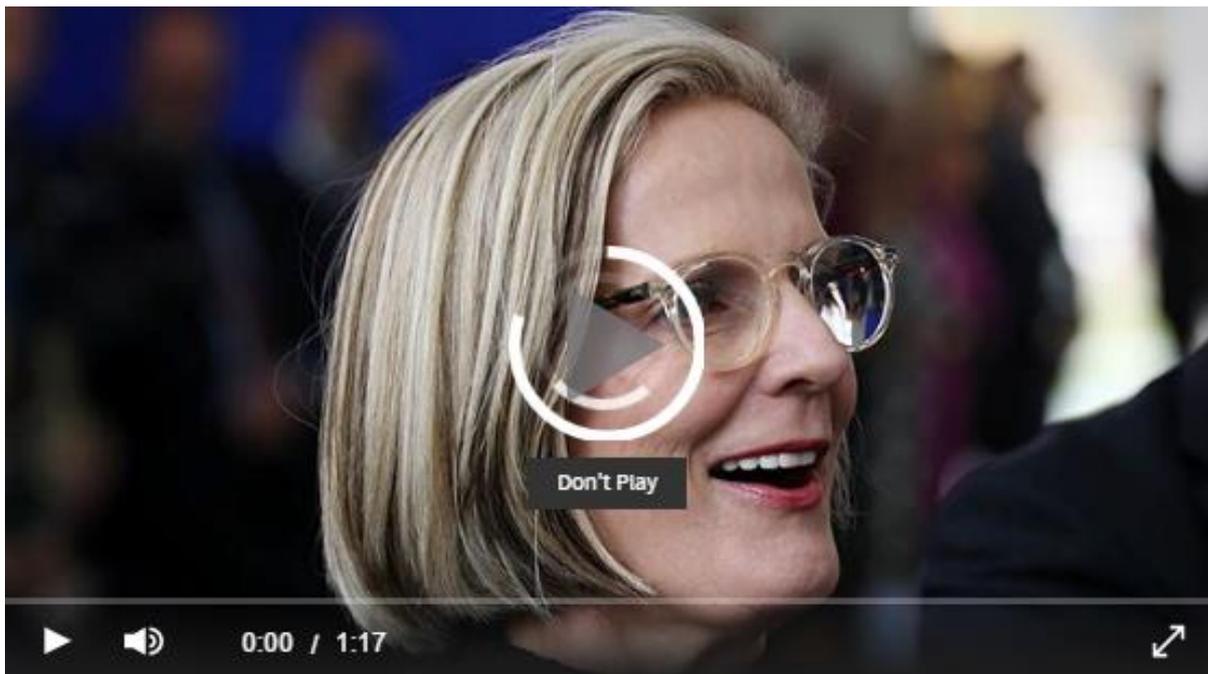


The bizarre planning scenario playing out in Sydney

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"What did he know and when did he know it?" was Senator Howard Baker's immortal question on Nixon and Watergate. Ours, regarding Greater Sydney Commissioner Lucy Turnbull should be, "What doesn't she know, and why – for pity's sake – doesn't she know it?"

Turnbull's admission on ABC 702 this week that she was "not aware that there are houses going to be demolished at Haberfield," was the most shocking public statement in this country since George Pell agreed priests should be insured against paedophilia charges, although not quite for the reason you might think.



Lucy Turnbull unaware of heritage destruction

Greater Sydney Commission chair Lucy Turnbull tells ABC 702 radio she is 'not aware' of the demolition of heritage Haberfield homes for the WestConnex motorway.

Turnbull's Westconnex lacuna is symptomatic of Sydney's massively dysfunctional planning system – right at its moment of maximum change. It's a system where all the big, driving decisions are taken by men-armed-with-numbers – engineers, traffic guys, bean-counters, politicians, developers – and "planning" is left to trot along behind. A system, in other words, where planning is treated like a girl.

You might think Lucy Turnbull's role as Greater Sydney Commissioner counters that view, but her 702 moment says otherwise. Across the eight months of Turnbull's appointment as Sydney's uber-planning maestro, the Haberfield demolitions have been intensely controversial. The constant protests, sit-ins and arrests did not stop 53 demolitions across seven streets, but you'd have to be comatose at the wheel to miss them. All very much on Turnbull's watch.

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Illustration: Simon Bosch

Had it been Wolseley Road, Point Piper, as opposed to Wolseley Street, Haberfield, you can guarantee the commissioner would have known. Indeed, you can guarantee the bulldozers would've been sent packing. Maybe too much harbour glare clouds your vision.

But that's not actually the point. The point is how Sydney repeatedly, persistently designs itself a planning system to fail.

Remember, this was meant to be the fix. Despite adding a fourth layer of government to an already over-governed metropolis, the Greater Sydney Commission is charged with producing "a plan for growing Sydney" in the form of mandatory frameworks to be imposed on councils everywhere. Bottom-up it's not. But it was meant, once and for all, to sort the unholy mess of state fiefdoms, council cronyism and developer free-for-all.

That can't happen. At a Better Planning Network meeting, 11 weeks earlier, someone asked GSC Chief Executive Sarah Hill – representing Turnbull – "What about the elephant in the room, Westconnex, and our houses being demolished?" Hill replied, "Well, Westconnex is a reality, we'll see how we can work with it."

That was pretty pathetic. If planning has neither control over nor interest in its primary determinants – namely the major lines of transport – it's not planning, it's decoration. You don't ask a surgeon to cut toenails on feet already black with gangrene. Yet this, I fear, is how they like it.

For weeks now the GSC has been miming consultation, taking its "Talk Bus" to Penrith and Bankstown, soliciting people's views. History does not record whether the Talk Bus visited Haberfield. But if, as Turnbull's use of the future tense for the demolitions suggests, she genuinely knew nothing, the question becomes, if not, why not?



Our skyline of 20 years' time could be more of the same, sweeping from Circular Quay to Botany – or it could be a thing of true beauty. Photo: Peter Braig

In her next breath Turnbull noted, still with apparent surprise, that Westconnex "is being built. You know, when you drive out there to Parramatta and Penrith you can hear the machines digging away. It is happening." So, was the demolition of 53 houses just insignificant detail?

You might think it doesn't matter. Sydney is pretty amazing, despite its planning having always been venal, hobbled and intellectually threadbare. So do we care that planning has only what's left in the sandpit after the Big Infrastructure Boys have had their fun?

We should, especially now. It's not just transport – Westconnex, the Metro and the light rail. The biggest transformation in Sydney's history is underway, with a score of vast projects including the Bays Precinct, Green Square, Parramatta North, the huge upzoning along Parramatta Road and the 560-hectare immensity of Central-to-Eveleigh (which in fact extends to Waterloo). All are carefully quarantined against planning, carefully in the control of men-armed-with-numbers. The upshot? Almost all of the huge moves shaping Sydney sit outside any planning purview.

This is just bizarre. Urban Growth, formerly LandCom, is not a planning body. As invented by Whitlam in 1976 it was an acquirer of land for public purposes. Now it's a flogger of

public land for private purposes; a quasi-developer briefed to maximise yield. What it won't do, therefore, is maximise public delight, even on public land.

Which is why, obviously, planning must happen first. Planning is about choice. Twenty-five years hence, Sydney's high-rise hyper-dense spine will extend from Circular Quay to Botany. It will dominate everything, but whether in a good way or bad is up to us, right now.

Scenario One. Business-as-usual. Piled-up egg-crate apartments loom over gloomy, windswept streets, everything is same-same, on the hulking Barangaroo model, huge of footprint, cheap to build, dull to look at, nasty to be near. Such buildings feed no one's pride.

Scenario Two. Sydney's central spine is green, thrilling and hyper-dense. Manifesting the fact of innovation, not just the rhetoric, it has become both beacon and uniting cause, proof that Sydney can be up there with Berlin or Barcelona.

Buildings are tall, even very tall, but most are slender at the top, being stepped back to reduce street-level wind and welcome the sun into streets and parks, especially the huge and beautiful Prince Alfred Park, completed first as a gesture towards all the new residents. In the hyper-dense city around it, footpaths are shaded with deciduous fruiting trees and vines, every built surface bears edible greenery or a photovoltaic skin and the dominant sound – above the solar tram's whoosh, the autonomous cars' hum and the ding of cycle-bells – is the herd-patter of countless walking feet.

Sydney's customary planning habits – where the careful have no power and the powerful have no care – can only deliver Scenario One. For Scenario Two we need the power and the smarts in the same hands; intelligent, public-spirited, holistic, all-encompassing planning. You choose.

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/the-bizarre-planning-scenario-playing-out-in-sydney-20160818-gqvw6t.html>