

NSW government architect calls on Parliament to pass 'no-brainer' legislation

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In a rare intervention into the political sphere, the NSW government architect has called on Parliament to approve legislative changes which will elevate good design to the forefront of the state's planning system for the first time.



NSW Government Architect Peter Poulet said the insertion of good design objectives into NSW planning legislation was a "no-brainer". Photo: Janie Barrett

NSW government architect Peter Poulet said the move to insert good design as a key objective of the state's core piece of planning legislation was a "clear culture change for NSW" and a "no-brainer".

"It sends the right message to the community that we value what their environment is like," Mr Poulet said. "It's common sense. Good design serves everyone."

The good design objectives are among a suite of proposed changes to the Environmental Planning and Assessment (EPA) Act, which will be debated by the Legislative Council on Tuesday as part of late-night sitting before heading to the lower house for approval.

Mr Poulet said his office had worked closely with the state government and councils to draft the three new objectives which, in addition to good design, include the

promotion of "built and cultural heritage, including Aboriginal cultural heritage" and the "proper construction and maintenance of buildings".



NSW government architect Peter Poulet has made a rare intervention in the political sphere, urging parliament to pass legislation which makes good design front and centre of NSW's planning system. Photo: Janie Barrett

"It's the first time [these measures] have been codified in legislation," he said. "It's amazing that it has taken this long to be honest."

The government's emphasis on design excellence dovetails with its recent restructuring of the Government Architects Office.

For 200 years, the agency designed and constructed some of the state's most iconic public buildings - such as the GPO in Martin Place, Central Station, and the Powerhouse Museum - before its transition into a strategic advisory and advocacy role last year.

Mr Poulet, the 23rd government architect, said the office now acted as "the arbiters of the [design] process" and published NSW's first statewide design policy earlier this year.

Inserting these objectives into legislation was significant, he said, because "it means every government agency, every local council, needs to strive for good design in the built environment."

The new objectives are expected to be among the least controversial changes proposed by the amendment bill, which is seeking to restructure the Act into 10 parts.

More contentious is the proposal to give the planning secretary a new "step-in" power to give development approvals, concurrence or advice on behalf of another NSW agency, where the agency has met statutory time frames or where two agencies hold conflicting views.

The proposed reform attracted the attention of the Independent Commission Against Corruption, which expressed concern during the public submission process earlier this year that the change would hand the Secretary "significant discretion" over development approvals, leaving the office holder vulnerable to undue influence.

Introducing the bill into the upper house last month, government leader Don Harwin said the measures were designed to "cut red tape, and provide a faster and more flexible planning system for government and the communities we represent".

For example, the bill proposes streamlining the application of council planning guidelines, called Development Control Plans, by providing a model template in a bid to simplify the 400 DCPs currently in operation across NSW councils.

The EPA Act is one of the most amended pieces of NSW legislation, and has been altered more than 150 times since it was first passed in 1979.

<http://www.canberratimes.com.au/nsw/nsw-government-architect-calls-on-parliament-to-pass-nobrainier-legislation-20171114-gzloqb.html>