

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/don-t-be-fooled-the-westmead-place-strategy-puts-lipstick-on-a-pig-20210401-p57q0v.html>

Sydney Morning Herald

OPINION

## *Don't be fooled, the 'Westmead Place Strategy' puts lipstick on a pig*

**Elizabeth Farrelly**

Columnist, author, architecture critic and essayist

April 3, 2021 — 5.00am

Ours is a government of many plans. Indeed, such is the profusion of plans, so vast is their coverage and so thick and fast their arrival one almost suspects deliberate obfuscation. (I'm reminded of that [scene](#) in *Harry Potter* where a conspiracy of owls sends a million letters into the muggle house's every orifice). In all this multiplicity, though, all this rampant "building Sydney's future", there's just one discernible idea. Innovation.

Tech-hubs have deluged inner Sydney, designating everything from Eveleigh through Central to White Bay an "innovation corridor". But if western Sydney was feeling any FOMO in the innovation department, it shouldn't worry. Pretty soon, if the plans are to be believed, and just upriver from the new flood-prone Powerhouse-to-be, Parramatta will have its own 250-hectare "health and innovation district".

[Cumberland Hospital, which gets swallowed whole in the Westmead Place Strategy

*CREDIT: TONY WALTERS*]

It's all set out in the 81-page draft [Westmead Place Strategy](#). The name makes it sound harmless, a collection of landscape fixes for that woebegone hospital campus. Be not fooled. It's not about place, it's not strategic and it's certainly not harmless, less concerned to fix the hospital than expand it to 10 times its already considerable size. It's not even innovative. Far from it. This is grubby old business as usual. What it really is, this Place Strategy, is a cloak for stuffing as much development as possible into the fragile, treasured Cumberland Hospital precinct, part of which is proposed for world heritage-listing.

The new plan reduces the whole of the Fleet Street, Cumberland Hospital and Female Factory site to Westmead's "sub-precinct 7", covering more than half of it in "mixed use" – university, retail, commercial and residential. This has driven the normally mild National Trust to phrases like "totally dismayed", "totally reject" and "deliberately misleading". It has Parramatta's Sisters of Mercy warning that

“the soul of such an historic place as Parramatta should be preserved, honoured and celebrated” and citing Pope Francis’ Laudato Si’: “Ecology ... involves protecting the cultural treasures of humanity in the broadest sense.” You don’t often find popes in planning objections.

We knew that the push was on. It was clear in 2016, when the government sacked Parramatta Council and installed as commissioner former Liberal minister’s daughter and ex-Landcom executive Amanda Chadwick. It became even clearer [on July 10, 2017](#), when Commissioner Chadwick unilaterally approved 1300 pages of Parramatta development and infrastructure projects including the “urban transformation” of the Cumberland Hospital precinct and its ruthless bisection by light rail. It was done in a matter of minutes. No voting. No dissent. “Resolved, Chadwick.”

Chadwick had left Landcom with a big payout (“the cheque was big and I get a new start,” [she wrote](#) to colleagues) after [being accused of bullying](#). She had no apparent difficulty bullying Parramatta into handing its most precious heritage fabric over to the UrbanGrowth jackbooters and was soon rewarded with a big job, running affordable housing for the [Department of Planning](#).

“As Administrator of the City of Parramatta Council,” [cooed the department](#), “Ms Chadwick has achieved a 10-day reduction in median housing Development Application approval times, making her a perfect fit for this position.” Never mind the quality. Never mind democracy. Never mind that a nodding puppet could do as well. Just feel the efficiency.

Chadwick’s version of the Cumberland Hospital destruction was known as PNUTP (Parramatta North Urban Transformation Precinct) and scattered [University of Sydney towers through the fragile heritage precinct](#). That fell through, or so we thought. But now it’s back, bigger and shinier. Transformation has become Innovation, allied with health, since that’s the latest thing, and with Westmead. I know (argue the expensive, zero body-fat rebranding consultants), call it the [Westmead Health and Innovation District](#). That makes it sound both virtuous and inevitable, as though this venerable, beautiful Cumberland Hospital were a natural part of that new shiny one.

True, COVID has given “health” a kind of gloss. There’s a sense that all this building throughout the fragile sandstone precinct – and the hundreds of mature trees destroyed for the purpose – is kind of OK if it’s for white-coats to do witchy things with test-tubes and pipettes. For the good of the species, your intuitive mantra obediently chants. We all make sacrifices.

**RELATED ARTICLE** [Opinion](#)

**[Who needs another tech-hub? All the way to White Bay with the MCA](#)**

But this is spurious. The University of Sydney has already sullied its own lovely campus with billions of dollars of largely undistinguished new buildings designed to extract funding from grants programs, big pharma and publicity-hungry donors. ([The Susan Wakil Health Building](#) is a classic. Designed by New York architects [Diller, Scofidio and Renfro](#) it sits like a great ugly lump on the once-pretty campus, its corporate aspirations brutally plain.)

The Trust calls for the North Parramatta heritage core to be removed from the strategy altogether. This would make it an excellent place for a first rate Parramatta Museum (instead of a hopelessly flood-prone Powerhouse) – thereby saving the precinct and Willow Grove as well. But can this happen?

[Last December](#), before the Place Strategy was even open for comment, the government signed a “[framework agreement](#)” with Sydney University. It contains an even more dangerous diagram than the Place Strategy, designating roughly a quarter of the heritage core “[New University and Enterprise Precinct](#)” and shoving yet another “start-up hub” right beside the Female Factory. We could easily find that, like [O’Farrell’s idiotic 2013 Crown casino licence](#), this diagram commits us to this nasty corporatisation of some of Australia’s most treasured heritage with no genuine say.

Well might the Sisters of Mercy invoke Pope Francis. A miracle could be required. The Libs keep doing this, signing dumb contracts in reckless haste (casinos, light rail, stadiums). As Harry Potter’s fat cousin Dudley bewails the inundation of letters; “Daddy’s gone mad, hasn’t he?” The only answer is: “Yes darling. Daddy’s bonkers.”

### **Start your day informed**

Our Morning Edition newsletter is a curated guide to the most important and interesting stories, analysis and insights. Sign up to *The Sydney Morning Herald*’s newsletter [here](#), *The Age*’s [here](#), *Brisbane Times*’ [here](#), and *WAtoday*’s [here](#).

### **[Elizabeth Farrelly](#)**

- Twitter

Elizabeth Farrelly is a columnist and author. Her latest book is *Killing Sydney*.