



Australian Institute of  
Landscape Architects

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## **Department of Planning, Industry and Environment - Public Spaces Division**

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### **Submission NSW PUBLIC SPACES CHARTER by the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) NSW Chapter**

#### SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

It is commendable that the Department of Planning Industry and Environment is establishing the Public Spaces Charter and AILA supports this important initiative. In summary from the above commentary and the attached detailed table of responses we recommend that the following would benefit from further attention

- a greater focus on all aspects of connectivity in all of the Principles
- a greater inclusion of the vital role of green infrastructure/ natural systems throughout the document
- more emphasis on the central role of parks
- greater emphasis on mental health and connection to nature
- more accuracy in defining the principles and stronger commitment to adequate measures is required. (The liveability aspects are quite well covered, however,)
- Principles which celebrate our 'local character' and 'culture and creativity' need further work to adequately recognise First Nation Connection to Country, and to address the geological and ecological history of the land, its scenic and sensory qualities, diverse stories of human interaction and sustainability of land use and materials. Refer Appendix 1: New Urban Agenda on Indigenous cultures and Paragraphs 70, 71, 76
- A greater focus on what makes for the quality of place is required rather than the currently heavy emphasis on activation interventions, regulations and programs
- Overarching information is missing including, to articulate how the Principles and Actions relate to other policy, and how they sit within the scale continuum of macro to micro, bioregional to local
- the many layers of heritage need to be highlighted and integration with the work of Greener Places is vital.

## GENERAL OVERVIEW

The Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) congratulates the DPIE on the publication of the Public Spaces Charter. This timely initiative in the immediate post-COVID event coincides with a wider community appreciation and recognition that the landscapes in which we live and the public spaces we enjoy are central to our health and that of the wider environment and our culture, heritage and economy.

In particular AILA is highly supportive of a suite of recent initiatives emanating from the NSW State Government and the DPIE and GANSW in particular that seek to promote the values of our Public spaces - and which lead to the generation of this important Charter - not least in the apparently unique creation of a Minister for Public Spaces.

We are fully supportive of the reach and ambitious coverage of the Charter and endorse DPIE's approach to making the Charter and the Toolkit a highly accessible document for all of the many interested stakeholders in the health of our public realm. We are also heartened that the Charter has drawn on inputs from a range of international experts in this field.

AILA also commends DPIE on their extensive communications on a wide variety of platforms including social media, in seeking to generate conversation around and action for public space. The inclusion of videos, webinars, ideas competitions and almost daily social media posts, as well as funding of quick-turnaround local initiatives have all gone a long way to maintaining public space in the forefront of the community's mind as the COVID pandemic -which generated those insights and renewed appreciation – begins to assume less importance in the community's daily focus.

AILA is consequently keen to offer all possible assistance in seeing this Charter completed and widely adopted. To that end we hope that this submission, while critical on some aspects of the draft Charter, is taken as a constructive and supportive contribution to this vital document.

## WHO IS AILA?

The Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) is the peak national body for the Landscape Architecture. AILA champions quality design for public open spaces, stronger communities, and greater environmental stewardship. We provide our members with training, recognition, and a community of practice, to share knowledge, ideas and action. With our members, we anticipate and develop a leading position on issues of concern in landscape architecture. Alongside government and allied professions, we work to improve the design and planning of the natural and built environment.

In operation since 1966, AILA represents over 3,500 landscape architects and promotes excellence in planning, design and management for life outdoors. Committed to designing and creating better spaces in Australia, landscape architects have the skills and expertise to improve the nation's liveability through a unique approach to planning issues via innovative integrated solutions. In doing so, landscape architects contribute towards better environmental, social and economic outcomes for all Australians.

The Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) welcomes the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry. Our members were concerned and shocked this year and felt that as designers and managers of the landscape we have an obligation and an opportunity to contribute and improve practice.

## CONTENT OF THIS SUBMISSION

The online submissions template is structured under five questions; however, as we have submitted a detailed response as below, we hope that we have addressed these questions at various locations in this submission.

We have structured this response in four parts:

- Context of the Charter
- General Observations and Comments
- Detailed Response to the Charter
- Commentary on the Guide and Toolkit

Please note that as we have already submitted a detailed response to GANSW on the Greener Places Guidelines – which we see as critically complementary to the Charter - we have repeated some of the commentary in the first two sections of our response. We have chosen to repeat this commentary as AILA is concerned that the drafts of these two important documents do not appear to talk to each other nor make clear their respective and complementary roles.

## CONTEXT OF THE CHARTER

In submitting this response, we are aware of the important planning context in which the Charter sits and briefly summarise some critical matters below, that we believe must inform an integrated response:

- **Absence of Any National Policy Framework;** given the increasing recognition of the values of public open spaces, biodiversity, canopy, waterways and wetlands to the health of our environment and population it is concerning that there is no National policy framework nor legislative instrument that we are aware of to guide States and local government in best practice delivery of an integrated approach to these critical matters. We hope that this Charter is instrumental in placing pressure for a National framework and common language for our public spaces
- **Differing Approaches in Each State;** as a consequence of the above each state has prepared its version of policies and guides over recent decades, all adopting varying metrics. It is therefore, heartening to see that this Charter is at the forefront of best practice and adopts a best practice and accessible approach.
- **Shortage of Expertise:** Worryingly, the field of recreation and public realm planning has lost an academic base over the last two decades in Australia and this aspect of strategic planning is also not generally taught to planners; consequently, many authorities are left short of expertise and experience in delivering these important initiatives. This Charter must provide a critical framework to assist those responsible for these areas in meeting best practice. The success of the Charter will however be highly contingent on how it is promoted and supported through its implementation. In the absence of critical expertise and support, the Guide alone will not achieve its objectives.

- **Growing Demand for Land;** with growing populations and increasing densities comes a parallel demand for and rising cost of land. The result of this has been that open space and natural environments have been considered secondary to our housing and work needs. In this context, we need to challenge urban growth priorities as profit-driven projects; for example, the profit-driven layout of housing developments in government-initiated 'growth centres' has resulted in the narrowing of street allocations, reductions in block size and reduced setbacks. The accumulated effect of this, undermines any sense of public space as part of the overall fabric of these developments, rather than just set-aside areas.

There is increasing research that provides evidence of the significant economic and health value to the nation of our public places and natural environment. It is time to recognise this and to fund an integrated public realm and natural environment that acknowledges these and other values. This calls for more than embellishing existing open space and requires a bold and confident approach in investment in these critical areas of our day-to-day lives.
- **Rapidly Changing Leisure and Recreation Behaviour;** much has changed in the last three decades in the way we approach - and the time we give to - our leisure and recreation. Sadly, many of the approaches adopted by the deliverers of the public realm and organisations responsible for recreation delivery (especially in the area of sports) have remained entrenched in the expectations of single use or heavily programmed open-space, failing to recognise these trends. The Charter rightly seeks to encourage a response to public space that recognises enduring values while adapting to changes on needs and demand.
- **Health Benefits of Open Space and Natural Environments;** the Australian population's recent experience of COVID 19 has dramatically demonstrated to us all the value of public open spaces and natural environments to our individual and collective health and well-being. This significant world-wide event has also emphasised the critical role that nature and landscape plays in social engagement. It is to be hoped that this Charter will build on this growing recognition and glean political support for further investment in public space and our natural environment. In this regard the role of Green Infrastructure must be seen and promoted as a central pillar in achieving enduring, appealing and sustainable public space.
- **Climate Change and Heat Island Impacts;** a systems-based approach to our open space and the natural landscape is key to addressing the profound, growing impacts on our communities from the effects of climate change. AILA has recently adopted a Carbon Positive policy that will guide our members in a best practice approach to this growing challenge. It is important that the Charter emphasise that an effective strategy to combat heat island impacts must be based on multiple and integrated environmental systems, a rigorously sustainable approach, and careful consideration of design choices such as cool materials, shade provision, and resilient planting.
- **Biodiversity Loss;** the current rapid, exponential decline in species diversity in Australia must be urgently addressed in the planning and design of all development, including buildings and infrastructure as well as open space. The Guide must provide clear direction, based on current conservation science, on the fundamental protection and enhancement of biodiversity in all open spaces.
- **Connection with Country;** the burgeoning realisation of the value that we can all gain from engaging with our Aboriginal community in recognising their long-standing cultural engagement with landscape and their ability to teach us about connection with country should be considered

central to a Charter of this nature. The development of a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) by AILA recognises this opportunity and we would be pleased to assist in facilitating greater involvement of the Aboriginal community in the planning design and management of our open spaces. The GANSW's Designing with Country initiative offers an ideal model to effect a much needed paradigm shift in this respect.

- **Cultural Heritage;** central to the planning of any new development (building, infrastructure or landscape) is an understanding of the cultural heritage of the existing place. Without this context being rigorously researched and integrated into a project from inception, critical aspects of our natural and cultural heritage may be lost and new places rendered soulless and lacking in context. The AILA Landscape Heritage Group have undertaken extensive research into the importance of landscape cultural heritage, and would be please to provide further detailed guidance for inclusion in this

#### GENERAL OBSERVATIONS AND COMMENTS

We make the following general observations and commentary on the Charter.

##### **Planning Context of the Charter**

Given its pivotal role in advocating for a collective commitment to high quality public space across the State, the Charter does not provide a clear explanation of where it sits amongst the numerous recent and related State Government initiatives emanating from DPIE and other Government Agencies. A 'line of sight' summary such as is provided in the document the Creating Places for People, Urban Design Protocol for Australian Cities, would be helpful, Fig 1;

Figure 1: Line of sight from national to site level

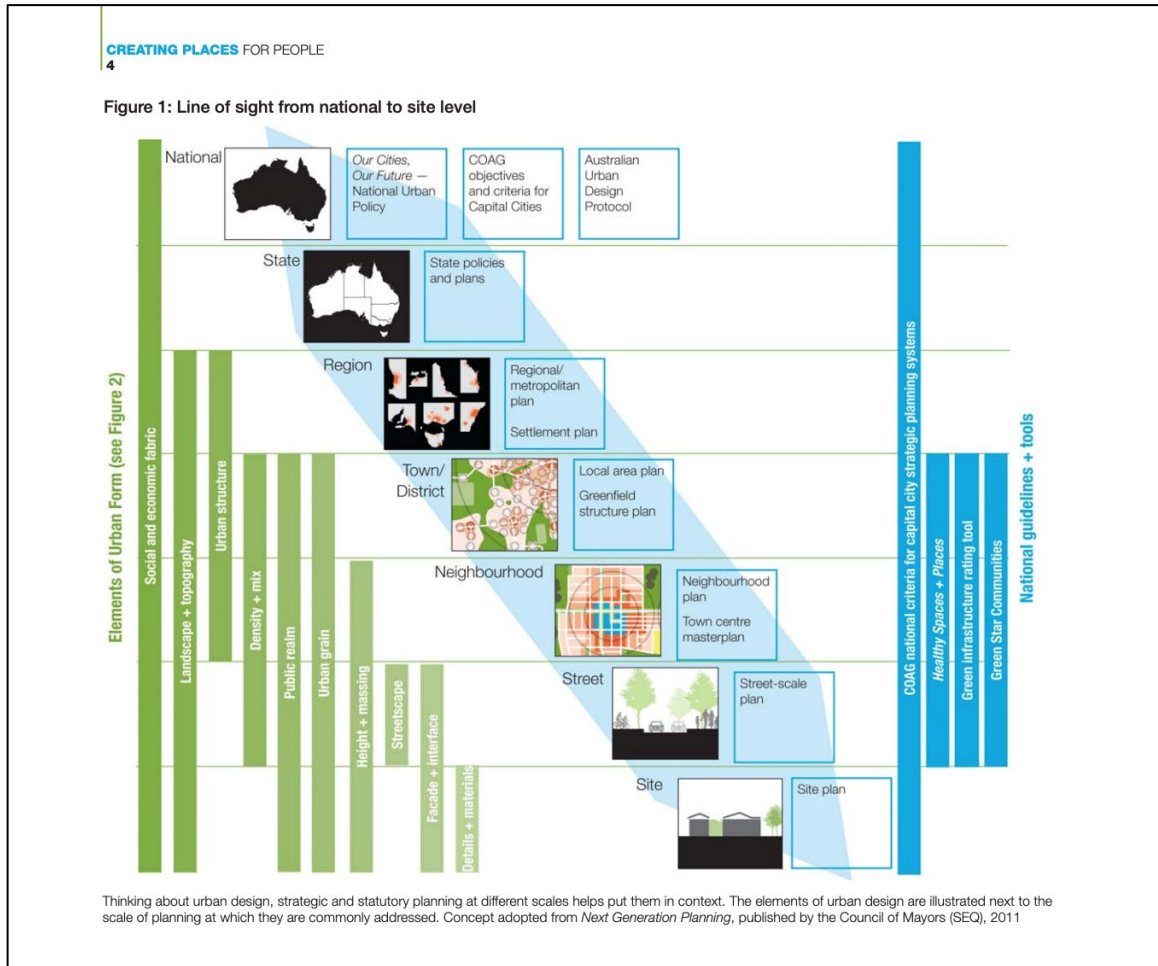


Figure 1. Line of sight from national to site level, in *Creating Places for People: Urban Design Protocol*, 2011. p4 adopted from *Next Generation Planning Council of Mayors (SEQ) 2011*

## 10 Principles

Selecting 10 Principles provides a sound framework for the Charter and the broad intent of their coverage is supported. However, as they stand, these Principles are rather generic and tend to oversimplify the aims; a number of the titles also fail to suitably reflect the content within. It may be useful to expand on the Principles and establish a layer of sub-principles to further define their intention (see also Writing Style and Expression below re syntax and reading flow issues).

## Connectivity

So much of what creates great public space centres around the numerous dimensions of connectivity, be that connected spaces, connected natural systems, Connection to Country or social connection. So, it is surprising the words 'connectivity' or 'connected' appear relatively few times throughout the Charter when such words should probably act as a consistent thread through every Principle.

## Green Infrastructure

Across the board it is the role of Green Infrastructure (GI) that arguably offers the opportunity to best realise the 10 Principles in the Charter. To that end the absence of any substantive reference to the natural systems and networks of waterways, riparian landscapes, bushland, wetlands, wildlife corridors and the like seems a significant omission. This further reinforces the absence of a strong thread of connectivity in the Charter referred to above, something that the Sydney Green Grid seeks to address.

## The Role of Parks

In rightly seeking to broaden the collective understanding of the wider public realm by incorporating public facilities and streets, the Charter appears to underplay the critical role of parks, which are unquestionably the heavy lifters in the public realm and in the community's mind. The use of the word 'park' is quite limited throughout the document. We would suggest that this imbalance needs to be addressed

An example of recognising the value of well managed and governed parks and landscape heritage in terms of resilience is richly analysed in The Federal Urban Design Protocol:



Figure 2: Place Productivity and Sustainability p.9 Aust. Govt. Urban Design Protocol for Australian Cities

## **Activation Focus**

The Charter Principles seem very focused on activation and programmatic initiatives. While helpful as value adds to any public space the implication is that successful spaces need to be activated through programmed interventions or regulations. This is a serious misconception, and it is concerning that the Charter does not focus on those essential design and planning qualities that effectively self-activate a public space, usually without need for any activation intervention. Indeed, a poorly designed place will not be improved through activation initiatives.

## **Landscape and Landscape Architecture**

The word 'landscape' is strangely absent from much of the Charter. Given the role of landscape as the canvas on which all public space is founded and its central place in the concept of Connection to Country we would expect that the word and the concepts it embraces would permeate the Charter. As notably and of some concern to AILA the role of Landscape Architecture and Landscape Architects is nowhere mentioned in the Charter, not even in the description of the involved professions named in the document.

There are of course many professions involved in the planning, design and maintenance of public space, but of all of these Landscape Architects have all aspects of public space as a central focus of their work and probably play the most prominent role within the public and private sectors.

## **Mental Health and Connection to Nature**

With the recent findings of the Productivity Commission into the enormous cost to the nation of poor mental health there is an increasing focus on the community's mental health and in particular the role that connection to nature plays in maintaining good mental health. We would suggest that this might be given more focus, particularly in Principle 6 Healthy and Active.

## **Public, Semi-Public and Private Spaces**

The Charter's definition of public space does not appear to address the numerous and important spaces that are owned by public agencies but which often remain under-utilised or heavily constrained in usage, not least the infrastructure corridors of energy, transport and water supply corridors in NSW. With the increasing demand for open space connections and corridors these agencies are rightly coming under pressure to free up public use of these spaces and to enhance their natural systems connectivity. We believe that the Charter should seek to reinforce this move.

## **Regional and Rural Areas**

AILA receives regular commentary from its many members who work in regional and rural areas that State Government policy documents rarely address the particularities and unique aspects of those locations. By its nature it is not possible for this Charter to address all of the varying contexts to which it may apply, but given that the Charter applies to public space across the whole State we would recommend that the document emphasize that the Principles.

## **Relation to Other Government Policy**

The webinars that accompanied the introduction to the Charter referred to various related initiatives across government that included the Greener Place policy and reference to Sydney Green Grid.



That text that refers to these initiatives in the Charter appears rather patchy and seems to omit reference to Greener Places at all (unless 'NSW Open Spaces Guidelines' is implied by this). Firstly, it is of concern that neither the recently released Greener Places Guidelines draft nor the draft Public Spaces Charter refer to each other in any discernible fashion. Secondly, it's not clear from the Charter where it fits amongst the many State Government policies that relate to public realm. The line of slight style diagram in Fig 1 would be useful here.

### **Writing Style and Expression**

The writing style adopted for the Charter is commendably jargon-free and generally accessible to all possible readers. The flow of the text is however inconsistent, at times engaging and inspiring at other times disjointed and unclear. The inconsistent syntax across the titles of the 10 Principles is particularly distracting and unhelpful to conveying the intent at the core of the Charter (see detailed comments table).

Some of the paragraphs are also quite lengthy and could be made more accessible by being split where appropriate. Rather than simply providing a location caption for each image it might be worth some additional commentary or perhaps even including some inspiring quotes.

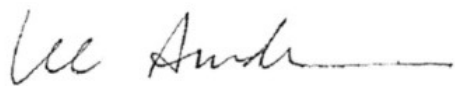
### **Next Steps and Governance**

The Charter closes rather abruptly on the last of the 10 Principles and does not give any indication of the next steps in relation to its adoption and how what subsequent or existing strategy or guidelines it will inform. It would likewise be helpful to include a brief overview of how the Charter sees the governance structures of public space being managed and evolved across its many related agencies.

### **References**

Given the presumably extensive research that has been undertaken and the range of experts consulted in compiling the Charter, the references seem very limited in scope. While this is a public document intended to appeal to a wide audience – and acknowledging this a is a reference list not a bibliography - a rather longer list of references would encourage the curious and engaged to investigate further. Even 10-15 well selected references in total would assist here.

Finally, there is a general paucity of reference to landscape as the foundation of public space and a lack of recognition of Landscape Architects' role in all aspects of the Principles to date.



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