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Parramatta should be our jewel but we've trashed its treasures

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Sydneysiders should treasure Parramatta. With her good bones, fine history and central locus, Parramatta should be a place like no other, a vivid and particular entwinement of nature and culture. She should be our favourite urbs, our pride and joy, our green-city flagship, our Faberge egg, our Paris. Instead, we've largely treated her as our cesspool, chucking our dirtiest air and most cavalier attitudes her way. Now, there's a chance to reconsider.

[In her former glory ... Parramatta's now-demolished Royal Oak Hotel.]

Back when the colony was new, with a blow-in population too ignorant to grow food at Sydney Cove and too arrogant to fish from it like the locals, Parramatta saved us. Fertile and richly soiled, Parramatta was, for a decade or so, Sydney's breadbasket.

Even now, Parramatta's core plan-diagram is sweet as a nut. Her main street stretches taut between a mighty river to the north and a great rail line to the south, stitching a fine little square into a grid sequinned with quality heritage buildings. There's a grand park to the west and an entire estate of colonial buildings equal to the Rocks, just across the river. Parramatta has everything a good city needs – except good government.

But COVID demands we rethink. It insists we abandon globalism and the slippery attitudes that underpin it. It suggests we reinstate localism, returning texture and engagement to our lives. Further, in freeing us from the daily commute that has shaped cities for a century, it points a way. How might this save our badly underloved second city?

The principles have changed. One, it's not all about the car. People like to walk, and cycle. That means shorter trips – to the local shops or cafe as a break from work, perhaps, rather than the long slog to it. So, two, it's not all about speed. This means motorways and one-way street systems, designed solely to deliver volume at speed, should be rethought.

It also implies, three, cities that are more about being there than shooting through – streets that are corridors but also rooms, neighbourhoods that are realer and more particular. Less glitz, more soul. In turn, four, this project of re-inhabiting the local means getting excited about basic stuff like sunshine and planting, pleasurable streets and clean air, energy and waste systems that are local and renewable.

Such an attitudinal shift, such a desire to elicit genuine flavour, would reverberate creatively through every part of Parramatta’s pretty little grid. It would start by taking heritage seriously, ditching a listing process that, says Councillor Donna Davis, “isn’t worth the paper it’s written on”. Actually giving a damn.

Transport for NSW would no longer be able, as it did on the night of May 19, to rush in under cover of darkness and demolish one of Australia’s oldest surviving pubs. The Royal Oak Hotel was built by First Fleeter William Tunks and his convict wife in 1813. And although TfNSW may not strike you as the typical cowboy wrecker, its pre-dawn raid left onlookers shocked by the strewn rubble, the lack of hoardings and the arrogance of sending those convict-made bricks and pressed metal ceilings to kingdom come.

TfNSW said the pub had only “local” significance and had to make way for the light rail and two car lanes on Church Street. But when you drill down it’s really more about accommodating “construction activities” than the rail itself. (The two car lanes disappear two blocks away in crossing Lennox Bridge.) Meanwhile, the salvage report, required to detail what, if anything, was saved, remains adamantly secret.

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Secret, too, is all detail as to the precise light rail route and infrastructure. The project was approved almost three years ago – on that memorable night in July 2017 when 1300 pages of council decisions were taken unanimously, at a single sitting and by a single person, then administrator Amanda Chadwick. Already, demolition is under way – on Church Street but also on the light rail’s track across the beautiful and richly endowed Cumberland Hospital heritage precinct.

This site is layered in history. Yet the light rail’s hoardings run within metres of the Female Factory Precinct (proposed for World Heritage Listing) and the works, whatever they actually are, have already exposed a major set of sandstone foundations and steps. And still no detailed plan, nor evidence of archaeology being undertaken.

Nor is there any clear reason why the light rail must run across the middle of this delicate site, destroying ancient buildings and hundreds of trees including mature

figs (up to 2650 trees along the whole route), rather than around its northern boundary. Except that the light rail will open the site up for development, and for Sydney University's 25,000-student campus.

But do we trust universities, with their ruthless corporate values, to behave decently in so fragile a heritage precinct? Is this “influx of students” even plausible now? And hang on, wait, don't we already have a couple of universities in western Sydney? Couldn't we just do local, and do that well?

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As if that weren't dangerous enough, a controversial new council plan for Parramatta proposes to extend CBD tower-zoning all the way north to Pennant Hills Road. Already, Parramatta is vanishing under towers. But this isn't just about height. It's about what height, unbridled, does. It sucks the soul out of streets, blocks sun, generates wind, discourages pedestrians, coarsens urban texture and, by skyrocketing land value, threatens every one of the dozens of heritage buildings in that precinct.

Then there's the Powerhouse move, which breaks apart a priceless industrial-era collection then parachutes bits of it into a billion-dollar building on a flood-prone site, destroying the lovely, Italianate Willow Grove villa and an entire heritage terrace on the way.

For half the money you could adaptively re-use the glorious hospital precinct as a museum of NSW, deploying some of the state's oldest buildings to tell its remarkable stories, from the original custodians on. It's not too late for Parramatta to resist the slide into a mediocrity of soulless towers. Never too late to pursue your truest, most interesting self.