

GREEN SQUARE

AN URBAN RENAISSANCE?

Green Square is one of Australia's largest developments, representing \$8 billion of urban renewal initiative and comprising 278 hectares of land between Sydney's CBD and Sydney Airport. The development has promised to bring about an urban renaissance to South Sydney.

Costa Argyrou looks at why has this great vision not been fulfilled more than a decade-and-a-half after Green Square was earmarked for urban renewal.

Green Square train station stands incongruously among vacant run-down industrial blocks and shabby car sale yards. However, the City of Sydney intends to transform Green Square into a "thriving retail, residential, and employment hub".

On completion, Green Square will be home to 40,000 new residents and will provide a range of community and leisure facilities and improved transport links. And, as the name would imply, green space. At the core of the development is the Green Square town centre, which will include 410,000 sq. m of mixed-use gross floor area comprising 2500 dwellings and 120,000 sq. m of commercial and retail space. This will be built around a series of public plazas, community halls, art workshops, meeting rooms and a \$40 million library.

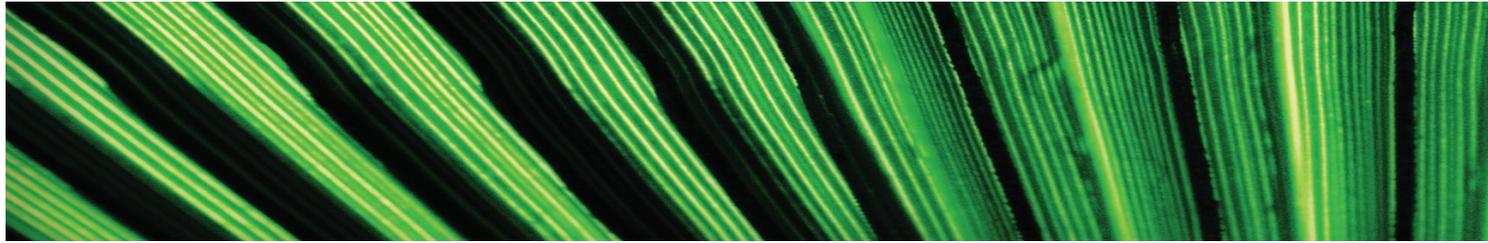
The chairman of Landcom, John Brodgen, recently said in a conference,

"We are 10 years into the [Green Square] project, with 10 years to go, and we haven't built a single dwelling"¹. It is, however, misleading to believe that little progress has been made to realise the vision for Green Square.

The area was first identified by South Sydney City Council for redevelopment potential in 1991. Since then a number of milestones have been achieved. In 1998, Stanisc Turner and Hassell Consultants completed the Green Square structural masterplan, which aimed to convert the industrial character of the new 'suburb' into residential and mixed-use land areas. The plan proposed land-use patterns, a public domain structure, social infrastructure, ecologically sustainable strategies and movement networks to guide the urban renewal of Green Square². Importantly, the masterplan was used for the development of the new planning controls for the town centre.



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- 2** City of Sydney. "City of Sydney Green Square Urban Renewal Area Background Paper." www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au. City of Sydney, Sept. 2008.
- 3** Endelman, Tessa. "Histories of Green Square" www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au. City of Sydney, 2004. www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/aboutsydney/documents/history/GreenSquare/HistoriesofGreenSquare.pdf.
- 4** In April 2012 the new Town Centre Development Control Plan 2012 came into force to support the LEP for the town centre.
- 5** City of Sydney. Green Square Town Centre Infrastructure Strategy. City of Sydney, Apr. 2006. Web, Sept. 2012. www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/council/onexhibition/documents/73InfrastructureStrategyFinalAsAdopted.pdf.
- 6** A. Davies, 'Developers find their work cut out luring leery businesses to southern square', SMH, 2 June, 2003, p. 6.
- 7** "Green Square – Town Centre Sydney." N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Sept. 2012. www.gstc.com.au/.

The opening of Green Square train station for the 2000 Olympics was the next giant step forward in providing the infrastructure to support the project. Some critics argued that the railway was in fact the catalyst for council and state government to settle on a plan for the redevelopment³.

In the last 10 years, the City of Sydney has adopted a package of new planning controls for the town centre, which include key controls on land use, built forms and the public domain. Most recently, the City of Sydney has been revising these controls in an attempt to respond to the evolving economic environment and to accommodate planning proposals by landowners⁴. In March this year, demolition works commenced at South Sydney Hospital, which involves the conversion of several hospital buildings to create community facilities in the heart of the town centre.

Although much progress has been made, why has the realisation of the Green Square project suffered delays?

Firstly, complex land ownership has set back the development. Landcom, as one of the largest landowners in the town centre, had to overcome significant hurdles to consolidate the government-controlled sites, such as the NSW Police Service Centre at 377-497 Botany Road. It was not until 2009 that Landcom partnered with Mirvac Projects and Leighton Holdings for the development of these sites.

Secondly, the global financial crisis (GFC) has continued to affect the access to and terms of development funding and has fundamentally altered the risk appetite for large-scale urban renewal projects. The GFC also meant those planning controls gazetted in

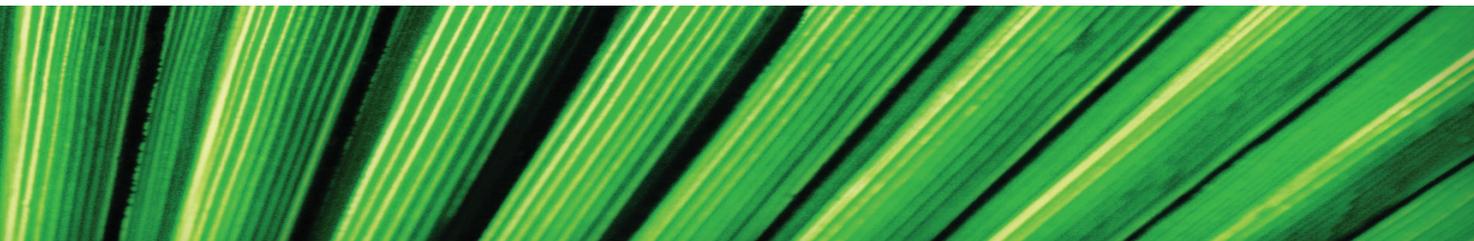
2006 by the City of Sydney needed to be reassessed as a consequence of landowners demanding increases in development floorspace, relaxed height restrictions and variations of the land-use mix.

Thirdly, the cost of infrastructure required to serve the project area has been a major stumbling block. The City of Sydney projected in 2005 that infrastructure costs would amount to \$103.2 million for the town centre alone⁵. Additionally, much of the infrastructure requires extensive technical investigations, design development and consultation as a result of the complexity associated with its implementation both on a local and regional level. The integration of stormwater infrastructure within the town centre and the broader catchment area is another case in point.

These delays have meant that Green Square has not attracted as much business as hoped⁶, and thus employment. Yet the recent completion of Collins on Bourke, the largest mixed-use development in Alexandria in the past five years, is the clearest sign yet of a growing trend of demand from owner occupiers for better quality commercial space in the Green Square area.

WHAT CAN RESIDENTS EXPECT FOR GREEN SQUARE'S FUTURE?

The City of Sydney's vision for Green Square is "a place where people will live and work, a place to shop, for entertainment, restaurants and cultural and community activities"⁷. Victoria Park, the Landcom-directed residential development in Zetland, is a benchmark for what may be expected from Green Square.



One council official recently described the planned town centre as “similar to Victoria Park with a retail injection and an improved investment grade of infrastructure”, with Victoria Park demonstrating the ability to successfully achieve density and sustainability, the workability of public-private partnerships and the possibility of pepper-potting affordable housing with private housing.

The large-scale residential developments at Green Square are also indicative of a much larger population settling in the Green Square area. Projects such as Payce’s 206-apartment East Village complex in Victoria Park and Trident Real Estate Capital’s proposed boutique multi-unit residential development on Victoria Street in Beaconsfield are transforming industrial and commercial space into thriving centres of activity.

The population surge is resulting in a recognisable demographic shift, with the number of young professionals replacing the labourers and trades workers in and around Green Square – in 2006, 23.7% of persons aged 15 years

and over in the suburb of Rosebery were classified as professionals, compared with only 6.3% and 12.6% of persons being classified as labourers and trades workers, respectively, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

These young professionals are impacting on the retail offering, with several ‘trendy’ cafés trading in the area such as The Grounds at 2 Huntley Street in Alexandria and Kitchen by Mike at 85 Dunning Avenue. Further typifying the changing demographic, Danks Street in Waterloo has developed into a retail and creative hub, providing organic food, homewares and art. High-end designer fashion outlets such as Zimmerman and Charlie Brown are vying for consumer traffic as well.

Green Square’s urban renewal initiative has also been the catalyst for a bustling creative cluster settling in the area consisting of professionals in architecture, photography, fashion and interior design. Koskela’s design emporium at 85 Dunning Avenue is a case in point. Koskela has shown how an industrial warehouse can be transformed into a creative space

clustering art exhibitions, photographic studios and a furniture showroom under the one roof.

Despite the delays that the town centre has suffered, the gentrification of Green Square is well under way. Urban pioneers such as Russel Koskela and Leo Chrisite have revitalised and triggered the transformation of suburbs in and around Green Square into creative hubs. New residential towers are attracting young professionals and Green Square’s traditional demographic is changing.

Unsurprisingly, property values are rising, with capital growth for units increasing by 41.6% over the past five years, according to RP Data. These rising prices are further perpetuating the cycle of gentrification and demographic shift.

The future is looking promising for Green Square, yet it remains to be seen whether the latest planning vision for urban renewal will be achieved. ■

Trident Real Estate and its related companies own a significant portfolio of assets in and around Green Square.