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Sydney's seven deadly sins of development? No, I call it a symphony

Dominic Perrottet

As the hot-cross buns lining supermarket shelves since Boxing Day suggest, Easter is on its way. But before Easter comes Lent, a traditional 40-day period of penitence observed by Christians worldwide. Perhaps it is this looming Lenten season that has Elizabeth Farrelly fixated on Sydney's seven deadly planning sins and preaching from the pulpit: "Repent and be saved!"



A vivid city blending old and new ... Circular Quay during the Vivid festival.

Photo: Dallas Kilponen

The Sydney Morning Herald's colourful columnist's most recent offering was a litany of NSW government projects dripping in sin. As a member of that government, I have to admit the accusations of evil-doing sometimes sting – though less so when they're couched in hokey caricatures and dated references to Thatcher, neoliberalism, and other kitsch from a century long gone. Truth is, I relish reading Farrelly's Saturday columns, partly for their passion, purpose and prose, but mostly because I disagree with just about every word. Like some kind of inverted compass, they help to affirm my political bearings, in a back-to-front sort of way. There is one thing we do have in common: we both love Sydney. A lot. Where we diverge is in our vision for the kind of city we want Sydney to be.

Hers, it seems to me, is terminally pedestrian – a Sydney returned to some romanticised mid-century heyday, a lightly bustling outpost with none of that nasty urban sprawl (working sprawlers be damned) or diabolical economic ambition. It's a vision I find confusing, sad and out of touch with what 99 per cent of Sydneysiders know as reality.

On the one hand, it fawns over brutalist eyesores that unnecessarily scar our city, while on the other, it condemns projects such as WestConnex – a road (gasp!) that creates more economic, social and cultural opportunities for people in Sydney's west, while taking cars out of the inner west, and trucks off suburban streets. The horror. The hide.

The result is naysaying, NIMBYism and a default setting of "computer says no". World-class hotel in Pyrmont? No. State-of-the-art stadiums? No thanks. Revive the Bays (Western Harbour) Precinct? Does not compute.

The last one is particularly mind-boggling. This harbourfront stretch of dazzling beauty has lain desolate for decades. In any other city, it would be a showpiece. But even now, as we work to overcome an era of complacency and lack of political will, proposals to open it up are met with howls of outrage.

This instinct for inaction is in our city's bones. Research conducted for the state Productivity Commissioner has found that most development approvals take about twice as long in NSW as in Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia.

As an avowed conservative, I find myself in the strange position of championing progress against a throng of nominal progressives all standing athwart the city yelling "stop!"

There is an alternative vision for Sydney. A vision for a city on the world stage: a great place to live no matter where you are, and an international gateway no matter where you're from.

Maybe it's a generational thing. I'm a millennial. My children are still young, and I want the Sydney they grow up in to hold unimaginable promise, as it did when I was a kid. Yet I know that for them to have the same opportunities, we will have to create them anew.

I feel this responsibility as Treasurer, too. It's easy to bash economic ambition from a place of security and comfort, but generations current and future are depending on us to secure for them a quality of life at least as good as generations past. For that to happen, growth and change are inevitable and necessary.

So our government is getting on with it. We're building infrastructure – roads, rail, schools and hospitals, museums, stadiums – as if our children's lives and livelihoods depend on it, because they do. We are putting an end to the wasteful squandering of our city's talents, and investing to get centrepieces such as Circular Quay up to world-class scratch.

But we must also switch the default setting from "no" to "yes", even if that yes comes with a "but" or an "if" or some other caveat. That may mean wresting back the balance of power over major decisions from unelected bodies, and forcing elected, accountable ministers to make the calls necessary to unshackle our town.

But it also means the people proposing new developments need to get real, and design buildings that respect and augment Sydney's unsurpassed beauty, not monuments to ego that trample all over it. This is a vital part of the balancing act we must perform: embracing the new, while preserving the heritage we love.

Of course, preserving heritage doesn't mean locking it away. Heritage is of no value if we can't experience it. We need to breathe new life into our historical gems, opening up places such as Macquarie Street – a treasure trove of architectural history – for wider public enjoyment.

If we get it right, Sydney's global future will be a richly textured masterpiece: old and new, loud and soft, fast and slow, cities and suburbs, jobs and culture, industry and open space, utility and beauty – all in harmony for the greater good of our people. Sinful? No. Symphonic.

Dominic Perrottet is the NSW Treasurer.