shifting mindsets

Bryan Hynes (former Acting CEO, City of Parramatta Council) described design excellence as a focus of Council noting that the City "was a construction site" and few places would be experiencing the level of change currently occurring in the Parramatta City Centre. Bryan described designers within Council lifting the organisation's ambitions, identifying place-based opportunities and championing key strategic projects to reshape the city. This included reimagining engineering infrastructure as experiential as well as functional and influencing others within the organisation to do the same. Bryan cited numerous examples of design leadership across the City, from the Central City Parkway "reclaiming disused land" to provide community facilities to Parramatta Square and the vision to re-engage with the Parramatta River.

C. Good design attracts investment

Good design adds value. This insight has been stated repeatedly by many but bears repeating in the context of this study. In 2000, a UK government agency, the Commission of the Built Environment (CABE), published a study on the social, environmental and economic value of urban design. Its key findings on how urban design adds value are outlined below.

Its study notes the benefits are shared by public authorities, investors, developers, designers (who "benefit because good urban design is crucially dependent on their input"), occupiers, everyday users and society more broadly (CABE, 2000, p. 10).

The NSW Government notes "good design is government policy" underpinned by its integrated design policy, launched in 2017, Better Placed (Government Architect NSW, 2017). This policy resonates with CABE's findings noting the benefits of good design cross many social, environmental, economic and cultural domains, shown in Table 3.

GA NSW outlines how good design can help in responding to "key challenges and directions for NSW, including health, climate resilience, rapidly growing population, changing lifestyles and demographics, infrastructure and urban renewal, providing consistent and timely review of major projects" (GA NSW, pp. 15-16)

"Today well-designed urban spaces are considered a prerequisite for sound economic revitalisation (Gospodini, 2001). The logic is that high-quality design creates places where people desire to live and work, places where businesses desire to operate and places where economic and cultural innovation incubate. It can also strengthen civic pride and identity and provide a sense of satisfaction for residents (Boland, 2017)." (Freestone et al., p. 2)

Table 3. How good urban design adds value

Source: CABE 2000, p. 9

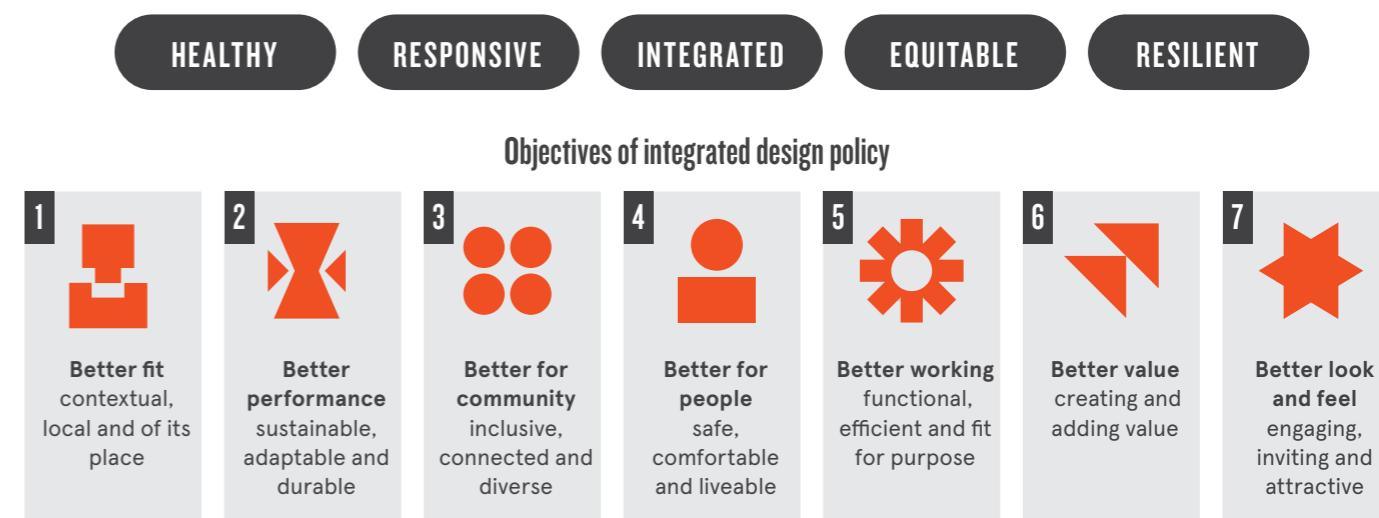
Economic value	Social & environmental value
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Producing high returns on investments (good rental returns and enhanced capital values). - Placing developments above local competition at little cost. - Responding to occupier demand. - Helping to deliver more lettable area (higher densities). - Reducing management, maintenance, energy and security costs. - Contributing to more contented and productive workforces. - Supporting the 'life giving' mixed-use elements in developments. - Creating an urban regeneration and place marketing dividend. - Differentiating places and raising their prestige. - Opening up investment opportunities, raising confidence in development opportunities and attracting grant money. - Reducing the cost to the public purse of rectifying urban design mistakes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creating well connected, inclusive and accessible new places. - Delivering mixed-use environments with a broad range of facilities and amenities available to all. - Delivering development sensitive to its context. - Enhancing the sense of safety and security within and beyond developments. - Returning inaccessible or run down areas and amenities to beneficial public use. - Boosting civic pride and enhancing civic image - Creating more energy efficient and less polluting development. - Revitalising urban heritage.

Within a local government context, there are many examples of how good design adds value across a range of impact areas (refer Figure 4). Local government has key roles to play in upholding good design, both in the delivery of public projects and influencing its delivery by others.

The link between economic impact and design began to gain traction across Central Sydney in the 1980s. In their 2019 book, *Designing the Global City, Design Excellence, Competitions and the Remaking of the Central Sydney*, Freestone et al. track the pre-history of "design excellence". The authors focus on the City of Sydney, and to some extent NSW Government and Commonwealth

Figure 2. A well-designed built environment is ...

Source: Better Placed (GA NSW)



interest in design to the time of the book's publishing.

Embedded in this narrative is the evolution of a City Council from a position of design agnosticism to appreciation and advocacy, including recognition of the "design dividend... a term used to link the private and public benefits to be gained from good architectural and urban design.

"Design dividend denotes the potential for superior architectural design to reap financial rewards for investors and developers on top of what it delivers for users and the wider community."

(Freestone et al., 2019, p.81)

In reading this book on global Sydney, one might assume other councils in metropolitan Sydney or broader NSW were equally cognisant of the impacts of good design, particularly given local government's reliance and need for quality investment, appropriate to local context.

However, this study – including interviews across both CEO and designer cohorts – suggests significant differences in Council's understanding of design and its value. Given interviewees were all drawn from the group of councils who had design teams, those interviewed presumably have greater awareness.

The CEOs interviewed candidly shared where they thought their organisations were at in understanding and implementing good design. Several admitted they were not where they needed to be.

Central Coast Council CEO, David Farmer, was relatively

new to his role, admitting his Council had been through a challenging time and was more focussed on rebuilding.

Greg Doyle, CEO, Wollongong City Council, believed that many Councils were focussed on the basics and wouldn't have the resources to devote to design. He admitted there were "some really obvious examples where we can do better" and Council had to "work really hard on creating culture so everybody understands the enormous value design brings". There were also some positive signs – the design reference committee "going from something 'that I have to do' to something people are embracing" and that investors are also of the view that design is a really important piece."

Bryan Hynes, former Acting CEO, City of Parramatta Council, described that Council as an organisation undergoing transition in its awareness of good design. He discussed the benefits of having designers working alongside planners in the Council tea in evolving the lingering "Asset and Ops functional approach that they would have had 20 years ago, and the important role internal designers had in up-skilling across the organisation." He also referred to the important role in-house designers play in "attracting better architects because they focus more on quality, and are more rigorous in process, pushing applicants to get a much better outcome."

Hynes' background in property has given him insight into the value of design in creating "a competitive point of difference" but noted many local government leaders wouldn't have this level of awareness. "I think that's where a lot of the challenge is. A lot of senior executives don't get it. When we receive submissions, those with design skills can look at the quality and vet them very easily. They speak the same language – architects and designers – and that's really important. Whereas if you've got a planner doing it, they don't look at all the fine grain detail,

for possibilities, or how you can get a different outcome.”

Kerry Robinson OAM, CEO, Blacktown City Council, also came to his position recognising the value of design, having worked in the property development sector for 25 years. For Robinson, the appointment of Bill Tsakalos into the role of City Architect and Director, Transformation – a position on the Executive – has been central to realising Council’s design excellence agenda, noting that some of Council’s traditional functional areas were reorganised to achieve his aims.

“It’s been a long journey, but a very positive one,” says Robinson. “It certainly wasn’t hard to convince Councillors of the need for a City Architect, or what a City Architect could bring. None of us appreciated how important it actually was, but what Bill [Tsakalos] has done with the role is change the emphasis within Council to focus us on more quality. The Councillors are enormously supportive and very happy that we are delivering transformational projects and far higher quality spaces than were delivered in the past.”

Five significant tangible benefits experienced at Blacktown City Council

1. Capacity to act as an ‘informed client’ in commissioning external design consultants.
2. Ability to undertake speculative work for Council land holdings and generate future projects.
3. Establishment of internal design review processes, raising the quality of Council projects.
4. Improved ability to assess and increase design quality from the private sector (including increasing quality of design consultants working in the LGA).
5. Enhanced monitoring of development impacts on natural systems.

As noted by Freestone et al., 2019, design excellence is a key element in the City of Sydney’s strategy and has been championed by successive Lord Mayors since Frank Sartor in the 1990s. The Council’s appreciation and approach to design has evolved over time with expertise building to suit the need.

Punter (2005, p. 43 in Freestone et al., 2019, p. 83) reminds readers of the “flood of ill-conceived, poorly designed, maximum floor space ratio (FSR)-seeking, speculative development proposals” that were occurring in Sydney in the late 1960s, contributing to increased appetite for design.

The dominant planning practice began reinforcing the

need for alternatives since traditional parameters (FSR, zoning) “said little about physical design” (Freestone et al. 2019, p. 116). It wasn’t until the mid 1990s, when Sydney was on the cusp of global attention as host city of the 2000 Olympic Games that real change began being championed. One City of Sydney Councillor was quoted in that study lamenting: “The world was still run by engineers. The Council had no designers at all. All design, including street furniture, street signs, parks, you name it, was done by engineers.” (Councillor 3, in Freestone, 2019, p. 101)

Today, the City of Sydney Council is a recognised advocate, embedding design excellence in everything they do, with current Lord Mayor, Clover Moore, regularly attending the City’s Design Advisory Panel meetings. Council established the Design Advisory Panel in 2007, comprising architects, landscape architects, arts and sustainability experts giving advice on major City projects and significant private developments. The positive impact is a matter of public record. Over the past 16 years, City of Sydney projects have won more than 113 national and international architecture and urban design awards.

In the City of Sydney’s Community Strategic Plan (2022) states that:

“Design excellence is integral to the City’s vision and we have embedded this in our practice, our planning controls, and our projects. “Our Design Advisory Panel has played a major role in raising design standards across the City, while our Public Art Advisory Panel has contributed to a legacy of contemporary public art that enriches our public spaces.” (City of Sydney, *Community Strategic Plan 2022*, p. 7).

While this excerpt focuses on the independent external expertise of the City through its Design Advisory Panel, the emphasis on design excellence is also a key part of the City’s resourcing strategy. The City has built this capacity over time, as Monica Barone PSM, CEO, City of Sydney Council explains.

“We didn’t have it. We had a few designers but it wasn’t dominant like it is now. We built it up over time. But importantly, it’s grown in confidence. And that’s come from delivering quality outcomes, because it’s the doing that builds the confidence.” And having skilled in-house designers to support the City’s vision has been critical to that, says Barone.

“Investors would not trust us unless they were met with a team every bit as good, if not better, than their own. I knew that whoever walked in the door and sat at the table – the architect, planner, drainage engineer, traffic engineer, lawyer – ours was as good as theirs. Meeting as peers.”

—Monica Barone PSM, CEO, City of Sydney Council

The experiences of both Monica Barone PSM and Kerry Robinson OAM reflect the literature’s findings on design governance, that is – “the ultimate aim is for a design governance initiative to make it easier for developers to reach the ‘right’ decisions, and harder for them to reach the ‘wrong’ ones” (Freestone et al., 2019, p. 33).

“Usually our answer to well-considered development is ‘yes’, otherwise we wouldn’t get the investment the city needs to be continuously renewed. What we’re seeing now is the kind of partnership between public and private enterprise that you need to make cities great. But it comes down to, when they sit in a meeting, the person across the table has to be as good as they are.”

Entrepreneurial designers within government have also come to this realisation, with one interviewee (Designer 1) describing a public domain strategy and plan which created clarity around Council’s objectives, making it easy for developers to invest.

“It’s been a tool that we can use to get others to deliver work in the public interest that we don’t pay for.

“Often we find developers are quite willing to do the work as long as we can give them clear direction. So we have been able to get public domain work of a higher standard than before [in-house design capacity]. There is a big gap in terms of public funding and its capacity to deliver. So I see this as a huge win for the city overall. Compared to the cost of developing, the cost of having in-house designers is completely negligible when you look at the revenue.”

(Designer 1)

CASE STUDY 9. Maitland Riverbank and Levee

The designers brief – There was a need for a new public toilet in the town centre.

Place-based issues – The river is a source of flooding for the town and surrounding region, the status of Maitland needed to be reinforced as a regional centre, the town had turned its back on its river, the local mall and central retail high street were in economic decline, traffic flow was dominating conversations – cars were seen to equal activity and Council’s traffic engineers were leading the conversation.

The approach – Internal designer presented to Councillors and a community reference group on the benefits of an urban design approach. He proposed broadening the public toilet brief to include re-planning the mall, a new link to the river with design excellence as a key attractor.

The outcome – a reinvigorated mall, a legible link to the river, a river walk and frontage and a new public toilet.

Image: courtesy Maitland City Council



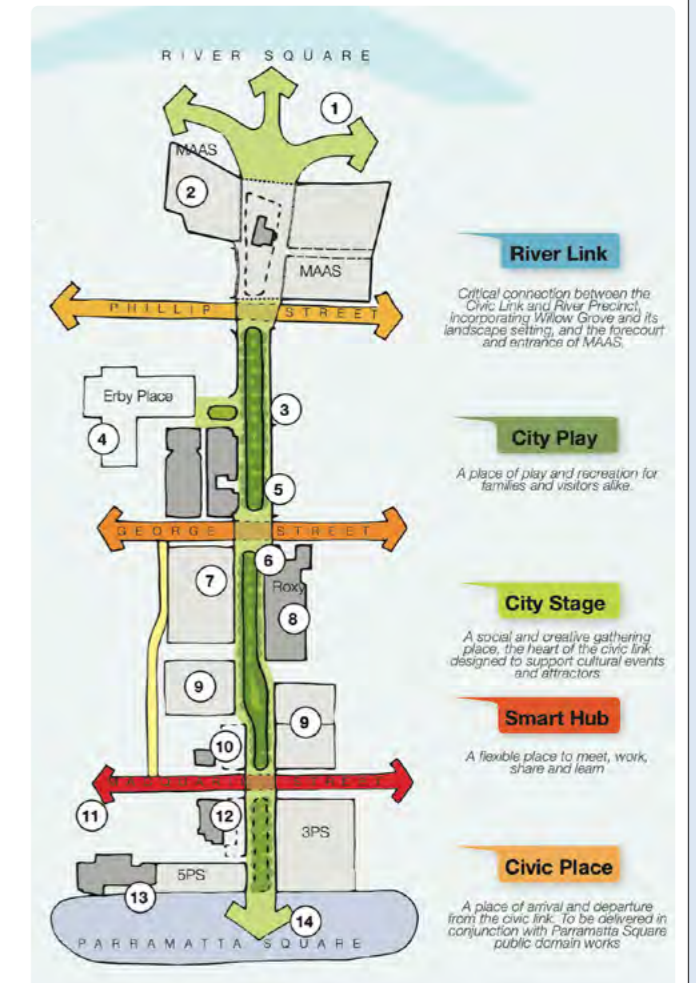
CASE STUDY 10. The Civic Link, Parramatta

The designers initial brief – To provide further detail on the ‘line’ indicating a new lane in the DCP.

Place-based issues – exponential growth and development of CBD, urban heat, significant heritage items nearby, limited public space, need for cultural attractors and better pedestrian links between public transport, Parramatta Square and the river

The approach – Internal designers worked with external designers on a vision and ‘framework plan’ to begin shaping the character of the new link.

Current status – The vision attracted significant State interest and investment – Parramatta Square Light Rail, Parramatta Metro have both been placed on the link and the new Powerhouse Parramatta at its terminus. Designers in Council secured the space through the DCP and continue to work with public and private land owners, authorities and the community to shape the surrounding built form and public domain through State and Local Government capital works and development projects.



Concept design for Civic Link. Image: courtesy City of Parramatta Council



Warwick Lanes Precinct in Blacktown City Council. Image courtesy McGregor Coxall

PART 4. WHERE DESIGN FITS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

A. Function and workforce groups within council

Local government employs around 190,800 people across Australia and 50,225 within NSW. As evident by its history (refer Part 2), disciplines in demand within local government have changed over time. There are approximately 400 different occupations currently working within local government which make it an incredibly diverse, multidisciplinary sector. (ALGA, 2022, p. 10); (ABS Census data, 2021)

Local government services are locally specific and cross numerous functional domains that include, but are not limited to*:

- Infrastructure and property services – buildings, local roads, bridges, footpaths, drainage, waste collection and management, management of property and assets;
- Cultural facilities and services – libraries, art galleries, museums, events;
- Open space and recreational facilities – swimming pools, parks, sports fields, stadium, golf courses, camping grounds and caravan parks;

- Community services such as childcare, aged care, community care and welfare services;
- Planning and development approval services;
- Health and regulatory services – water and food inspection, immunisation, noise control, animal control, building inspections, licensing, certification and enforcement;
- Water and sewerage services;
- Corporate and administrative services.

*Source: ALGA 2018, pp. 9-10

A Council's organisation often reflects the dominant occupation groups within its workforce. Occupational groupings of the typical Council workforce (Ryan and Woods, 2015, p. 236) are shown in Table 4.

Each Council is locally specific, however most Councils would have an internally focussed corporate service and governance section, an externally focussed community service section, a planning and environment section and an engineering and infrastructure (or capital project) delivery section.

Table 4. Australian Local Government Workforce Occupation Groups

Source: Ryan and Woods, 2015, p. 236

Corporate Services and Governance
- Councillor support
- Finance
- Customer service
- Information technology
- Procurement
Engineering & Infrastructure
- Roads & bridges
- Design & architecture
- Waste & sanitation
- Traffic
Human & Community Services
- Community development
- Libraries
- Recreational facilities
- Childcare
Planning & Environment
- Strategic planning
- Regulatory services
- Natural resource management
- Environment and sustainability

B. Roles of designers in Council

The typical role of designers within Councils as shown in Table 5 is a summary of discussions with industry colleagues, case studies and interview data. This list is not definitive or conclusive, but a starting point.

While there are certain types of design intervention that are more likely in local government due to its functions and legislative framework (policy, planning, process or projects), the way designers work is determined by the needs of the place they work within, its community and organisation.

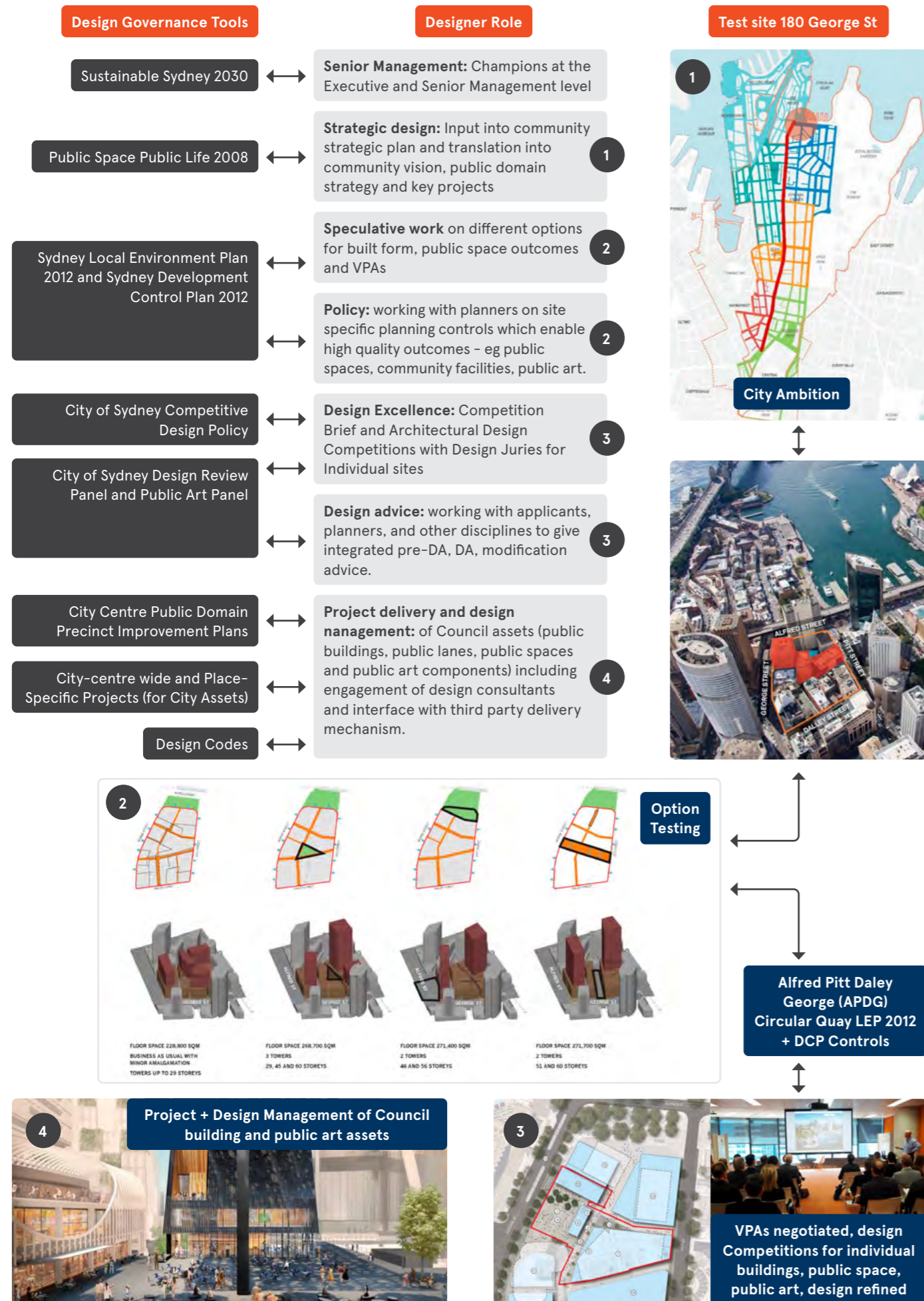
All roles require design leadership (advocating good design outcomes) and partnerships (across Council functions and often with State Government partners or other stakeholders). There is no one-size-fits-all approach to practice, so methods differ, overlap and can be quite inventive. For complex projects, all roles may be required and can be filled by designers in one team or multiple teams.

While the same level of resourcing is unlikely in other local government areas, Figure 3 (next page) illustrates – via a complex capital city case study – the different roles designers can play. In most cases, the responsibilities in the position description of designers in Council will not neatly align with the roles and methods outlined in Table 5. Responsibilities are more likely to

Table 5. Typical design roles and methods in Council

Typical Design Roles What they do	Methods / Process How they do it	Location where they sit in council
Senior management / Design leadership	Champion good design outcomes at executive/senior management level.	Everywhere there is a designer
Strategic design	Preparation of place-based visions, strategies, masterplans, framework and public domain plans.	Strategic Planning (though not exclusively or consistently)
Design policy	Preparation of policy, place and/or site-specific planning controls and guidelines.	Strategy Strategic Planning
Design advice	Providing advice and review of third-party proposals, built form testing, urban design, heritage, architectural and public domain advice including design expertise in court.	Strategic Planning Development Assistance
Design excellence	Preparation of competition briefs and coordinating / participating in design excellence panels (with private sector partners).	Strategic Planning
Project & design management	Scope definition based on internal and external engagement, writing consultant briefs, working with private sector consultants to deliver precinct renewals, public buildings, public spaces (different scales and expertise), project management through to delivery including procurement processes.	Infrastructure / Capital Works delivery Recreation & Open Space Property & Facilities Management
In-house design	Capital project design and documentation for streets, open spaces, public space, buildings.	Infrastructure / Capital Works delivery Recreation & Open Space Property & Community Facilities Management
Speculative place-based work	Speculation on the future of Council owned property (buildings, land, assets) including visioning exercises, strategy, site evaluation and feasibility testing of options.	Strategy Strategic Planning Property & Facilities Management

Figure 3. City of Sydney Council design governance example



Images: courtesy NSW Government Architect's Office; City of Sydney Council

align with a designer's location within Council and its functional area, than an integrated design governance strategy across Council.

Although Carmona (2017) describes a theoretical design governance toolkit drawn from UK experience, all designers within NSW state or local government must work within their legislative framework only using the tools available to them, which are sometimes limited by their position, location and level of influence within Council.

The latter is a challenge for local government agencies wanting to champion good outcomes as design governance tools are most effective when applied consistently and together.

While urban designers, architects and landscape architects have different skill sets, an observation drawn from interviews is that the more designers there are within a Council, the more specialised the skillset can be.

For Councils with limited resources, small design teams with a blend of skills and experiences have been able to support one another and cover broad terrain. Complementing internal skills with external consultant support and an independent design review/excellence/advisory panel is another common strategy. (Refer Part 4, Section E for further discussion on some of the differences between internal and external designers).

Council's planning directorates usually include both strategic planning and development assessment services (typically led by planning professionals) and a separate infrastructure or capital works delivery area (typically led by engineering professionals).

Design-related positions are usually located within one of these two directorates. However as implied by the cross-disciplinary nature of design work, and as illustrated by the various locations listed in Table 5, the work of urban

designers, architects and landscape architects usually straddles numerous functional areas within Council. The challenge of containing design within a notional organisational structure is illustrated in Figure 4.

Various organisational approaches to design are evident in different Council structures. Based on interviews conducted for this study it appears the most common way for architectural, urban design and landscape architectural skills to enter local government is by an individual within Council identifying the need.

The seniority and functional responsibility of this initial design champion also seems to determine its location in the organisation, presumably as they have prepared the business case and/or position description for the role.

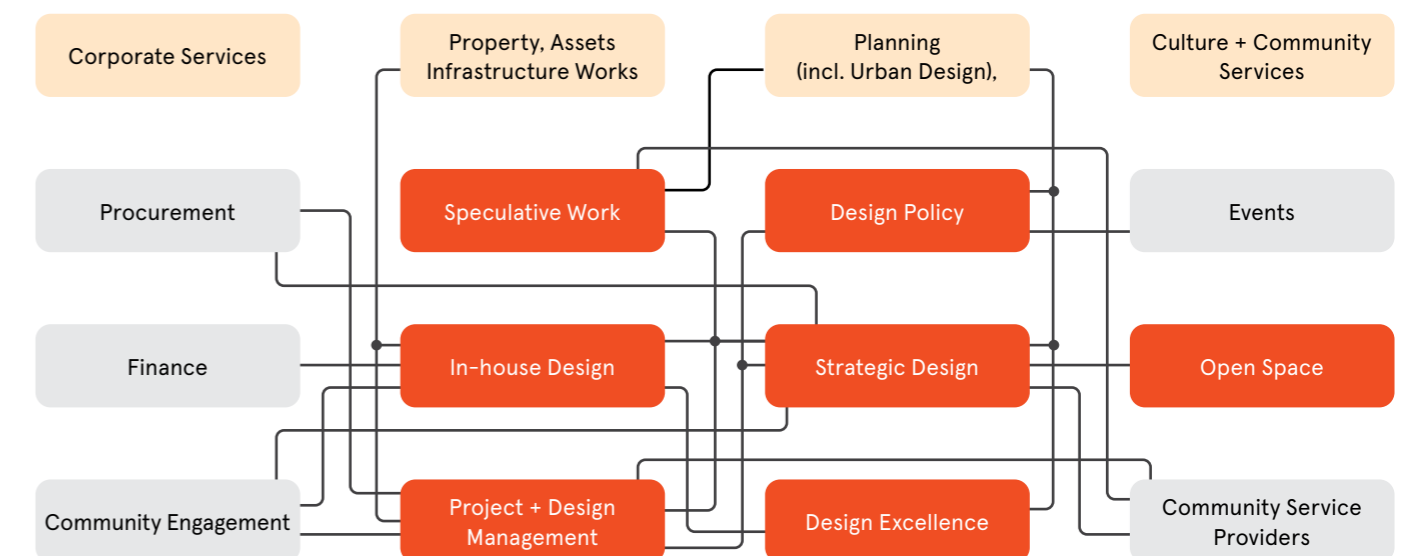
This ad hoc approach has led to some Councils having design-trained staff scattered across the organisation, hidden by titles determined by obscure nomenclature (interviews with Designer 1, Designer 4, Designer 6) without fully understanding or tapping into their design skillset or expertise. This has a number of counterproductive effects.

A dispersed approach minimises organisational understanding of design and the ease of designers supporting one another and working as a team. It would be unusual to find other occupations or disciplines spread across Council in the same way. A corollary is the challenge of reporting into people from other disciplines who may not understand (or misunderstand) the design skill set.

While many occupations within Council report into managers from a different background, our interviews with designers suggest there is a particularly poor understanding of design and the skills of design professionals. This means that the designer's role often incorporates an educational aspect of explaining and

Figure 4. Cross-over between design roles (red) and notional Council directorates

Lines reflect the complex inter-relationship between directorates responsibilities, design roles and broader Council functions.



introducing their skillset, aims and purpose to other disciplines, which senior professionals might not be prepared for and many junior architects, landscape architects and urban designers are not trained for.

The contribution of designers is also limited by their level of influence. Given the cross-functional nature of design work (shown in Table 5), the ability to influence others within the organisation is fundamental to efficacy and efficiency, and difficult to achieve without sufficient seniority or the endorsement of the executive.

All the designers interviewed for this study were senior practitioners with a level of experience and expertise equivalent to a director or principal in private practice. In most cases they were also the most senior design professional within their organisation, however most of their positions were at or below Level 5 seniority (see Figure 5).

The structural challenges for designers leading from the bottom up were not lost on Bryan Hynes (former Acting CEO, City of Parramatta Council). “Unfortunately, they are buried too far down in the organisational chain, and I think that’s got to change.” Hynes points to the example of Graham Jahn, Director of Planning at the City of Sydney Council. “He’s a great example. He’s very senior in the City of Sydney and he gets it. Whereas if you look in most Council structures, can you find a person of Jahn’s ilk and understanding and passion at a senior level? Not very often.”

Figure 5. Notional reporting lines within Council

**Most common level for design leadership*

Level	Notional Title
1	CEO or General Manager
2	Director
3	Senior / Executive Manager
4	Manager
5	Coordinator / Team Leader*
6	Senior Project Officer
7	Project Officer
8	Student

It certainly begs the question question: to what extent might reducing the diversity of council structures improve their ability to produce better design outcomes? Would design governance made clearer, simpler to implement and thus more effective? Could it make for greater transferability of skills and experience within the sector, and clearer relationships between policy, practice and outcomes?

C. Strategic design v. strategic planning

Strategic design and strategic planning are complementary pursuits informed by different skills sets. At one level, strategic design considers the spatial arrangement of a city, town centre or precinct. This includes how individual elements such as topography, built form, public domain, landscape, streets, lanes, parks and transport systems interact with one another, and the intrinsic qualities and character of a place. At a macro level, strategic planning considers the economic, social and environmental factors which impact land use and embed this into policies and plans that control use of land.

“People always ask me – is it all about the strategy? And I say, well it is all about the strategy, but we have to be strategic and opportunistic. You have to have solid strategy, solid vision, solid work. But then you never know where you’re going to go, because most of the city is built on private land. You’ve got to be ready when investment is ready and then you’ve got to pounce and as I always say, and never flinch.”

—Monica Barone PSM, CEO, City of Sydney Council

Barone’s remarks were echoed by designers interviewed for this study. It was generally felt that if Council had to prioritise where to put its design energy and this could only be in one area, strategic design would be the area of maximum impact.

This work mostly (but not always) occurs within strategic planning – noting that open space and property strategy which help to define a Council’s capital work and property management agenda, do not typically occur within this area.

“In strategic, no matter where you are in that chain, you have a lot of agency to act early. It’s just then pushing it up the hill.” (Designer 4).

“We’re still designing future slums. They’re so bad. We’re getting houses with gutter lines almost touching each other. There’s no open space at the back. There’s no setback at the front. There’s no room for street trees. Its really poor. So we need to look at our planning. We need to start with good strategic planning and move down from there.” (Designer 6).

Strategic design work has specific challenges, including:

- It is the most hidden type of design work and many seeing it as planning;
- It often takes a long time to see a visible outcome and sometimes the most important outcomes remain invisible – like the decision not to proceed, or the advocacy required to achieve consensus across multiple actors both in and out of Council;
- It requires a lot of discretionary design skill to determine the right balance between prescription and flexibility and the provision of ongoing advice to multiple people across multiple spheres can be resource intensive;
- When “on the ground” deliverables occur, recognition of strategic design contributors is even less likely than other forms of designer in government;
- To effectively ‘rally the troops’ and gain commitment for a change in approach, the work needs to be internally resourced.

Cities, precincts and places are an ongoing work in progress and require constant reinvention, design and redesign. This work can only be done by internal designers. The fact that this is not widely recognised as an ongoing design exercise is problematic and needs to change.

“Really good urban design does not just happen. It’s not like a building. You can go down Macleay Street and think well this is a lovely street, but it’s not evident in the same way as the design of an object is. It might be evident, when it’s large scale like in Paris and you think, wow we’ve got these boulevards, and they contrast with all these other streets. But in Australia, people have no perception that it could be better or different. Conversely, when it’s good, they have no perception that it could have been bad,” (Designer 5).

Strategic design work to inform Council’s property and capital works delivery agenda is another internal design function absent in many Councils. The ability to test options and provide strategic design advice on Councils property assets, in addition to scoping projects to inform business cases and briefs ahead of a capital works process, set direction and are important definitional pieces.

D. Other approaches to design within Council

Private sector consultancies

There are several other approaches to design within Council. Those who explicitly recognise the need for design services and do not have the skills or capacity to provide it in-house rely on private sector consultancy services. These could be as follows:

- **Strategic planners** offering strategic design work, advice and/or testing to determine appropriate built form and/or public domain outcomes to inform planning controls.
- **Development assessment planners** working with applicants or inform land and environment court proceedings at the site level on buildings and public space outcomes– particularly as it relates to the NSW Apartment Design Guide (ADG), SEPP 65 and heritage requirements.
- **Property or project managers** for infrastructure/capital works projects.

These services are specific to the Council client and scope of commission which limits an external consultant’s ability to ‘join the dots’ in terms of people or place.

Advisory and review panels

Some Councils also have design advisory, design excellence or design review panels. There is no publicly available list of these or their terms of reference, however anecdotal evidence suggests the majority focus on improving the quality of private development.

GA NSW has been supporting the establishment of design review panels within local government and their research (GANSW, 2023) suggests 74% of metropolitan Councils and 24% of regional cities/towns (with a population over 40,000) have some form of design review panel.

Access to these panels are critical for Councils that don’t have in-house designers. Interviews with designers in government suggest they can also be a valuable resource for peer review of internal design work and/or to assist in cultural change efforts that require an independent view.

Many Councils have clauses within their local environment plan (LEP) requiring “design excellence”. These clauses typically callout a process required for particular sites and may even specify design competitions.

A number of designers within government believe the term “design excellence” is an unhelpful misnomer that misrepresents the process, marginalises design and designers as an optional and high cost aesthetic add-on.

Certainly any inference that “design excellence” equates to “gold plating” or the type of outcome suitable for a peer-recognised design award, is incorrect. Conjecture within the DiG group, supported by interviews undertaken

as part of this study, suggests that true “design excellence” – that is, the type which is peer-recognised through industry awards (AIA, AILA, AUDA) is more likely when Council culture explicitly values design.

At a meeting of the Designers in Government group (May 2023), one member posed the question: “What if nothing was excellent, but everything was good?”. The extent to which design excellence processes deliver outcomes that are actually “excellent”, as opposed to “good” or merely “not bad”, has been a matter of ongoing discussion within Designers in Government group and designers more broadly.

While most Councils would utilise external consultants to support internal design work or for design documentation and delivery of capital works projects, interviews with CEOs and designers identified that outsourcing design in its entirety does not have the same impact as having designers in-house.

Councils undertake a variety of property, planning, infrastructure and capital work delivery activities that are not recognised as design-related, yet set a framework which explicitly directs or determines design outcomes. This was raised as a significant issue in interviews with designers in local government.

Some of these stated concerns are shown in Table 7, while the advantages to having in-house designers also identified in interviews are summarised in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Top 10 advantages to in-house design expertise
(Source: designers in Council interviewed)

1	Ability to understand and respond easily to local context – organisational, community and environmental.
2	Avoid the need to go through procurement processes to gain design advice.
3	Lead sensitive, strategic design and speculative work which relies on local knowledge.
4	Scope and define Council projects for an external design team.
5	Have the skills and confidence to act as an educated client in managing an external design team.
6	Meet as peers and speak the same language as external design consultants who interact with Council in the planning space.
7	Provide informal advice, influence others, increase in-house knowledge about good design.
8	Lift the quality of development outcomes and Council projects generally through spatial understanding and championship of quality outcomes.
9	Lift the quality of design consultants working in the LGA by challenging substandard development proposals and encouraging developers to rethink their strategy.
10	Join the dots both spatially and internally, reduce reliance on consultants and work more like a team.

E. Number and location of designers within NSW local government

The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) regularly review the local government workforce, its skills, capabilities and future requirements via a survey. This survey is an important source of information for the sector and provides “key data on human resource conditions in Australian local government” (Ryan and Woods, 2015).

The 2018 and 2022 reports have been reviewed for this study. Both highlight skill gaps and skill shortages with “the most cited skill shortages” (40–60% of respondents across both surveys) being engineers, urban and town planners building surveyors and project managers (ALGA, 2018 p.6 and 2022, p. 13 and p. 33).

The report also notes “a suitably skilled workforce is not only essential to fulfilling core operations, but also in a strategy sense to enable capacity building into the future” (ALGA, p. 15). The inability to find people with the right skills and experience for these roles was the second most common driver of skill shortages for Councils.

To combat some of these challenges the Australian Local Government Association has established Careers at Council, a platform to attract staff to local government. A key focus is targeting graduates “in areas of skill shortage (engineering, planning and development, environment, project management and human resources” (ALGA 2022, p. 124).

Despite evidence of architects, landscape architects and urban designers working in local government for many decades, there is little information within the ALGA workforce reports about the presence or need for architectural, landscape architectural or urban design skills or design trained staff.

The 2022 report states the “strategic need to build a future workforce that has the skills, capacity and productivity to handle Australia’s ‘big picture’ needs” including “climate change (through both emissions reduction and, increasingly adaptation)” and “better managing metropolitan growth” (ALGA 2022, pp. 10–11) but doesn’t identify the need for design expertise to do this. The 2018 report goes closer – but only just – noting in passing that Councils in NSW cited “heritage officers and architectural designers” (amongst other areas) as “emerging skill shortage areas.” [ALGA, p. 49].

Both the 2018 (p. 28) and 2022 (p. 110) reports identify “design, engineering, science and transport professionals” as one of the top three areas of employment shift across Australia with +3,749 in 2018 and +1,055 in 2022. The ABS data source provides further granularity on movements in this segment. Table 8 shows the breakdown in LGA employment numbers by occupation for NSW across the 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021.

Table 7. Issues raised about no in-house design advice

(Source: designers in Council interviewed)

Issue	Interview comment
Planning controls that have been insufficiently tested and are unworkable.	“I estimate that roughly 50% of controls don’t work. Other people tell me it’s closer to 70%. A lack of understanding in the strategic planners about built form is really problematic. So even quite modest densities have never been handled successfully. In terms of the large scale, again, a lack of understanding or urban design recommendations from the strategic planners has led to quite ridiculous densities.” (Designer 5)
Design outcomes led by impact avoidance and ‘what not to do’.	“Planners don’t want to tell people what to do, but they do so by default – by telling them what ‘not to do’. It’s not hard to do building envelopes that are quite specific and people know what they’re doing. Planners always say it’s too hard.” (Designer 5)
Planning, place-making, transport, engineering or asset management driving overarching public domain design and outcomes.	“Design starts from land-use planning; we should be involved in every stage of shaping the built environment, and that isn’t properly understood. They see that as the planner’s role, and we get involved later.” (Designer 1) “We have place-making teams but generally they’re not qualified in design. They often push forward with little redesigns or reactive fix-up projects. The outcome is always poor. A lot of what they do is reactionary. It’s that kind of thinking Councils need to get away from. It takes design expertise to look at the big picture.” (Designer 6) “We are dominated by engineering and we’re heavily dominated by assets and maintenance as well. It’s often the tail wagging the dog. Every design vision that you present is obviously constrained and restricted by ‘well, we can’t afford to maintain that’, or ‘we don’t want that as an asset.’” (Designer 6)
Poorly scoped capital works projects that have an insufficiently considered and ill-defined design brief.	“The difference between having an architect as a design manager on a public facility and an engineer is just worlds apart. A lot of that is about the process put in place from the beginning to ensure that we’re not solving the wrong problem and setting the procurement process up to succeed; it’s bringing rigour to the [design] process that wouldn’t have been there otherwise.” (Designer 4)
Lack of overall vision for the public domain to inform future capital works planning, funding and delivery.	“There was work happening, but it was ad hoc. Nobody was looking at the CBD as a whole, no one was bringing it together [for example] – no one was looking at the laneways. Unless there was a capital project, there was no plan in place, there was no design work that had been done, and no one advocating for it, or applying for funding.” (Designer 1)
An over reliance on external design consultants.	“I think there was, and to some extent still is, an over reliance on consultants. By not having in-house design experts, you have project managers relying on consultants, because they’re not design qualified. So, the guidance they get is really very specific to the particular site and project. Before designers, there was no one in Council taking a broader view.” (Designer 1)
Design input being sought at the wrong time or avoided.	“We’re not seen as necessary for certain projects, or we’re seen as a roadblock which leaves us completely cut out of the front-end planning process, only to come in too late, after they run it past us so we don’t whinge later and cause delays and variations. Then we’re seen as the bad guys, which is not at all how it should be. We can help with the front-end planning so things go a lot more smoothly, because they’re scoped properly, so delivery runs a lot better. The point is people don’t understand how much design occurs at the planning stage, which is why we need to be involved.” (Designer 1)

Figure 6 indicates percentage change since 2006 Census, while Figure 7 illustrates spatial distribution. Together Table 8 and Figure 6 show us that while the number of architects and landscape architects working in Councils is growing at the fastest rate over time, indicating demand for their design skills, the numbers (and data sets) are still small.

Examining Census data suggests trends and reveals issues. While numbers are low in the Architect and Landscape Architect sub-category, this category together with Environmental Scientists and Urban and Regional Planners have been areas experiencing significant growth (Figure 6), though further investigation is necessary. Census data reports on individual answers to a survey on census night and depend on how people chose to answer questions. Occupations are defined by Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO, 2013) and urban designers are not classified as a category within this standard.

It is difficult to know where the number of urban designers are hidden, though anecdotal evidence suggests many work in strategic planning. Based on the current membership of the Design in Government group the census figures appear low and somewhat inaccurate. Some of the designers interviewed for this study work in Councils which are listed as having no architects or landscape architects. Other practitioners may also select and appear in the Census under another occupation category such as non-registered architect, landscape architects and those who perceive themselves not to be practicing or practicing as planners, may also select and appear in the census under another occupation category.

Notwithstanding issues with the data, the spatial mapping indicates the growth trend to be occurring mainly across metropolitan and metropolitan fringe areas with a slower rate of incremental growth in regional towns and cities.

Table 8. Indicating Census results across in Design, Engineering, Science, and Transport Professionals Category, OCCP Occupations in Local Government Employment

OCCP Occupation	2006 # people	2011 # people	2016 # people	2021 # people
Natural and Physical Sciences	374	356	598	659
Environmental Scientists	368	530	571	613
Engineering Professionals	1159	1323	1468	1506
Civil Engineering Professionals	1013	1033	1235	1369
Architects, Designers, Planners and Surveyors	1523	1811	2170	2559
Urban and Regional Planners	1128	1356	1645	1972
Surveyors and Spatial Scientists	283	309	302	282
Architects and Landscape Architects	80	117	140	156
Marine Transport Professionals	9	0	5	5
Design, Engineering, Science and Transport Professionals, nfd	0	3	0	0
Total for DESTP Category	3065	3673	4241	4729

NB: Table includes overall data for all 3-digit OCCP sub-categories (in black) but excludes 4 digit occupation categories with less than 50 people, categories with no further definition (nfd) and the graphic design category.

Figure 6. Percentage increase in Local Government employment since 2006

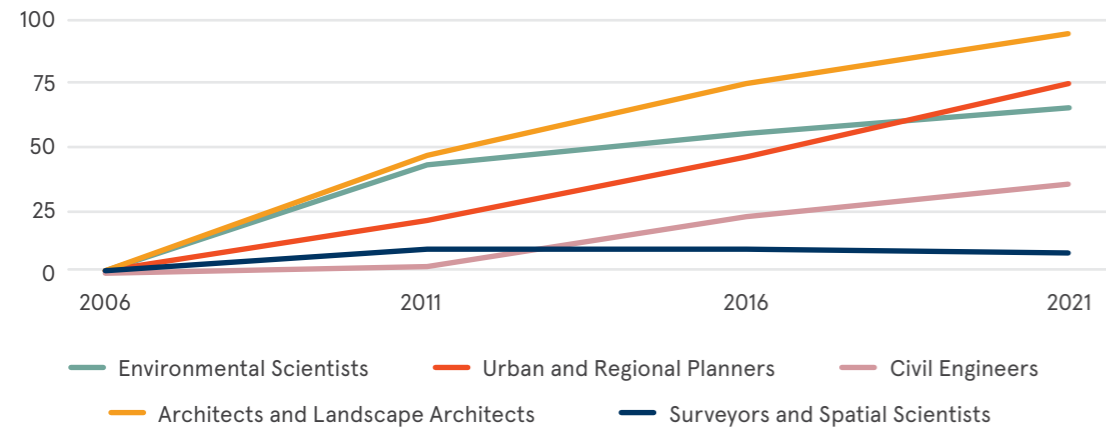
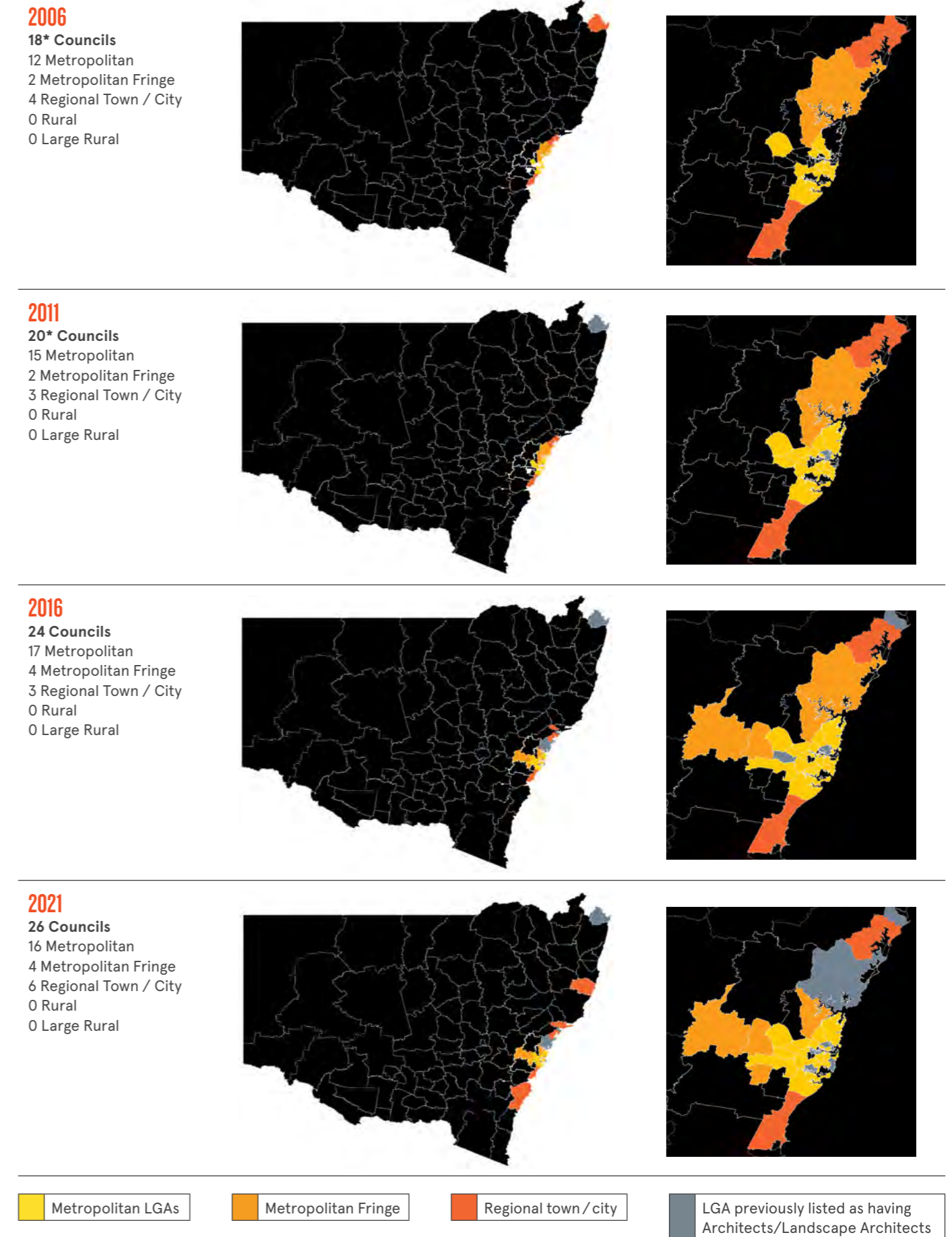


Figure 7. Changing distribution of architects and landscape architects in NSW LGAs over time
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census Data 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021



*Numbers have been simplified to post amalgamation equivalent for comparison



PART 5. SUPPORTING DESIGN IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

This study reinforces others in finding that good design is important and that in-house designers are valuable to government in achieving great outcomes for places. However, this finding is not new and many of the issues associated with design governance are known (Carmona 2016, Freestone et al., 2019). Freestone et al. (2019, pp. 42–45) writing from a Sydney perspective cluster key challenges into four main areas:

1. Distributed decision-making – the variety of actors and decision makers involved often with divergent views and interests;
2. Institutional setting – the opportunity space for designers within the political, legal and workplace context;
3. Balancing prescription with flexibility – achieving the right balance required for design quality – too prescriptive or too loose both lead to poor outcomes;
4. Skill shortages – a deficit of design skills in the public sector.

The interviews undertaken for this study have raised opportunities and challenges which cross all four of these areas, but have highlighted specific issues with the ‘institutional setting’ of in local governments which impact other areas.

Designers are well-placed to ‘balance prescription with flexibility’, can provide leadership in ‘distributed decision making’ and can contribute to local government’s ‘skill shortage’ solution – but only if the ‘institutional setting’ for designers improves. This part of the study focuses on areas where action can be taken within local government and industry more broadly to improve the enabling infrastructure for good design to be initiated from within local government. Based on interview feedback, five key issues to be addressed are:

1. Low levels of understanding about design within local government;
2. A workplace culture which sidelines design;
3. An emerging sector with evolving organisational structures, few positions and unclear career paths for designers;
4. A lack of design champions at the leadership level;
5. Design governance across state and local government jurisdictions.

A. Low levels of understanding about design within local government

“Generally people think the word design is about aesthetics. People wouldn’t dream of driving a car that wasn’t well designed, but they don’t tend to think the same when it comes to buildings and cities.”

(Designer 5)

Barriers

There are many misconceptions about design. The following general issues are not exclusive to the practice of design in local government but can contribute to a challenging workplace context.

Table 9. Misconceptions about design

Poor understanding about design and good design (generally) by the public.	Given Councils consist of over 400 occupation groups and are led by publicly elected representatives, if public appreciation for design is low, the chances of design benefits being understood are slim.
Lack of successful design examples that demonstrate how good public places could be.	This was mentioned as a constraint by several interviewees who discussed the limited exposure Australians (generally car-dependent) had to well-connected, walkable, accessible, amenable, safe, social and inclusive places, more common overseas, and the challenge of not having local examples that people could relate to.
Lack of awareness that good design is both a process and a product.	The fact that most people would not interact with architects, landscape architects or urban designers in their daily lives, or know what they do in the same way they do with other professions.

The hidden nature of design within local government presents additional challenges, which layer onto these common misconceptions.

- The belief that design is subjective, co-design provides the answer, or consultants on their own can bridge the design gap, rendering professional design advice and facilitation of design processes within government unnecessary.
- An assumption that good design is optional not helped by the misnomer of “design excellence” generating assumptions the process leads to “gold plating” or the counter view that it will equate to peer-recognised design excellence.
- A lack of knowledge about designers in government (generally) and low levels of engagement with the local government sector by peak design bodies.

- Low engagement levels between the local government sector and peak design bodies.
- Poor understanding of the different roles and jurisdictions of local and state government.
- Low design awareness by planners and engineers who are key allied disciplines (refer Section C).

Enablers

There are a number of efforts underway to raise public awareness about design – including the City of Sydney public talk series, the Sydney Architecture Festival and local community initiatives such as Architecture Street, a talk program co-founded and curated by Dr Michael Zanardo and Sam Rigoli in Sydney’s Inner West.

The Architecture Street program invites the public to engage with current architecture and design issues through the lens of local projects, which stimulates a broader understanding and appetite for good design. “We always try to make sure the content is local so that attendees appreciate that good design is possible in their own backyard.” (Zanardo and Rigoli, 2023).

The establishment of the Designers in Government (DiG) group has helped professional connections and opened dialogue. Created for urban designers, architects and landscape architects within State and Local government, the initiative was supported (2019) by the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA), NSW Chapter.

Advocacy by DiG group members include articles published in *Architecture Bulletin (journal of the AIA NSW Chapter)* Volumes 78–80, 2021–2023, and a keynote public address (supported by the Henry Halloran Trust) at the Festival of Urbanism, 25 November 2022). A growing national interest and conversation about the role of design and designers within government has been emerging in parallel (*Architecture Australia*, March/April 2023).

There are current NSW Chapter Councillors of the AIA who work in government, a NSW based National Director of Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) has recently been elected on a platform of public practice and the executive of the Urban Design Association (UDA) also has government representation.

Further strategic outreach by design-focused professional bodies (AIA, AILA, UDA) into local government to support the public practice space – including engagement with major infrastructure projects and significant place-shaping initiatives – would help internal efforts to increase government understanding of good design, expand mindsets on design practice and improve professional pipelines into the sector.

Consultation on the draft Design and Place SEPP (2022) generated professional discourse on the role of design and designers in government. The draft Urban Design Guidelines directly impact the work of local government designers, and the SEPP also sought to strengthen the role of independent design review panels.

The DiG group prepared a submission for this and advocated (likely for the first time) the important role internal designers play within local government agencies. For any State-based design strategy with a place focus, testing and feedback from local government design professionals is critical to ensure policies effectively translate across jurisdictions and to ensure place-based implementation matches intent.

Future NSW Government policy and guidance provides an opportunity to reinforce the role designers in local government play in achieving good design outcomes which are locally appropriate and place-specific.

The research and teaching associated with this study has exposed the practice of design in government to academics and students at the University of Sydney School of Architecture, Design and Planning.

University programs in design (architecture, landscape architecture, urban design) have an opportunity to introduce students to government practice. This could be through studio projects that consider good design outcomes through the lens of government levers, practice subjects which introduce alternate career pathways, electives which expose students to different facets of practice (eg strategic design, brief writing etc), or communication subjects which teach the art of explaining design to interdisciplinary colleagues, Councillors and community in accessible English.

B. Workplace cultures that sideline design

The history of local government within NSW describes a sector which has been resilient, entrepreneurial and adaptive despite the challenge of being an informal arm of government. The various disciplinary inputs into Councils' organisational structure mirror local government's history – with engineers joining forces with architects and surveyors to initiate the planning profession and planners joining engineers to take their place as key disciplines within local government.

Whilst this has been happening urban planning has focussed on densification, places have become more complex, disciplines more specialised and local government asked to deliver more. These changes have been occurring at the same time as the NSW Government Architects' Office has changed its primary role and focus (Power, 2016), from an office that designed public and civic infrastructure for Government (1832-2016) to the strategic advisory role of GA NSW (from 2016 onwards).

While there are signs of designers emerging in local government across NSW to take up the challenge, planners and engineers are yet to fully embrace colleagues with these allied skill sets, and something has been lost regarding the importance of design within the public realm.

Barriers

In this study, the preliminary data and interview responses suggest there are not enough designers in local government to address growing needs. The Census data indicates most designers are located in metropolitan, metropolitan fringe, regional towns and cities, however numbers do not necessarily coincide with areas undergoing significant change or growth and appear to ebb and flow.

A key challenge for local government is attracting the appropriate skills required for design governance. Underlying this is the challenge of creating an organisational culture that values design and welcomes the perspectives of designers. This can be challenging without senior leadership support. Kerry Robinson OAM (CEO, Blacktown City Council) describes how this was actively implemented at Blacktown City Council...

“One of the things that we have done since I came, is employ a City Architect, and create a directorate for the City Architect to head up. We gathered up everyone who might have once picked up a Rotring pen and put them under that directorate. So all of the engineers, landscape architects and architects. That was done with very specific intent, because lifting the standard of design was something that we needed to do.”

“Getting developers to deliver better design was something that we needed the skills in-house for, and it was also important to get all of the designers thinking about the integration of design and getting design right. That’s been a long journey, but really positive.”
—Kerry Robinson OAM, CEO, Blacktown City Council

One of the biggest issues to emerge in our interviews with designers related to an unequal relationship between planners, designers and engineers within Councils. Most designers we interviewed described a context where design skills were not well understood and they were reporting into planning and/or engineering directorates where they were significantly outranked and outnumbered by planners and engineers, who did not see good design outcomes as a strategic priority.

This led to designers – typically in small number, employed in an ad hoc manner and dispersed across functions – often feeling quite isolated, marginalised, and personally challenged by the enormity of trying to champion good design in a culture that did not understand their skillset or support their work. Some of these cultural challenges are expressed by designers in Part 6, Findings & Recommendations.

The sentiments expressed from design professionals (Part 6) reflect broader literature on change and innovation breakthrough more generally best represented by the slogan “Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast” (Horth and Vehar, 2014, p. 2).

Horth and Vehar (2014) describe the challenge of most organisations that embark on “disruptive” innovation rarely emerging “because the organisation inevitably chokes on the radical nature of the offering, which doesn’t fit into its current reality.” (Horth and Vehar, 2014, p. 3). Inserting design expertise into existing Council functions and expecting good design to ensue without sufficient leadership support is a falsehood.

“Actively pursuing innovation requires considerable resources and deliberate focus. It requires innovation leadership, support from the organisational hierarchy and a culture that values and nurtures creativity”

(Horth and Vehar, 2014, p. 3)

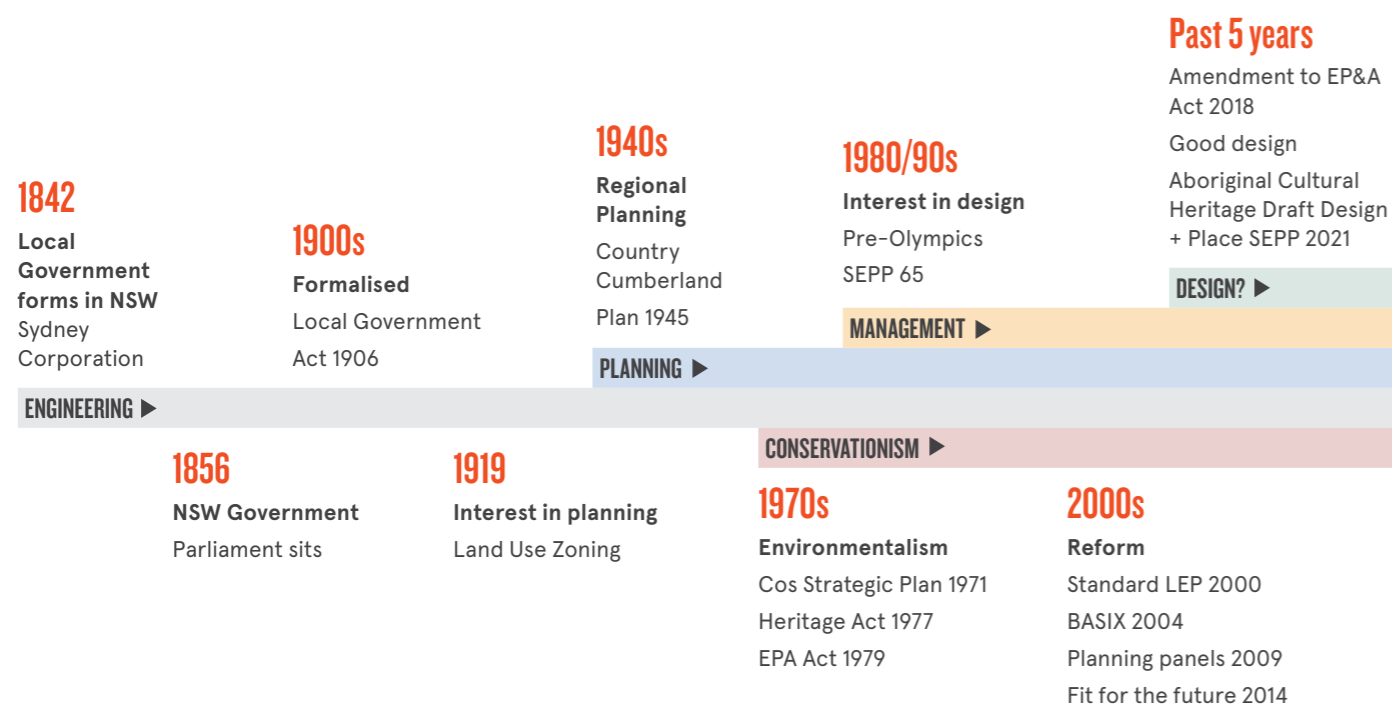
Enablers

Several designers interviewed spoke about the importance of Council designers working within a consolidated team. For smaller Councils and regional areas the challenge of being the lone designer within an organisation is likely to be most acute. Council strategies for sharing resourcing such as those adopted for water catchment groups or collaboration models such as Resilient Sydney, which cross multiple local government areas potentially offer precedent models of practice.

The literature on creating enabling environments for creative processes and people to flourish identifies the need for workplace support and clustering of likeminded people. Management studies have found that “the locus of evaluation for creative people is typically the profession rather than the particular organisation in which they currently find employment” (Bradway, 1971, Goulder 1958, Organ & Green, 1981 in Mumford et al., 2002, p. 710). A team led by a respected designer is more likely to provide this level of support.

There are examples where design teams within Council structures have been successfully consolidated and placed in locations able to cross-service functions in a manner that on equal footing to other disciplinary contributors. Interview feedback suggests that in organisations with a small design team and without a strong culture of design, higher quality outcomes can be unlocked with design leadership at the executive level to ensure adequate sponsorship.

Figure 8. Timeline of local government development and emerging disciplines



Kerry Robinson OAM (CEO, Blacktown City Council) describes the transition to this model:

“The engineers are a bit yearning for the good old days when there was a City Engineer that they should work for, and don’t understand why they work for a City Architect. And to be frank a number of those older folk with very old school views have moved on. They were very skilled at what they did, but they did it in a very limited way.”

Within the City of Sydney – where design and designers have had strong support for the past 20 years, the Director of Planning has an architecture background and the City Architect is also an executive manager. Designers work in several teams across functional areas and appear to be able to do so in an environment “amongst equals”. Monica Barone PSM (CEO, City of Sydney) describes the organisational culture which allows this to occur.

“I always jokingly say, when I first came into local government, you spend all your time wrestling power from the engineers. But you also need the excellent engineers. The problem in Australia and probably most local governments, is [design] doesn’t exist at all. It’s not respected at all. Whereas we really respect it, but not at the expense of everything else – as an equal, in amongst that multidisciplinary team that enables things to be done. But if it doesn’t exist at all, or feel you’re the one architect in the Council, and no one’s supporting you. Then you’ve really got a difficult time ahead of you.”

Disciplinary silos begin within University. Interdisciplinary education provides an opportunity for students to be exposed to the different skill sets and focus areas of disciplines. The author taught a subject at the University of New South Wales as part of the Built Environment Interdisciplinary Learning (BEIL) program which is open to a number of disciplines including planners, architects, landscape architects and construction managers.

Opportunities for interdisciplinary studies that expose planners, engineers, architects, landscape architects and urban designers to each other’s skills and capacities foster deeper respect and form better foundations for local government workplaces. This could occur within individual universities through shared subjects or combined design studios. An alternate approach could be summer or winter schools focussed on a local issue, led by peak design bodies collaborating with Local Government that allows student participation from multiple Universities.

C. An emerging sector with evolving pathways

During interviews undertaken for this study, designers were asked about career opportunities for design professionals within local government and government more broadly. Omnipresent in these conversations were the different cultural contexts that interviewees were working within. Unsurprisingly, this in more positive cultures were more positive about the future. Responses offered insight into existing career pathways, future potential, and the extent to which local government recognised and was interested in rectifying the design governance gap.

“I think we all look to City of Sydney as this kind of ark. A place that is so much further along in the journey, of seeing the value in designers, that they’re just part of the machine. Whereas you know, I still feel like we’re these little weird bits attached to the side. I don’t personally see, or feel like I could, just choose to move to country NSW and automatically get a job in Council.”

(Designer 4)

Barriers

The census data reviewed for this study reveals that the number of design professionals within local government, while growing, remains extremely low. The data which sits behind this is problematic with uncertainties regarding how individual design disciplines self-identify (registered or non-registered, training or job description) and the choice of limited occupation groups (urban design being absent) making data both inaccurate and impenetrable.

Assuming workplace cultural issues can be addressed, building capacity will take time, concerted effort, and viable career paths. Current positions in Councils appeared more reflective of that local government area’s understanding of design than the roles designers play or the skillset they offered. Its telling that the Australian Local Government Association does not consider design as a skill deficit in their workforce capability assessments.

A key barrier is the visible existence of positions that designers can apply for with recognisable titles and alignment with role function. One designer in Council interviewed (Designer 6) shared their experience: “I think it is [a lack of understanding]. I mean my own job title probably emphasises that. I’m a registered landscape architect, I was employed as an urban designer, and now I’ve been changed to a strategic planner. And I

think it’s just that attitude of yeah, whatever. They don’t really understand the differences between those things. [...] We’ll give you a title we understand. So yeah, just call me an engineer, it’ll be easier. Plenty of room for more engineers.”

A lack of career pathways and professional development opportunities for people with a design background was a key issue raised – suggesting that even if designers might be attracted to a career in local government, unclear career pathways limited the attractiveness of the sector. One interviewee (Designer 5) noted “an issue at the absolute top of the tree in local government is you can’t really get anywhere.”

A combination of reasons was suggested – from roles and titles that reflected structural biases “titles play a big role ...they are really designed for a planner or engineer” (Designer 2); to broader questions of cultural fit – with capital works functions being “suitable for an engineer” (Designer 2) and strategic roles being “really more geared towards a planner” (Designer 2).

While there was a sense among several interviewed designers (Designer 2, Designer 4) that acting opportunities might be made available and could be an opportunity to change mindsets, it was generally felt designers would not be able to compete with planning and engineering disciplines when these were publicly advertised.

Enablers

Some Councils are significantly ahead of others in embedding design expertise into their organisations. In Councils where design functions were better understood and embraced, a more positive outlook was anticipated for designers, according to one interviewee.

“At the local government level there is phenomenal opportunity for designers and for career development. It’s definitely a multidisciplinary approach. And you’re working on both speculative and specific design solutions.”

(Designer 3)

“Local government is pretty unique in that it offers the opportunity to work in urban design, landscape, architecture, engineering, but with overlap in terms of the disciplines. It’s definitely a multidisciplinary approach. And you’re working on both speculative and specific design solutions.”

“So if you’re a young professional, local government offers a lot in terms of public space, buildings, and infrastructure. The other dimension which you don’t get anywhere else, is community engagement. It is very hands on, it’s not readily available in other areas of practice.

But it’s the core of what we do. [...] I think there’s a big growth space in local government. It just needs others to recognise it.” (Designer 3)

Engagement between local government, peak design bodies and educational institutions could also increase knowledge and improve local government’s ability to attract design skills into the sector. The involvement of designers in local government conferences, supported by peak bodies would promote awareness. Similarly, local government needs to actively engage with the professional design sector. The Lord Mayor’s Prize, established by City of Sydney Council and awarded annually by the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA), NSW Chapter, offers a tangible signal to design professionals that City of Sydney values design and could be a welcoming employer.

D. Lack of design champions at leadership level

In most cases the introduction of designers into local government appears to have occurred because of a design champion. Designers interviewed relayed histories of design teams which initially flourished, achieved great outcomes then were disempowered and floundered with leadership change. The more senior the champion the more likely the internal team was to succeed. Bryan Hynes (former Acting CEO, City of Parramatta Council) reflected on Parramatta’s journey and time taken to progress change.

“When you go back and look at the history of it, it’s taken a long time to actually build that design capability, for people to understand it, and then to start to embrace it. So when you look at where it’s come from, it really started as design policies in planning and then bled into other areas where people can see the significant benefits that it actually brings across directorates.”

“It’s taken probably 20 years to get it to the stage where it is. It’s quite enlightening when you look back. And you needed people who are real thought leaders like David Borger when he was the Mayor on Council, with his planning background to start to say, well, this is how we actually set it up and push for it.”

Barriers

Interviews with both CEO/GM and designer cohorts suggest designers in government follow design champions. Designers appear to emerge whenever someone has identified the need, but their fate also appeared to fall when champions left. Two interviewees (Designer 1, Designer 2) relayed histories of design teams which initially flourished, achieved great outcomes then were disempowered and floundered with leadership change. As noted previously, the reliance on champions has led to designers emerging within local government in an ad hoc way, which can lead to poor utilisation of design skills and challenges with cultural change.

Political leaders have played an important role both in enabling and blocking cultural change. Interviews with some CEO/GMs suggest that not understanding the role or impacts of design has stymied efforts by some public administrators to establish City Architect roles or City Design teams.

All of this points to a broader lack of design appreciation within the local government sector. For Councils who are willing to begin the journey, a further challenge is knowing where to start.

Enablers

History suggests that the organisational culture for good design begins at the leadership level and is most effective when both public administrators and democratically elected officials are united on its importance and creating the enabling infrastructure to support its implementation. This is evident from the City of Sydney's journey, recounted by Freestone et al. (2019), and from interviews undertaken for this study. If more leadership champions were to emerge the likely flow on effect would be improvements to the quality of the built environment.

For General Managers or CEOs to embed design teams within their organisational structures they need to be able to convince Councillors of the merit of good design and be supported by the Council Chamber. This can be challenging if Councillors have had limited experience with design professionals. An onboarding process for new Councillors which communicates the merits of good design, benefit to places and role of designers in Council could assist Councillors to become advocates.

E. Design governance across jurisdictions

“There is no actual body in New South Wales that considers the city as a collective” (Designer 5). Design governance ideally occurs from a collective position about places that focus on how a city, a town, a place, comes together – not on the individual elements. The public domain is the joint responsibility of state and local government, each of whom have different jurisdictions, areas of expertise and levers for design governance. There is a need for these two arms of government to better understand and recognise the different opportunities and constraints of their jurisdictions and work together to play to their strengths.

Barriers

The difference between state and local government interests and focus areas was cited as an ongoing frustration for CEOs/GMs and designers. Challenges aligning timeframes and navigating impacts to place were raised as issues. Planning policies and infrastructure projects led by the State Government can supersede local plans, complicate design governance at the local level and make it challenging to achieve good design outcomes. Local governments' hyper local focus can also reduce Councils ability to engage with challenges across boundaries and align with State Government on place-based pain points. While both state and local government consult one another on their respective policies and projects there is no ongoing forum between state and local government's to work jointly on how these outcomes manifest in place.

Enablers

There are examples where state and local government have worked together successfully on design governance across jurisdictions. The relationship evident between designers in these examples are characterised by ongoing engagement, open communication and mutual respect. Consistency in governance between these two arms of government can improve the context for distributed decision making by focussing community and stakeholder direction and improving the quality of design outcomes on the ground.

An increased understanding of the similarity and differences in jurisdiction will also improve collaboration between levels of government. The informal designers in Government (DiG) group has gone some way to establishing a network of design practitioners across jurisdictions, however it is currently run by volunteers, operates out of hours and relies on goodwill. Some participants attend in their own time as the forum is not endorsed by their employers. Support for a formal community of practice would increase knowledge and appreciation across state and local jurisdictions.

A forum between state and local government for information sharing, collaboration and joint design governance for consideration of matters where place-based jurisdiction overlaps would improve place-based outcomes and be of benefit to both jurisdictions.



PART 6. FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Positive impacts

In the interviews with Council Chief Executives and General Managers, some of the positive impacts they reported to having designers in their organisations include that designers:

Improve places on multiple levels – from basic function and accessibility to the creation of interesting places and experiences.

Add value to the planning process by understanding the design process, speaking the same language and being able to differentiate between good and bad outcomes.

Bring a different skillset, drive innovation, challenge existing methods and lift the performance of others within Council.

Champion good design which improves perceptions of place, lifts civic pride and both encourages and is an expectation of quality investment.

Catalyse change through big ideas, which can carry momentum, capture the imagination, encourage partnerships and investment.

Are able co-create and translate community aspirations into something physical and visible and paint a positive picture of how things could be.

Bring an integrated approach to addressing numerous place-based factors by understanding process and working across disciplines.

Demand a higher quality of third-party development (private or state) which attracts better quality architects, outcomes and attracts further, better quality development.

Demonstrate to the community that they are cared for by lifting aspirations, expectations, and increasing the quality of public buildings and public spaces.

“The advantages of having designers inside your organisation is that they influence everyone else, to see what the possibilities are. They help you understand good urban design and built form — essential in Council, because ultimately, we are land managers.”

—David Farmer, CEO Central Coast Council

B. Challenges experienced by designers

In interviews with designers working in local government, some of the challenges they experienced include:

The value of designers is repeatedly questioned

“As designers, we are constantly questioned as to what our value is and does we [Council] need it. Planning and design are interdependent; you cannot have good infrastructure outcomes without good design. Design is a necessity, not a ‘nice to have’. It’s of equal importance and just as essential as planning.” (Designer 1)

The skills of designers are poorly understood

“What unique skills do we bring? Skills that others don’t have!. Planners and engineers can’t do our job, in the same way that we can’t do theirs. Sometimes that’s not appreciated. We understand design and the built environment in a different way, with the skills of architects, landscape architects and urban designers. A planner is not an architect; an engineer is not a landscape architect. We can’t be substituted by other disciplines and are just as needed in shaping the built environment.” (Designer 1)

The need for design input can be overwhelming

“It’s having strategic design right, then ensuring design requirements and minimal design outcomes are set in stone at the planning stage. Then there are problems with private certification and compliance which nobody is following up on from a design or a landscape design perspective. So you need design at the planning stage, the delivery stage and at the post-completion stage. It’s so big sometimes, you just don’t know where to start.” (Designer 6)

The need for a generalist skillset

“So [engineers] are everywhere, and for that reason able to be specialists, whereas I feel like every designer in Council has to be a generalist because there are so few of us, so we need to be able to step into many different contexts and give advice. On any given day, someone might ask me about Green Star, or what housing density you should have in a medium-density suburb if you want to have greening on the streets – like just anything.” (Designer 4)

The need for allies

“I feel a lot more relaxed having an ally. Allies are just so important. So I can’t imagine how hard it is for people who are the only one in their Council. You feel you’re always finding ways to make it bearable; like – let’s get together to have lunch with the designers. (Designer 4)

The importance of team culture

“I would say that we now have fewer designers and because they are isolated, they’re not part of a team culture which backs each other up around design integrity. They’re very vulnerable to the influences of other professional streams because there isn’t that support. You don’t have your tribe. And in the creative process there aren’t the people around to bounce ideas off. So in that way ideas and the direction of projects can get narrower, less creative and less courageous.” (Designer 2)

The personal challenge

“The isolation can be hard, I didn’t expect it to be this hard when I took the role. You forget that for an engineer they’re going to work with other engineers. They can relax into doing their job, in a professional environment. Whereas I never feel relaxed. Even if you’re given the chance to speak up and say what it is that would make everything better – you can’t always generate that vision alone. I need a team for that.” (Designer 4)

C. Recommendations

Local government-facing

- 1. Ensure every Council has access to executive level design leadership and in-house design advice.** Ensure each metropolitan, regional town/City and metropolitan fringe LGA has a Design team led by someone at the executive level. Consider a shared resource model for small and rural Councils. Prioritise implementation in areas undergoing significant change (eg through large scale infrastructure projects) and growth. Ensure City Architect roles report directly to General Managers or Chief Executive Officers until appropriate workplace cultures and resource models have been established to support good design outcomes more broadly.
- 2. Seek Chief Executive Officers/General Managers support to lead cultural change within Councils.** An alliance of CEOs/GMs who have City Design teams and have experienced the benefit of good design on place-based outcomes could provide a forum for local government CEOs looking to improve the quality of design within their LGAs. Once the leadership context exists current collaboration models could be enhanced or new developed to provide the necessary organisational support. Cultural change initiatives could include the establishment of a forum for shared learning across local government agencies, providing support for local government agencies looking to embed new design positions within their organisation and supporting communities of practice.

- 3. Provide onboarding training on ‘good design’,** the benefits of design to places and the role of in-house designers to Councillors. Include information on the benefits of good design to places and the role of in-house designers to achieving this in the onboarding process for new Councillors. Ensure training is jargon free and explains the different roles of planners, designers and engineers play within Council.
- 4. Review position titles and organisational structures for in-house designers.** Consider where design expertise sits within organisations and whether existing capacity (and future industry pipelines) are fully supported by existing titles, position descriptions and reporting lines.
- 5. Engage with industry groups** (Australian Institute of Architects (AIA), Australian Institute of Landscape Architects, Urban Design Association) to build pipelines into the sector. This could include participation in award programs, continuous professional development opportunities, and professional job boards to measure design success against industry markers, grow professional skills and build design pipelines into the local government sector.
- 6. Work with LGNSW to increase awareness of design and designers within local government.** This could include recognising design professionals roles, supporting in industry-facing engagement and events including career forums.

State government-facing

Support and reinforce efforts by local government to grow internal design expertise and implement City Design/City Architect teams. This could include:

- Supporting Local Government leaders (CEOs, GMs) to champion good design at a peer-to-peer level within local government;
- Programs that encourage Councils to engage and support designers particularly in areas with limited or no in-house design expertise;
- Including perspectives of in-house designers in development and testing of future NSW Government policy and guidance.

Address the opportunity and challenge of design governance across jurisdictions. This includes:

- Seeking the support of NSW Government Architect to champion design governance across State and Local Government jurisdictions;
- Consider establishing a forum between State and Local Government agencies to discuss design governance issues that cross jurisdictions such as major infrastructure, significant place-shaping projects, policy and planning frameworks;
- Support communities of practice that increase awareness and understanding across jurisdictions.

Research and education-facing

Support ongoing research on design in government to inform capacity building and advance practice. Research areas could include:

- A similar study of design professionals in State Government;
- A survey to quantify, spatially locate and further understand the practice of design professionals in local (and potentially state) government;
- Developing case studies of effective design governance models (local, interstate, overseas) and assessing them for applicability in the local context;
- A symposium on design governance hosted by a University, bringing practitioners together;
- Further research on the preliminary findings of this report to deepen the ability of design professionals to articulate their practice and measure the tangible social, cultural and environmental impact of designers in government.

Support ongoing education of architects, landscape architects, and urban designers in public practice. This could include:

- Introduction to public practice through studio projects, practice subjects and electives that focus on built outcomes and design governance;
- Communication of design in accessible English into design course curriculum to assist future practitioners explain design (architecture, landscape architecture, urban design) to non-designers.

Increase interdisciplinary awareness of ‘good design’ and the roles played by architects, landscape architects, urban designers, planners and engineers. This could include:

- Developing courses within planning and engineering streams to deepen awareness of architecture, landscape architecture and urban design;
- Create opportunities for interdisciplinary study, studios and electives shared between planning, urban design, architecture, landscape architecture and engineering cohorts.

Industry-facing

1. Support engagement with peak professional bodies with Australian Institute of Architects (AIA), Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) and Urban Design Association (UDA).
2. Support public dialogue that explains design, 'good design' and what designers do in plain English. This includes: continuing to promote and support public-facing city talks, community talks (such as Architecture Street) and other initiatives which seek to explain design and what architects, landscape architects and urban designers do to the general public.
3. **Advocate for interdisciplinary education** between architects, landscape architects, urban design, planners, and engineers. This includes:
 - a. Partnership between design peak bodies to increase collective impact;
 - b. Promoting interdisciplinary education as an underpinning of 'good design' to professional associations of allied disciplines including but not limited to PIA and Engineers Australia.
4. **Advocate for 'good design'**, executive-level design leadership and in-house design teams in local government. This includes:
 - a. Engaging with political leaders and CEOs/GMs across State and Local Government on the importance of City Architects and Design teams within local government to facilitate high quality outcomes at the local level;
 - b. Supporting university education and local government (generally) in their efforts to upskill and build professional pipelines into public practice.
5. **Increase engagement** with the local government sector generally. This could include participation in local government conferences, conversations and forums where there is an opportunity to discuss and support 'good design' and the role of designers in government.



Parramatta Ways: Implementing Sydney's Green Grid. Image: courtesy City of Parramatta Council

PART 7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study has begun to reveal the rich and varied role designers in local government play and the types of contribution they can make, but there is still much to learn.

Every month, new members join the DiG group either through discovery or recommendation, and without doubt, a parallel study could be undertaken on the variety of design practices and practitioners at the State Government level, revealing similar levels of practice diversity.

Many architects, landscape architects and urban designers have entered local government to make a public contribution, but their commitment and resilience is often not acknowledged or supported in the sector.

Their practice is broader, more collaborative, and interdisciplinary than current training for these disciplines, and it is hoped that this study sparks new conversations and different ways of thinking within universities and across professional circles.

Designers are entering local government to use their skills and training in creative ways to achieve good design outcomes for local places and communities. In doing so, many find themselves in leadership roles due to their ability to:

- Collaborate and co-create;
- Understand spatial design process (from ideation to implementation);

- Pivot easily between scales (from big picture to granular detail);
- Synthesise information;
- Solve problems;
- See opportunities;
- Create integrated outcomes for integrated places.

There are examples in NSW Councils where traditional workplace structures have been challenged, designers have been empowered, the culture has adjusted leading to greater impact via good design outcomes. In these environments some of the impact designers can have is more obvious.

For other Councils, it can be difficult for in-house designers to propose a different approach in the roles they occupy, however they still find ways to make an impact and improve local places.

By finding ways to communicate the work, articulate the process and measure its impact, the benefits of in-house design thinking and process could be made available to other areas of within local government and continue to add – both economic and social value – to places and organisations across New South Wales.

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