



A Vision for Kings Cross

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Committee
for
Sydney





Overview



Turn laneways into shared zones

Deliver public Wi-Fi

Slow car speeds

Develop a lighting strategy

Create new pocket parks

Create new through-site links

Centralise noise management and complaints

Increase tree canopy

Incentivise theatres and live performance venues

Certify Kings Cross as a night-time hub in the Neon Grid

Trial new waste collection models

Repurpose underutilised retail space

Improve wayfinding and amenity

Increase late night transport and improve Kings Cross Station

Establish a Business Improvement District

Increase pedestrian space across William Street



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A great place in need of direction

"The old timers will tell you the Cross has had it. It's not like it used to be, they'll say. And they're right of course. It's not, for Kings Cross exists in a permanent state of mutation, and herein lies its very existence – its adaptability to change, its readiness to accept and absorb a new generation with new ideas yet still retain its unique sangfroid"

R Ellis & W Stacey, 1971¹

Alongside images of the Opera House and Bondi Beach, Kings Cross is one of the most internationally recognised places in Australia. Its eclectic history as a bohemian area, a red-light district, home to gangsters and cut throats, movie stars and artists, live music and theatres, dive bars and discos, has made it an intriguing place to live or to visit. It was a place for new migrants to find a home and for the rich to play. For the past century it has built a reputation for being vibrant though also naughty, edgy, and gritty – delighting, and sometimes shocking, an often-conservative Sydney.

But for all its colourful history and naughty reputation, Kings Cross has been knocked off kilter. In 2014, a spate of alcohol fuelled violence and some tragic deaths sparked outrage from across the community. In response the NSW Government imposed a series of reforms and restrictions which collectively become known as the 'lock-out' laws. The result was a significant decline in night-time activity which saw most of its bars and night clubs closed². With much of its local economy based on alcohol sales the precinct experienced a dramatic economic decline. Five years later and many venues are boarded up and most of its bars and clubs closed. With much of its economic vibrancy gone and fewer visitors, the edgy parts now just look threatening to some, and the gritty parts look messy and unkempt. Most of its night-time economy has moved elsewhere, many tourist hotels have been converted to apartments, and the precinct has lost lots of jobs in hospitality (-12% since 2014), retail (-10%) and, of course, in pubs and bars (-33%)³.

Investment in new restaurants, shops and bars has been limited as the regulatory environment is uncertain and the future economic direction of the precinct is unclear. Many of the shopfronts are on short term leases as landowners wait to see what the future holds. Some are considering redeveloping their land to more residential use. Perhaps worst of all, its vibrant reputation is in tatters and it is regularly described as being dull. The Covid-19 pandemic has only accelerated the precinct's malaise, with tourists gone and venues shut.

The Cross is undergoing a metamorphosis – and yet to land in a place that rests easy with its history and provides a pathway forward for its future. It is a precinct that, right now, doesn't seem to know what it wants to be, what its purpose is, or what its future should look like. It seems to be waiting for something to happen or something to change.

But it need not be like this. The Cross still has all the ingredients for making a great and vibrant place. It has a wonderful street network, intersected with interesting lanes and parks. It has great transport access with connections to the City Rail network, and easy access to the CBD. It has a rich and beautiful architecture, housing the highest population density in the nation. And it has a great and colourful history. In short, it has great bones on which we can build a great place and a great future that improves liveability and ambience for local residents, and that visitors also find appealing.

This report seeks to set out a new vision for the Cross, one which builds on its rich history but also seeks to avoid some of the mistakes of the past. It outlines some key moves which the local community and businesses suggested should be considered to rebuild the area's vibrancy and liveability. It focuses on rebuilding the precinct through a new economic strategy, along with good 'place-making'. It looks at activating the street by promoting restaurants, bars and cafes with alfresco dining and kerb side seating. It looks at how a new night-time economy can be supported – one not based solely on alcohol – but on live performance, theatre, restaurants, small bars and tourism. It looks at how the local economy can diversify to become a place of work, as well as rest and play, because a good night-time economy doesn't mean it should not also have a healthy daytime economy. It looks at resetting the Cross as an integral part of Sydney's visitor economy, offering a fun and safe time, day or night – and for that offering to be available for locals and visitors of all ages and interests.

¹ R Ellis and W Stacey, Kings Cross Sydney, Thomas Nelson, Sydney, 1971, p 6

² <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/what-the-hell-is-going-on-in-sydney-176-venues-disappear-20180527-p4zhst.html>

³ Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics Counts of Australian Businesses, including Entries and Exits (CABEE) June 2019 (ABS Catalogue 8165.0)



Part 1: The past and current state of play

A short walk east: A Brief history of Kings Cross

"It seemed like an illuminated garden in which the trees were laden with innumerable brilliant lamps"

The Sydney Gazette describing the view of Kings Cross from Sydney. 1833⁴



Few places in Australia have as rich a history as King Cross. Prior to white settlement the area was home to the Cadigal people who used the area as a meeting place and ceremony ground. White settlement saw the area quickly developed, first as a failed farm, then as home for much of the colonial establishment who built mansions along the ridgeline overlooking Sydney and the Harbour.

As Sydney grew, development along the ridge intensified, first as grand Victorian terraces, and then, from 1900 onwards, as federation and art deco style apartment buildings. Initially named Queen's Cross⁵, defined by the intersection of Victoria Street and Darlinghurst Road, the precinct was renamed Kings Cross in 1905 after King Edward VII and to prevent confusion with nearby Queens Square. By 1930, it was the most densely populated neighbourhood in Australia. A title it still holds.

With the expansion of the nearby Garden Island Naval port, the precinct became a playground for cashed up sailors and soldiers on furlough. First during WW2, and then during the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the precinct

became home to stylish eateries, theatres, burlesque dancers, dance halls and sex workers, as entrepreneurs tried every which way to relieve these servicemen of their dollars. This heady, anything goes atmosphere, soon attracted artists and writers, political and LGBT activists, and the sly grog trade. It became a gateway neighbourhood for new migrants offering affordable accommodation, easy employment, and a tolerant assimilation. And it became a playground for the rich and adventurous seeking a more risqué form of entertainment.

The economic stimulus generated by servicemen saw the Cross develop a thriving night-time economy and it became the place to go when the rest of Sydney closed down. Its high density, multicultural community, bohemian lifestyle, eclectic cuisine, rich architecture and nightlife cemented the Cross as an iconic, globally recognised part of Sydney. A must for any tourist and a place special to the heart of most Sydneysiders.

⁴ Sydney Gazette and NSW Advertiser, 12 February 1833, p 2

⁵ To celebrate Queen Victoria of Britain's diamond jubilee in 1897

Where is Kings Cross?

"Just where is Kings Cross? – or, as it is referred to affectionately by those who live there – The Cross. Can anyone say, or point to it definitely, or define its boundaries?"

HC Brewster, 1954

Defining the boundaries of the Cross is still a difficult problem. Does it include Potts Point and Darlinghurst and if so, how much of it? Does it end at William Street or extend past St Vincent's Hospital? Does it include parts of Elizabeth Bay and Woolloomooloo? Answering these questions depends very much on your own personal perspective. For many Sydneysiders, Kings Cross is simply what they imagine it to be.

In preparing this Paper, the Committee for Sydney has decided to avoid this debate completely because Kings Cross (or The Cross as most Sydneysiders call it) bleeds across arbitrary boundaries and defies any finite demarcations. It is where you think it is.





The 1980s saw most of the sailors and soldiers leave, but by then the Cross had a life of its own. Its late-night bars and nightclubs attracted thousands of visitors from across Sydney and across the world. Every night, but especially on weekends, the Cross became a mass of over 20,000 people seeking to dance and drink the night away. The local economy became increasingly based on alcohol. Many of the former theatres and dance halls were repurposed as nightclubs or hotels with live acts. What restaurants and cafes remained tended to migrate to the periphery of the precinct away from the crowds of revellers - north down Victoria Road and Potts Point or south towards Darlinghurst and Paddington.

Along with alcohol came drugs, both soft and hard, as well as crime, organised and disorganised. The combination of "destination drinking," drugs and vice slowly changed the perception of the Cross. What was once seen as a "naughty but nice" place, was increasingly associated with late night brawling, party buses, and gangs of stranded drunk people looking for a way home.

On the back of the Police Royal Commission, and widely exposed corruption amongst Kings Cross Police, in the late 1990s the NSW Government implemented a number of reforms aimed at "cleaning up Kings Cross", including the construction of new high profile police station and various other place management reforms, ultimately including the first medically supervised safe-injecting centre in Australia. In 2005, Kings Cross joined Johannesburg, as the only two places in the world to have the riot squad deployed as a matter of routine.

From Lock-Out to Lock-Down:

"The red globe of light, the liquor green,
The pulsing arrows and the running fire
Spilt on the stones, go deeper than a stream;
You find this ugly, I find it lovely"

Kenneth Slessor⁶

Sydney's tolerance of alcohol fuelled violence eventually reached its limits and the NSW Government responded with a series of regulatory reforms. Bars and nightclubs had their hours of operation limited, the type of alcohol they could serve and the music they could play proscribed. No new venues selling alcohol were permitted and patrons were restricted from moving around, as venues were required to 'lock' them out when they left. The reforms saw many venues close down and Kings Cross's night-time economy moved elsewhere. With its economic base (dining and alcohol) now curtailed, the precinct drifted and its future has become uncertain. The precinct saw little investment except demolishing some former venues and hotels for residential apartments. This decline was accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic which forced an even harder lock-down on what little activity remained. At the same time, new businesses like gyms have moved in and will likely have a role to play in the future of the area.

The Cross has a chance to reinvent itself and reshape its future. But what should this future look like? Going back to its days as the centre for destination drinking is not an option, so what should its future economic role be? What steps are required to improve the liveability of the place? What investments are needed, both public and private, to support a healthier day and night-time economy?

⁶ Strip on the Strip p.9

What the community thinks

The City of Sydney sponsored the Committee for Sydney to undertake community and business consultation to explore what future locals wanted to see and explore what options are possible for renewing the Cross. The goal is to outline a possible vision for the Cross and to prompt a wider discussion about its place in the wider Sydney story.

Working with the Institute for Public Policy and Governance at the University of Technology Sydney and Business Sydney, we received responses from 357 residents, business owners and Kings Cross stakeholders on what they liked and what they didn't like about the Cross in 2020. This represented a response rate of 48% from the 750 stakeholders invited to respond, which reflects a high degree of passion and investment in the future of Kings Cross.

We also conducted a series of workshops and focus groups to explore in more detail what some key stakeholders felt about the place, what needed improvement and what its future might look like. The next section summarises some of the key findings from these consultations.

A challenging Cross to bear: Current issues and problems

The feedback from the surveys and focus groups identified many spatial and economic issues facing the area. The main streets were struggling even before the Covid-19 lock-down, especially the critically important Darlinghurst Road. This road is the spine which holds the whole place together, if it's failing then the whole place will struggle.

While the architecture and existing built form mostly adds value, and the street layout is interesting, the public realm needs improvement. The footpaths are mostly in good condition, and City of Sydney Council has recently allocated significant resources to improving some of them. More however can be done to improve the amenity. Too often paths are cluttered with garbage bins from local shops and restaurants or they are not wide enough to accommodate kerb-side dining. Most of the local streets are still dominated by the private car.

The main 'gateways' to the Cross are uninviting. Notwithstanding the promise of the Cross-City tunnel, William Street is still a major traffic thoroughfare with poor pedestrian and cycling amenity. The other gateway, the train station, is a dark, brutalist bunker. Its main concourse is unattractive, has poor wayfinding and signage and only a well-trained local knows which exit goes where.

⁷ IPSOS / CFS Life in Sydney 2020 Survey

The Cross also lacks a coherent economic strategy. In the face of uncertainty, investing in a new business in the Cross is a fraught venture. The regulatory environment is difficult and subject to change. Adding to this uncertainty is the lack of a clear sense of what sort of place it wants to be. The tensions are obvious and play out in the urban form, function and use - should it be a residential neighbourhood resulting in a possible dormitory suburb, albeit a very densely populated one, despite its inner-city location? Should it hark back to its early days as a multicultural, foodie destination as an "eat street"? Does it return to being an entertainment hub, and if so, what form should this entertainment take?

The Cross lacks a clear sense of purpose - a clear brand or narrative to tell the world what it is today and what it wants to be tomorrow.

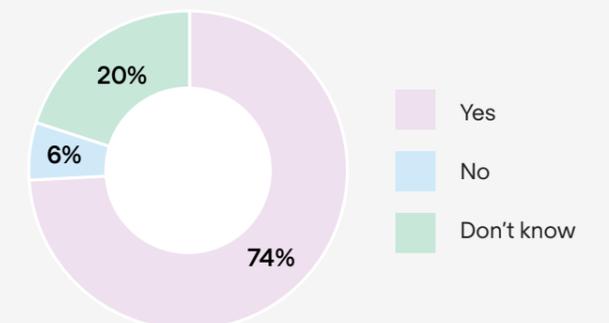
And finally, years of negative press and the 'lock-out' laws have given the Cross a tarnished reputation. Whether deserved or not, many Sydneysiders still don't see the Cross as a nice place to visit.

What they like

People who live, work, and visit Kings Cross like its diversity and proximity to the CBD. They have a deep connection with area, with more than 50% having lived there for more than 10 years and the overwhelming majority (74%) plan to stay for the foreseeable future, higher than the Sydney average (65%)⁷.

Kings Cross's residents are there to stay - Three quarters of residents (74%) plan to still be living there in five years - higher than average for Sydney (65%).

Question: If you live in 'Kings Cross', do you think you will be living there in five years time?

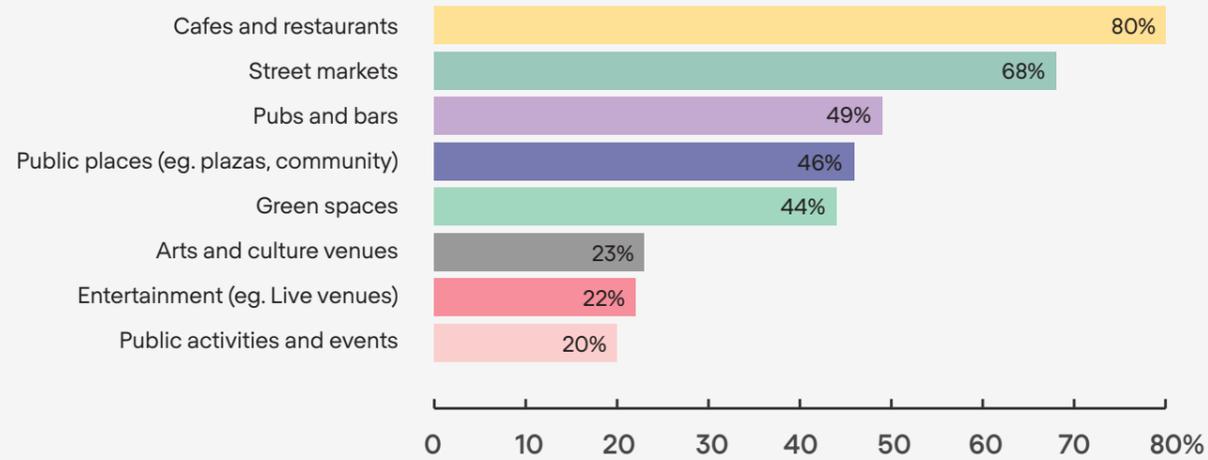




There is a lack of employment in the area with most having to commute elsewhere for a job. That the place lacked quality arts and cultural venues, places for live performance and few public activities and events. While restaurants were seen as high quality (80% good or very good), art and culture venues (23%) and live music venues (22%) scored poorly.

The Cross's restaurants, markets and pubs are highly rated, whereas cultural and live music venues score poorly.

Question: How do you rate the quality of entertainment and leisure in Kings Cross?



What they want more of

People overwhelmingly wanted more outdoor dining opportunities and better pedestrian areas with wider footpaths. They want more parks and green spaces. They want more street gardens and public squares. (82%)

They want more live music venues (81%), more theatres (77%) and small bars (77%) and public art (74%).

Diversifying the offering of Kings Cross is highly desirable.

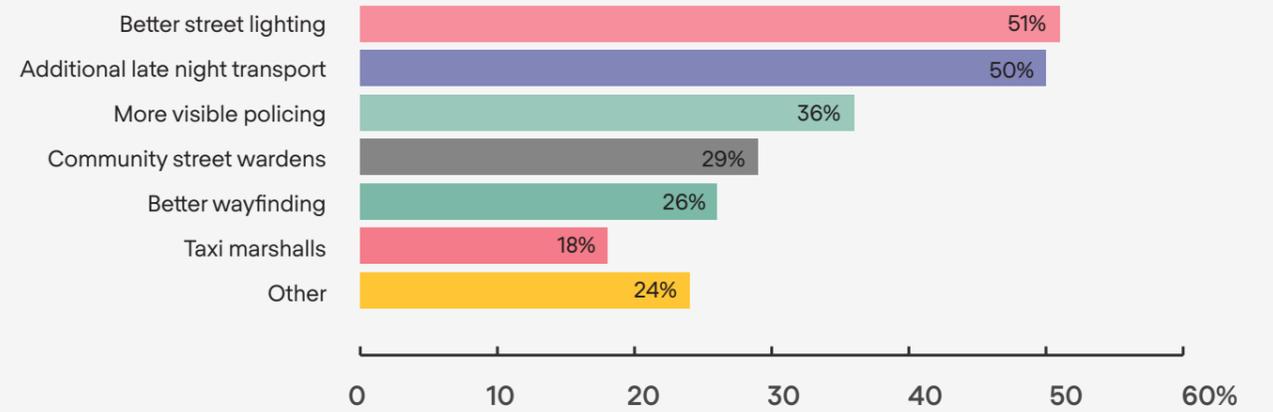
Question: Which services or facilities would you like more, the same or less of in the future?

More		The Same		Less	
Service/facility	%	Service/facility	%	Service/facility	%
Street gardens, trees and plantings/improved streetscapes	82	Pharmacies	87	Nightclubs	29
Live music venues/galleries	81	Dry cleaners	80	Health and fitness	23
Small bars	77	Hair and beauty	78	Residential buildings	20
Theatres	77	Health and fitness	71	Pubs	16
Public art	74	Supermarkets/grocers/butchers	63	Car parking	15

They want the place to be safer with better lighting, more late night transport and more visible policing.

Lighting and night-time transport top the table of safety solutions

Question: What would improve safety in Kings Cross?



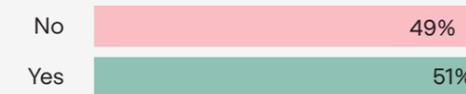
What the community are divided about.

While there is broad consensus on many topics, the community has some significant areas of disagreement – reflecting the diversity of respondents and the area.

The role of the high street as a destination for people from across Sydney (and beyond) is contested. While many (42%) felt that the local high streets had improved over the past five years during a time when the area saw significant falls in visitation, a majority (58%) felt the street life had deteriorated. Similarly, the community is nearly perfectly divided over whether it wants the Cross to be more accessible for tourists.

The community is divided on whether the Cross should be more attractive for visitors.

Question: Would you like to see more facilities for tourists in Kings Cross?



A lack of agreement

The community engagement shows some clear differences of opinion across the community. It also suggests that any way forward that doesn't find a compromise between these differences will leave a significant portion of the Kings Cross community behind.

If we are to see a place that lives up to its potential, that provides a vibrant night-time hub while maintaining local character and liveability, these compromises must be grappled with.

To be clear – without the community converging on an agreed way forward, the Cross will remain confused. State and Local Government cannot solve this on behalf of a community that is articulate, vocal, and passionate about the future of their suburb. This will likely involve some compromise, but ultimately lead to a better place.

The precinct is at a crossroads. The remainder of this paper sets out a set of changes the Committee for Sydney believes are a sensible, positive direction. We invite the community to consider and engage with this new direction for the precinct. The alternative is, we believe, a place without direction that will continue to drift, disappointing all.



Part 2: A place with purpose: A new economic plan

If the Cross is to have a bright future, it needs to rebuild both its day and night-time economy. To restore its vibrancy, it needs to be active and activated during the day and lively, but safe, at night. The question is what should this new economy be based on and how should it be curated and supported?

Getting the show back on the road: A vibrant and diverse night-time economy

For most of the past 80 years the Kings Cross night-time economy was based on the daily influx of visitors from across Sydney and across the world. From the 1940s to mid-70s this was provided by the regular influx of servicemen from nearby Garden Island. This was then replaced by the growth of destination drinking as Sydneysiders and a growing cohort of backpackers flocked to the precinct for a night of boozing, dancing, and party buses. On a busy night this could number more than 20,000 people.

This clustering of so many people into one precinct underpinned the economic and social vibrancy of the Cross. However, the servicemen are now long gone, and the Sydney community has made it clear that few want the party buses to return. So how do we support economic revitalisation? How do we attract people to work in the Cross during the day or visit at night?

The NSW Government's 24-hour Economy Strategy

In September 2020, the NSW Government released their 24-hour Economy Strategy, setting out an agenda to support night-time economic, social, and cultural activity across Sydney.

The strategy is built on community sentiment that Sydney's night-time experience has been getting worse over the years and a desire to diversify the offering away from alcohol-based activities. It sets out a wide range of recommendations to improve our 24-hour economy, underpinned by the appointment of a 24-hour Economy Commissioner and a "neon grid" across Sydney.

The neon grid would be a network of 24-hour economy hubs that are activated, well-connected and promoted as a whole. Each hub would be certified through a system based on the UK's Purple Flag program, using a standard of excellence in achieving vibrancy, diversity and safety to certify and promote successful night-time precincts.

Kings Cross, as Sydney's historic night-time hub, should be the start of this grid. Setting a goal to have the precinct be the first location certified would shift the narrative for the precinct as a vibrant place, while providing confidence that a safe, diverse offering is available.

> Key moves:

1. Develop Kings Cross as a hub in the Neon Grid.
2. Set a target to have Kings Cross as the first hub certified as a Night-time hub.

A city that sings:

The Committee for Sydney believes that live performance, in all its forms, could provide a means of attracting new visitors (and their wallets) to the Cross. In this we are not alone. 81% of the surveyed residents wanted more live music venues and 77% want more theatres. After more parks and gardens (82%), more live performance venues were the most desired facility for both residents and visitors.

Live performance, be it music, cabaret, theatre, drama or comedy, is the mainstay of many urban precincts across the world and for good reason. People going to a show or performance often stop at bar or restaurant on their way and will stay for a late-night meal or drink when the show is over. More importantly, they are unlikely to drink to excess or engage in anti-social behaviour.

Many of Sydney's livelier 'eat streets' are underpinned by live performance venues. The more than 20 theatres and music venues which populate Newtown/Enmore support over 200 local restaurants and bars. It is no accident that Parramatta's 'eat street' emerged adjacent to the Riverside Theatre. Similarly, the opening of the Concourse Theatre enabled a once quiet Chatswood to develop a night-time economy and a thriving restaurant precinct.

Here the Cross has a head start. It is home to several small to medium sized theatres, including the Hayes, Griffin Theatre Company, Kings Cross Theatre (KXT) and the Old Fitz. But there is room for many more. The many struggling or boarded-up night clubs and adult entertainment venues in the area could also be given a new lease of life if they were repurposed as performance or music venues.

The problematic economics of live performance

Theatres and venues are the anchor tenants of a successful and vibrant night time precinct. They drive the agglomeration of people and economic activity around which restaurants and bars can flourish. But even the most successful of theatres rarely make enough money to justify their existence.

The Enmore Theatre is a case in point. This 1600 seat venue, home to Sydney's Comedy Festival, live music and theatre, is booked solid most of the year and generates nearly \$50 million per annum for surrounding businesses. But for all its success, the venue itself rarely makes a reasonable rate of return on its capital. It only survives at all because the cost of its construction was financed generations ago. If it didn't already exist as a building, it would never be built today.

The problematic economics of live performance explain why the private sector hasn't built a large new venue in decades. It's why most existing theatres are either in government ownership, are incentivised by planning and land use concessions, or, like the Enmore, are legacies of previous generations.

While the Cross has several legacy theatres, if it is to develop new ones these will have to be incentivised by the planning system or receive direct support from different tiers of Government.

Orwell Street from the entrance to Llinkelly Place, looking toward the Minerva Theatre





But even with this head start there will need to be much greater investment in new or refurbished live performance spaces if the Cross is to achieve the critical mass it needs to rebuild its 'eat street' and night-time economy.

In many instances, this investment can be incentivised by the planning system. Because of the nature of live performance venues, which do not need access to natural light or prominent street frontages, they can be placed in areas of a building or new development that is less profitable for other economic uses. Sydney's Theatre Royal is several metres underground, hidden in the sub-stratum of the MLC Centre. The Recital Hall is likewise hidden in the less profitable floorspace at the rear of Angel Place. Similarly, George Street's Metro Theatre happily operates as 1700 seat venue on the second and third storeys, leaving the street level to be activated by retail.

The City of Sydney has a long history of supporting cultural activity, using a variety of innovative planning instruments. They operate the Heritage Floor Space trading scheme in the CBD. This scheme was instrumental in saving the Capitol and State Theatres and restoring them to working order. Their work on Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, could also provide a model. The City's Local Strategic Planning Statement (LSPP) identified the need for more cultural and entertainment infrastructure to support the revitalisation of Oxford Street. Building on the existing creative industries, such as the National Art School and College of Fine Arts, live performance and cultural space was seen as critical to reviving the precinct's struggling late night economy.

Responding to this need, the owners of the former Academy Twin theatre lodged a planning proposal seeking, among other things, a floor space bonus to support the inclusion of a new "entertainment facility or venue" as part of the redevelopment of the former theatres. With minor amendments, Council endorsed the proposal which allowed additional floor space if the development included a hotel, a medical facility and entertainment space. The new 'entertainment facility' will eventually be determined by the market, but options include a 450-seat theatre, live music or comedy venue, or an exhibition space. The Cross could use a few 600 seat theatres too.

A similar approach of incentivising live performance infrastructure in the Cross is strongly supported. If the Cross can develop a critical mass of venues, and across a range of sizes and formats, it could build a vibrant night-time economy servicing theatre goers. It could re-establish its reputation for multicultural food and build a network of 'eat streets'. It could replace its old night-time economy, which was based on alcohol and destination drinking, with one based on destination eating and entertainment.

> Key move:

3. Consider incentives in new planning proposals and development which provide new theatres and live performance venues.

What is the future of the Metro Minerva?

At the time of writing this report the future of the former Metro Minerva is under active and lively debate. During our consultation process many people expressed the view that this former theatre is a treasured building which should be returned as working venue. Others argued that it should be redeveloped and that it was not economically viable to operate as a theatre and to do so would be a waste of public money.

Create NSW and the City of Sydney have co-funded a Feasibility Study of the Minerva. The study has found it is economically feasible to reopen the theatre, with further testing required to understand whether this would require purchase or investment from government to support this outcome.

The study found that:

"The estimated cost of purchasing the Minerva and the subsequent capital expenditure required to reinstate a fully functional theatre would be substantially less than the cost of a new 1000 seat theatre, depending on the level of technical equipment required. Based on the cost of reinstating the Minerva back to a functioning theatre it is seen as good value depending on the capacity of the new owner to fund the purchase and meet operating costs."

Not a place to whisper: Managing the night-time economy and noise

If the Cross is to develop a vibrant night-time economy, one based on a high quality eat street and al fresco dining and underpinned by live theatre, it needs to ensure the regulatory environment is both robust and certain.

Here the recent work by Council to update their planning and land use controls is a step in the right direction. Council's recent Late-Night Trading DCP and draft An Open and Creative City Planning Proposal will make it much easier for new businesses to operate in the Cross. It removes many of the unnecessary regulatory hurdles which prevent new investment and clearly articulates how places like the Cross should be managed. In particular it seeks to deal head on with the vexed issue of noise and how it should be managed.

During the consultation process, the issue of noise, and how it should be managed, was raised by both residents and businesses. Many complained that vexatious complainants were making it impossible to operate businesses and that NIMBYs were driving the life and vibrancy out of the Cross. That even noise from lunchtime alfresco dining was attracting complaints to local Police, Council Rangers, and the EPA!

There is not much anyone can do about vexatious complainants, but we can take steps to ensure that such complaints don't strangle the economic and social vitality of places like the Cross. Here the Committee sees a greater role for coordinated State agencies to complement the reforms currently being pursued by Council in their planning proposal for the night-time economy.

NSW has seven separate agencies which have a role to play in managing noise and complaints. This multiplicity of regulators allows the vexatious to venue shop their complaints. It also makes it difficult for businesses to respond to complaints as a single noise issue can trigger a several different regulatory responses. The Committee believes Council and State agencies should trial centralising their regulator roles into a single point of contact for affected residents and businesses, and the Cross is the perfect place for such a trial. A single regulatory regime for noise would provide a hot line to allow genuine complaints to be addressed and managed in a timely manner.

> Key moves:

4. Adopt the An Open and Creative City Planning Proposal as quickly as possible.

5. Trial a single agency to centralise noise management and complaints across State and Local Government agencies.





Not a dormitory. Why residential is not the only land use

This report does not consider existing planning controls or zoning in Kings Cross, as this is a subject to ongoing review by the City of Sydney. However, we do support the existing business zones already in place.

The flexibility of the Mixed Use and Local Centre Zones permit a wide range of activities, including retail, hotel, commercial, theatres as well residential. More importantly its flexibility allows for some uses to be incentivised over others where there is clear social or economic benefit from doing so.

These Zones suit a place like the Cross which has many functions and purposes. It is a residential neighbourhood, an entertainment precinct, a place of employment and a key part of Sydney's visitor economy.

During the consultation, some argued that the area should be repurposed as a quiet residential neighbourhood, albeit a high density one. That the other uses should be zoned out. We disagree. The diversity generated by the current zoning is something to celebrate and should be replicated in other parts of Sydney.

A silver lining to the COVID cloud: a 'pop up' daytime economy

Fitzroy Gardens



One of the few benefits of the Covid-19 pandemic was the rediscovery of local streets and parks as thousands of Sydneysiders were forced to stay home to stay safe. In the wider Kings Cross area more than 60% of the residents who once commuted to work elsewhere are now working locally.

Working locally was not as disruptive as we all anticipated. We surprised ourselves, and our bosses, with how well we adapted to working from home or the local cafe. Many of us are reporting not only greater productivity, as the daily commute has been replaced by a stroll from bedroom to the home office desk, but also finding it quite enjoyable. It's nice to be close to shops, neighbours and family. Many of us are rediscovering our own neighbourhood- exploring nearby parklands and revisiting local cafes and shops. When asked, most residents of the Cross (60%) said they want to continue working locally even when the pandemic ends.

In the Cross, this sudden influx of daytime workers has stimulated local businesses and cafes and activated the streets. It's been a welcome, if unexpected, economic lifeline. In a few short months Kings Cross witnessed an expanded daytime economy.

When the pandemic passes, not all of us will not return to the old way of working. Many of us will want to continue working from home, or near home, at least some days a week and only commute to work when necessary. But working from home does have its limitations. The high density, apartment living of the Cross means not everyone has enough space for a home office. We also often need access to wifi, or meeting rooms, a secure VPN, printers, and IT support.

Here public wifi and co-working office space can provide a solution as well provide a basis for an ongoing daytime economy. Public wifi is available in many places across Sydney – but not in the Cross. Meanwhile, the Mixed-Use and Business zoning of Kings Cross currently permits a range of uses, including commercial office space. However new commercial office space is rarely developed with most buildings given over to residential or retail uses. It need not be like this.

Many of the existing under-utilised shop fronts could be repurposed for co-working space, at least while the pandemic rages.

> Key moves:

6. Explore options to provide free public wifi across public spaces.
7. Encourage property owners and Council to convert underutilised retail floorspace to be repurposed as co-working spaces.
8. Encourage future redevelopment should encourage the provision of more office space.



Part 3: The public realm and place making

The importance of local high streets

The Committee has long argued that the role of the street is too often overlooked in Sydney. That in building our neighbourhoods we focus too much on land use, good architecture, and the design of buildings, rather than on the much more important places in between – the Street. In Reclaiming Sydney’s High Streets, we argued that the street is where the real life of a city happens. It is where we exchange goods and services, buy necessities, have a coffee, see people and be seen. That vibrant streets are the bedrock of the local economy. They are special places and need special treatment. Get the Street right and a place will thrive. Get them wrong and it will struggle. Many of the recommendations we made in this paper are applicable to the Cross.

Good High Streets are people ‘places’ and their use for cars and transport only ever a secondary consideration. Wherever possible we believe the footpaths should be widened to allow more space for pedestrians and kerb side dining. Footpaths need to be clear of unnecessary clutter to allow more space for those critically important ingredients that make a good high street – trees, furniture, and seating. Unless something is absolutely necessary, it should be removed.

On much of Darlinghurst Road, Council has mostly achieved this. Over several years they have removed the overhead cables and power poles, replacing them with less intrusive Smart Poles. The footpaths have been widened and parklets introduced in a number of places. Street trees now provide much needed shade and amenity, and footway dining is supported. Current works along Macleay Street are a further example of this commitment in practice.

However, the Committee thinks there is still areas for improvement. Cars can mostly still travel at speeds of 50kph, and pedestrians still must wait too long to cross the street. Cars need to be slowed even further and discouraged from entering the precinct unless absolutely necessary. Most of the Cross should be limited to 30kph and in some places slower. At this speed, the whole precinct becomes safe for cyclists and pedestrians alike.

Reduced speeds change the amenity of Darlinghurst Road

While many of the kerb side lanes may be needed as loading zones during the day they can be repurposed as pop-up parklets at night and on weekends.



Darlinghurst Road and Roslyn Street

Where Darlinghurst Road crosses William Street also needs particular attention. The area is festooned with a multiplicity of traffic lanes travelling every which way, which makes the place particularly unpleasant for the pedestrian. The windswept exposure and lack of amenity provides a psychological and physical barrier which cleaves the Cross in two. It can take several minutes to traverse this short section of the street with several long pauses waiting permission to cross. The six lanes of traffic could be reduced to a single lane in each direction, reflecting the number of lanes to the north of the intersection, creating greater space for a pedestrian plaza and reknitting north and south Darlinghurst Road back together. The resultant space can then host cultural, creative, and night-time activities, enticing people to traverse the currently hostile area. Fixing this intersection, the actual cross from which the Cross gets its name, is a must.



Reducing through-traffic across the Darlinghurst Road/William Street intersection presents an opportunity to stitch Kings Cross and Darlinghurst back together.

> **Key moves:**

- 9. Slow car speeds and reprioritising the phasing of traffic lights to favour the pedestrian. In the future consideration could also be given to making sections of Darlinghurst Road a shared zone, limiting through traffic to 10km.
- 10. Reduce lanes across Darlinghurst Road over the William Street tunnel, increasing pedestrian space.
- 11. In the longer term, investigate options to reduce traffic exiting and entering William Street at the Cross intersection.

Permeability, side streets and laneways

Darlinghurst Road isn't the only street which needs attention. The precinct's laneways and side streets are often cluttered and messy. Too often they are festooned with garbage bins from surrounding businesses and dwellings. These bins undermine the amenity of the footpath, are unsightly, and attract pests such as rats and ibises. Managing waste is a problem affecting cities the world over and there are no easy answers, especially with the dense and complex built form at the Cross. However, local businesses and residents can help by ensuring bins are quickly removed once they are emptied. On some streets consideration could be given to providing centralised 'waste hubs' reducing the need for each tenancy to have their own bin and to support a more circular economy.



Earl Street

The side streets and laneways also need to be afforded a wider role than just for servicing local buildings, rat running cars and waste removal. These are places in their own right. Wherever possible they should be activated with commercial and social activities including alfresco dining. Dead-end lanes and cul-de-sacs should be extended with through-site links in new development. As much as is possible they should be pedestrianised to make them safer and more interesting.

> **Key moves:**

- 12. Increase the number of Kings Cross laneways and side streets declared 'share zones' with vehicle speeds limited to 10km and pedestrian movement prioritised.
- 13. Encourage new developments to provide through-site pedestrian links to make the whole precinct more permeable, active, and safer.
- 14. Trial new waste collection models to reduce the number of private bins in the public domain.

Parks and greenery

Throughout the surveys and focus groups, the area's green space and parks were given particular priority from residents and visitors alike. In such a densely populated precinct, this is hardly surprising. Other than over the William Street tunnel, the Committee sees few opportunities for new open space in the area given its existing built form, though wherever possible the inclusion of pocket parks in new development should be encouraged.

Given this constraint extra effort is needed to ensure existing parks are maintained to a high standard and other public and private lands given over to greenery and increasing canopy cover. Wherever possible sections of the kerb side lane should be turned into parklets or to provide more space for street trees.

Council's current street tree program is supported, though consideration should be given to replacing the many palm trees in the area. Palm trees provide little canopy cover relative to their height and are often the preferred nesting sites for Ibises. "Bin Chickens" are a lovable Sydney icon, but they are a menace to the public realm and outdoor dining.

Council's current policy of encouraging roof top gardens and plantings is also strongly supported and new development should be incentivised to include green roofs and vertical gardens.

> **Key moves:**

- 15. Increase tree canopy and green the public and private realm across the precinct.
- 16. Create new pocket parks and soft plantings where new development permits.

Lighting the way

Another issue highlighted during the consultation was the need to improve lighting across the precinct. For many this was an issue of safety, with some feeling the darkened side streets and laneways were intimidating at night. Others highlighted the benefits special lighting can make to enliven and define the precinct. One focus group participant pointed to how wonderful Hyde Park was when the trees were lit up with fairy lights and under canopy lighting. She asked why the plane trees along Darlinghurst Road and Macleay Street couldn't be lit in the same way?

We agree but think we can go further. In the 1950s the Cross was famous for its neon signs which lit the main streets and laneways with an array of colour and movement. The famous Coca Cola sign is just a small remnant of what was once a glistening neon boulevard. Council's current DCP supports retention of existing neon signs and will permit new neon signs where appropriate. However, the Committee would like to see this taken much further with neon signage and lighting encouraged across the main streets and laneways of the Cross. Kings Cross should be the sparkling neon heart of the Premier's neon grid.



Darlinghurst Road lit by neon at night

> **Key moves:**

- 17. Develop a Kings Cross lighting strategy to improve the look and feel of the place after dark.
- 18. Actively encourage businesses to use neon signage as a key identifying marker of the Cross.
- 19. Fund smaller scale innovative lighting projects in laneways, improving safety and also adding creativity and interest.





Part 4. Improving transport connectivity to Sydney and the world

If the Cross is successful in building a more vibrant day and night-time economy, it needs to be better connected to the rest of the City. How people get to and from Kings Cross, how they move around once there, need significant improvement and work.

Entrance to Kings Cross Train Station on Victoria Street



While the advent of transport-on-demand services like Uber have partially resolved this issue, considerable improvements are still needed if the Cross is to develop a safer, more accessible, night-time economy.

Several reports over recent years have called for the State Government to run the Eastern Suburbs rail longer so visitors are not stranded. While the State has trialled a limited late-night service, it is prohibitively expensive and often just transferred the problem to an equally crowded taxi rank in the CBD.

However, the imminent arrival of the CBD Metro could change this. The Metro, being driverless, is much cheaper to run 24 hours a day. It also intersects the Eastern Suburbs Line at Martin Place. A limited late-night service from the Cross to Martin Place would allow transport access to the North Shore, North West, Eastern Suburbs, and the Inner West. The last stage of the journey could then be met by a much shorter Uber or taxi ride.



Night-time connectivity

The lack of suitable transport options, particularly late at night, was one of the main reasons the Government imposed the 'lock-out' laws in the first place. Visitors and tourists left stranded when the public transport network closes down at midnight converged, on masse, on the two available taxi ranks to compete for a limited number of taxis. The result was often anti-social behaviour and conflict.

> Key move:

20. Trial late night trains to connect the Cross to the wider 24-hour Metro network.

A better front door: Kings Cross Station

While extending the hours of operation of the railway is an important first step, fixing the amenity and experience of the Kings Cross Station itself is the next. This station is the principal 'gateway' to the Cross. It's how most resident and workers get to and from the precinct and it provides the all-important first impression for new visitors.

Sadly this 1970s underground bunker of a structure, presents a poor-quality front door. The disjointed and complex layout presents very few view-corridors for pedestrians making wayfinding difficult. The Concourse is sterile with low ceilings and harsh lighting, making for a cramped and austere presentation. Signage is unclear and only the experienced local knows which exit leads to what and where.

While the station is what it is and won't be rebuilt anytime soon, there are things we can do to improve its functionality and presentation. Better lighting and signage are a must, and the visitor experience could be improved with public art.

Fortunately, much of thinking about how to achieve this has already been done. In 2015, the Council and Kings Cross Community Centre jointly developed a proposal to install artwork and lighting to improve the presentation of the station and to better highlight where the entrances and exits are. The plan was to involve local artists to develop installations which would tell the story of the Cross, provide a point of interest for the passer-by, and improve the drab presentation of the station.

Just where this proposal got to, no one seems to know, but we think it should be pursued as a priority and have included the report as an appendix.

> Key moves:

21. Increase wayfinding in Kings Cross Train Station to improve visitor journeys.

22. Progress the Kings Cross Train Station Art Project.

A better front door: The Boulevard of broken dreams

The other way people access the Cross is via William Street. While not really within the scope of this brief, the Committee believes that this multilane, traffic sewer needs to be addressed if the Cross is to flourish.

Despite successive Government efforts over several decades, including investing billions in three road tunnels, William Street has never lived up its promise as a tree lined, pedestrian friendly boulevard. It is full of cars rat running to avoid the tunnels' tolls, the amenity of the footpath is poor, and the streetscape lacks activation. It need not be like this.

While some of the key moves we would recommend have already been tried along the street, such as parklets, wider footpaths, and more street trees, these aren't sufficient to overcome the six lanes of traffic travelling at speed along its route. More lanes need to be removed and more cars using the Cross-City Tunnel and Eastern Distributor. As far as is possible the only vehicles using William Street should be those heading to the Eastern CBD, or to William Street itself.

> Key move:

23. Improve the amenity and vibrancy of William Street by removing some of the traffic lanes to allow wider footpaths and better pedestrian amenity.





Part 5. Singing from the same songbook: Better governance

Much of the malaise which has infected the Cross over recent years stems from the lack of 'joined-up' government. Different tiers of Government have endeavoured to regulate and control its operation and define and redefine its function. Too often the efforts of one are thwarted by the other, and vice versa. While Council has most of the care and control of the public realm, the State has a role in regulating industry and responsibility for the main roads and transport network. This generates considerable confusion, regulatory over-lap, and at times disfunction. In the past each have tried to manage this by appointing place managers and developing precinct plans (Council) or by appointing a special Precinct Co-ordinators (State). As one exasperated participant of the focus groups pointed out *"We don't need another bloody bureaucrat to tell us what to do."*

Similarly, the aspirations of businesses and residents have not aligned. In the rush to capitalise on the opportunity of so many visitors, many businesses paid little heed to the quality of the public realm or the impacts their operations had on their neighbours. They have paid a high price for this neglect. Likewise, many residents now want to wish the Cross away and make it a more residential, dormitory suburb. The multitude of local community and business associations over the past decade is testament to the strongly held views on how the Cross should be governed.

Managing these competing interests and visions requires a carefully designed governance arrangement. One which can provide a forum for different views to be aired and discussed. One in which the best intentions of different levels of government can be aligned to deliver a better place. But most importantly this governance arrangement needs to provide a voice for the Cross. A body to advocate on its behalf, defend its reputation when it is tarnished and to provide for the local 'boosterism' that the place so clearly needs.

In the past the Committee has supported the Business Improvement District (BID) model as one solution. These public/private partnerships have proven successful in driving precinct renewal across the world, particularly inner urban, theatre districts such as London's West End and New York's Broadway and 42nd Streets. BIDs can be one tool for facilitating local businesses to invest in the public realm and to take a wider view of how their own operations impact on each other and their neighbours. Unfortunately, there are several bureaucratic obstacles which make establishing a BID difficult and time consuming. While these can be removed with some good will from both tiers of Government, there are other alternatives.

Another option is to replicate the Collaboration Area model used by the Greater Sydney Commission in places like Camperdown/Ultimo and St Leonards. This model provides a clearing house for government agencies and local industries to coordinate their activities and investments. These have developed joint precinct plans which then are adopted and implemented by each tier of government as well as local landowners and industries.

Whichever approach is adopted, The Cross needs to establish a better forum for resolving collective action problems and channelling private energies into the broad project of community uplift.

> Key move:

24. Establish a BID or similar body to help coordinate and curate the local economy and provide the precinct with some much-needed boosterism.



Summary of Recommendations

An Economic plan

1. Develop Kings Cross as a hub in the Neon Grid
2. Set a target to have Kings Cross be the first hub certified as a Night-time hub.
3. Consider incentives in new planning proposals and development which provide new theatres and live performance venues.
4. Adopt the An Open and Creative City Planning Proposal as quickly as possible.
5. Trial a single agency to centralise noise management and complaints across State and Local Government agencies
6. Explore options to provide free public wifi across public spaces.
7. Encourage property owners and Council to convert underutilised retail floorspace to be repurposed as co-working spaces.
8. Encourage future redevelopment should encourage the provision of more office space.

Public Realm

9. Slow car speeds and reprioritising the phasing of traffic lights to favour the pedestrian. In the future consideration could also be given to making sections of Darlinghurst Road a shared zone, limiting through traffic to 10km.
10. Reduce lanes across Darlinghurst Road over the William Street tunnel, increasing pedestrian space.
11. In the longer term, investigate options to reduce traffic exiting and entering William Street at the Cross intersection.
12. Increase the number of Kings Cross laneways and side streets declared 'share zones' with vehicle speeds limited to 10km and pedestrian movement prioritised.
13. Encourage new developments to provide through-site pedestrian links to make the whole precinct more permeable, active, and safer.
14. Trial new waste collection models to reduce the number of private bins in the public domain.

15. Increase tree canopy and green the public and private realm across the precinct.
16. Create new pocket parks and soft plantings where new development permits.
17. Develop a Kings Cross lighting strategy to improve the look and feel of the place after dark.
18. Actively encourage businesses to use neon signage as a key identifying marker of the Cross.
19. Fund smaller scale innovative lighting projects in laneways, improving safety and also adding creativity and interest.

Transport

20. Trial late night trains to connect the Cross to the wider 24-hour Metro network.
21. Increase wayfinding in Kings Cross Train Station to improve visitor journeys.
22. Progress the Kings Cross Train Station Art Project.
23. Improve the amenity and vibrancy of William Street by removing some of the traffic lanes to allow wider footpaths and better pedestrian amenity.

Governance

24. Establish a BID or similar body to help coordinate and curate the local economy and provide the precinct with some much-needed boosterism.

Contributors

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Participants in workshops

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- Kings Cross Community Centre
- Kings Cross Liquor Accord
- Sydney Fringe Festival
- Night Time Industries Association
- Restaurant & Catering Association
- Australian Hotels Association
- Independent Bars Association
- Kings Cross police
- The Holiday Inn
- NSW Treasury
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for
Sydney

Keep in touch

Committee for Sydney
sydney.org.au

 @Committee4Syd

 committee@sydney.org.au

 +61 2 8320 6750