



Place Design Studio

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# Initial Urban Design Assessment

Former Gasworks Site,

111 Queens Parade and 433 Smith Street, Fitzroy North

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Prepared for Protect Fitzroy North Incorporated

by David Pryor, Place Design Studio

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## Introduction

It is important to maximise public value from the disposal of public land, with consideration given to a broad range of potential benefits beyond that of the sale price. The redevelopment of the gasworks site has the potential to become a very exciting project. The 3.9 hectare scale of the site, together with public ownership, create opportunities for a demonstration project with benefits extending well beyond the site (demonstrating affordable living or precinct-scale sustainability for example). Amendment C243 will be a crucial tool which can either facilitate such opportunities or lose them. Without strong guidance and control for the site, the final outcomes will tend to revert to fairly generic intensive development.

The following assessment focuses on the DPO16 component of the amendment.

## DPO16

The DPO lists information to be provided in a Development Plan, but contains very little to direct the Development Plan.

Clause 1 may be unduly lenient. It appears to permit, for example, the (approval of) demolition of a heritage structure before a Development Plan has been approved. It also allows for a permit to be issued for part of the site prior to the overall development plan being resolved. This could result in subsequent stages being compromised in layout or design.

Clause 3 of DPO16 requires a Development Plan generally in accordance with the Indicative Concept Plan and the *North Fitzroy Gasworks Precinct Urban Design Framework 2008*. This is an important inclusion, as the Urban Design Framework (UDF) includes useful guidance that is lacking in the DPO. However, the two documents differ in some significant respects. Of particular concern is that they contradict each other in terms of some of the maximum building heights. There is a risk that this may result in the UDF being disregarded, and it would be highly desirable to amend the Indicative Concept Plan so that the two are in closer alignment.

## Site Layout

The urban design framework has a clear structure, largely generated by extending surrounding streets into and through the site. This helps the development knit into its surroundings and provides a logic for the form of the open spaces within the site. The Indicative Concept Plan is similar in its subdivision pattern and permeability.



However, the clarity of structure has been reduced, as have view lines through the site, which can aid legibility and invite the public to confidently and safely enter the site.

That said, I see no need to religiously project all surrounding streets into the site. In some respects the Indicative Concept Plan improves on the urban design framework - by reducing the maximum distance between site entry points for example. Given the changes that have already been made, there may be benefit in reviewing the diagonal links and chamfers that are based on the alignment of Hodgkinson St but no longer extend it in a meaningful way.

The Indicative Concept Plan has no requirements for modifying adjoining streets to facilitate linkage with the neighbourhood – the Jamieson St crossing and the Smith St tram stop being examples suggested in the UDF.

## Built Form and Massing

The Indicative Concept Plan has no upper-level setbacks from George St.

The UDF calls for mandatory (“absolute”) height limits to all street frontages, but the maximum heights in the DPO would be discretionary, given that the Development Plan is only required to be “generally in accordance”.

The street wall heights in DPO16 are higher than those in the urban design framework, particularly along Smith and George Streets, as shown in the following table:

Frontage	DPO16 Maximum	UDF Preferred Max	UDF Absolute Max
Queens Pde	20m (6 st)	17m	20m
Smith St north	20m	14m	17m
Smith St south	32m (10 st)	14m	17m
Alexandra Pde	32m	17m	30m
George St	32m	17m	20m

The proposed 10 storey street walls are considered excessive – particularly given the discretion allowed for even taller facades to be approved. In Melbourne, such street wall heights are very rare outside the central city. 5 storeys is often considered the upper limit of “human scale” for a streetscape; above this, there is limited scope for any visual or other interaction between building occupants and pedestrians.

In terms of overall height, DPO16 would permit significantly greater heights. The urban design framework did not include overall maximum heights, but set performance criteria. The combination of upper levels not being visible from adjoining streets and the provision of winter sun to the southern edges of open spaces would significantly constrain height away from the street frontages. It would be useful to model both the DPO and the UDF envelopes and test them. Refined performance criteria should then be included in the DPO, or the Indicative Concept Plan should be adjusted to ensure well-scaled interfaces with the open spaces within the site.

Street wall heights should be considered in the context of proposed DDO16 (Amendment C231), which proposes:

- a consistent street wall (specifically including along Queens Pde just east of the subject site and Smith St),
- a mandatory maximum 5 storey street wall height in Precinct 2C (west of the subject site) fronting Queens Pde, George St and Alexander Pde



- a mandatory maximum 4 storey street wall height in Precinct 3 fronting Smith St and the section of Queens Pde east of the subject site;
- DDO16 does not address the block north of the site; existing development is low-height and fine-grained, but Hansen's Built Form Review shows this as part of a "minimal change" area (Figure 16 on p44 appears to override p41 in this respect).

The Indicative Concept Plan proposes a maximum street wall height of 6 storeys along Queens Pde and the north section of Smith St (opposite Precinct 3) – 1 to 2 storeys higher than the neighbouring blocks. Given the separation provided by Smith and George Streets, height differences of 1 and 2 Storeys could present as reasonably consistent, but any greater differential would not; if a 6 storey height limit is to proceed here, it would need to be mandatory, as there is otherwise a likelihood of 7 or 8 storey forms being subsequently approved.

If the DPO were to be amended to set both preferred and mandatory maximum heights, I recommend that the criteria for exceeding the preferred height be more demanding and more measurable than those in the UDF – eg "5 star Green Star" rather than "sustainability", or "5% affordable housing (administered by an accredited housing association ... etc)".

The proposed height and setback requirements are not clearly conveyed. The Indicative Concept Plan needs to be read in conjunction with the table on p3, but is not cross-referenced to it. Under the Maximum Height within Setback column, overall maxima are included, which are not within the setback. I recommend that the information in the table be transferred to the Indicative Concept Plan and that the table be deleted.

The Indicative Concept Plan appears to show all levels setback from the west, south and part of the east boundary. If these setbacks are proposed, they should be spelt out. I am not aware of any reason to set back the street wall except along George St, where it could facilitate a cycle lane.

### **Public Open Space**

Useful public spaces are called for, but there is a lack of specific requirements such as minimum sizes, or that these spaces be handed over to the council on completion for example.

Three of the open spaces shown on the Indicative Concept Plan are very exposed to streets, limiting their amenity and usefulness. For the north-facing space, this is compensated by good solar access, but this is less true of the east and southwest spaces.

The central space would be surrounded by 10- to 14-storey buildings, and solar access would therefore be very limited. The east side would receive sun at around midday, but vehicular access is proposed on the east side, limiting pedestrian use.

The quality of open spaces is largely dependent on the interfaces around them. To this end, it is desirable to stipulate active frontages. This is done in the UDF, but not the DPO.

Link spaces are an important part of the open space network. They should be open to the sky, but DPO16 does not state this. Consideration also needs to be given to the height of the buildings binding these links and the resultant height:width ratios of the link spaces.



Given the difficulty of excavating contaminated soil within the Gore St alignment, it would be helpful for the Landscape and Public Realm Concept plan to include consideration of species that remediate the soil.

The two “primary pedestrian nodes” in the Indicative Concept Plan overlap the Gore St axis, which may be beneficial for tree planting as there will tend to be soil below rather than an underground carpark. (This is subject to the detailed resolution of the remediation of the site.)

### **Movement Network**

I have not undertaken a traffic assessment, but note that, whereas the urban design framework limited vehicular access to the Queens Pde frontage, DPO16 proposes access from every street except Queens Pde.

The vehicular link through the site appears to be an efficient way of servicing all buildings from the rear, but it is important that these spaces within the site are attractive shared spaces – not simply service lanes.

The way in which carparking is dealt with has significant urban design impacts. I recommend that DPO16 include carparking principles similar to those in the UDF – particularly taking advantage of the required excavation to locate carparking (and other services) underground.

The Indicative Concept Plan has 6 links into the “public” realm of the site – one more than the urban design framework. This is an improvement, provided each site entry is well linked across the adjoining streets to the surroundings.

### **Building Design**

To achieve the design diversity needed for the development to integrate with its relatively fine-grained neighbourhood and avoid a monolithic presentation, it is desirable to include a requirement that each building be designed by a different architect. (This was done for the QV development with some success.)

### **Housing Diversity**

The DPO includes a requirement for a report that demonstrates “how the development proposes to provide affordable housing and family friendly housing”. While this is commendable, it does not go far enough. Given the rare opportunity offered by a large block in government ownership, it would be appropriate to require a percentage of dwellings to be allocated to social or affordable housing. (Although not primarily an urban design issue, occupancy has significant impacts on urban design outcomes.) Without such specificity, housing diversity tends to be limited to the number of bedrooms per dwelling.

Family housing should specifically be encouraged at low floor levels overlooking communal open space.

### **Environmentally Sustainable Design**

DDO16 lists ESD principles that any Development Plan would need to be based on. These are sound, but there should also be a requirement that the Plan take advantage of the unique ESD opportunities offered by such a large site. These include shared resources such as on-site car-share spaces; the consolidation of carparking and substation(s) to minimize negative impacts on the public realm; site-



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wide reticulation of grey water or hot water; consideration of the local food network; and circular systems using various forms of waste as resources.

## **Conclusions**

While DPO16 is mostly sound, it should provide significantly more direction, some of the building envelopes are considered excessive, contradictions with the urban design framework need to be resolved, and measures should be put in place to ensure the site is developed in an integrated way, fulfilling some of the unique opportunities it offers.

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