

Camden Residents' Action Group

Incorporated

Camden – Still a Country Town

Website: <http://www.crag.org.au/>

Face Book:

<https://www.facebook.com/CRAgcamdenresidentsactiongroup/>

PO Box 188

Camden NSW 2570

Email: admin@crag.org.au

Ph: 0415 617 368

General Manager

Camden Council

70 Central Avenue

Oran Park 2570

Email:

mail@camden.nsw.gov.au

johnstreetproject@camden.nsw.gov.au

Attention: John Street Project Team

29 September 2025

Dear General Manager,

**Re: John Street Project
Draft Concept Designs for John Street, Camden**

We understand this is a major project, with NSW funding of \$23.1m, arising out of recommendations in the 2018 Camden Town Centre Urban Design Framework (UDF).

We much appreciate the approach and substantial efforts of the John Street Project Team to properly engage and consult with the community.

Context

Everyone we have heard from supports the John Street Project's stated aims of enhancing Camden's civic and cultural heart while preserving its unique heritage and character and creating a pedestrian-friendly environment that invites people to explore the town centre.

John Street is an important location historically chosen by the Macarthur brothers in 1836 for the civic heart of Camden in what today is Camden's Heritage Conservation Area (HCA). As stated in the UDF (p. 15) the axial vistas along Camden's major streets, particularly the axial view along John Street to St John's Church are of exceptional significance.

It is well documented and undisputed that Camden is a highly significant town in the colonisation story of NSW and Australia. The 1840 town is on the radar of NSW Heritage for state listing. Aside from its cultural importance, from an economic perspective it is also a unique asset.

As background and as stated in the UDF's *Public Domain Strategy* (p. 51), consultation with the community found an overwhelming response to the treatment of the public domain in the Camden Town Centre, with many respondents stating that any further upgrades should be of an appropriate heritage character.

This strong response was a result of the then recent Argyle Street “enhancements” which the community, including the business community loudly protested about because they degraded heritage significance and the town’s competitive difference¹. There was no true and proper community consultation for the Argyle Street works. Attempts to seek audience and subsequent protests were to no avail. This experience left a legacy of distrust of attempts to “re-imagine” the town and a “once bitten twice shy” questioning of how well urban consultants and Council necessarily understand and appreciate the unique asset they are redesigning and managing.

Another unfortunate legacy is that the inappropriate Argyle Street works are difficult to integrate with appropriate works in John Street. As noted in the *Heritage Report* (p. 38) there is inconsistency of fabric such as footpath paving and street lighting, between John and Argyle Streets that is unsympathetic to the heritage significance of the street and creates disunity.

As stated in the UDF's *Culture Strategy* (p. 43) Camden’s rural history has provided ample built forms and open space for the community to use for cultural events and community activities and which could function as a regional cultural hub and arts precinct. As the *Culture Strategy* also covers, many people stated in the community consultation that the heritage of the Town Centre needs to be protected and preserved and that the community would like to see that public art responds to the heritage character and feel of the Town Centre. In other words, although the community wishes to enhance and celebrate the unique history of the Macarthur town, the establishment of an arts culture should not compromise conservation of its character as an historic rural town.

¹Melanie Kembrey 15 June 2015 *Sydney's 'last country town' Camden divided by town centre revamp* Sydney Morning Herald Available at <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/sydneys-last-country-town-camden-divided-by-town-centre-revamp-20150615-ghnzxs.html>

Given this context the project is understandably sensitive with long-time residents and business owners who do understand the town's unique history and have long advocated for its preservation.

Specific feedback on the Project

- **Survey weighting vs conservation**

We are concerned that findings about what the community liked and disliked about John Street, how they envisaged John Street as a future creative and community hub and their small and big ideas for the street, have the potential to be considered at the expense of conservation.

Feedback from the greater community which includes a great many new residents of the Camden LGA may not be tempered by the overriding objective of conservation of Camden's heritage. Whilst enjoying the town's difference and leafy open spaces new residents do not necessarily yet fully appreciate its history and the need for conservation of its authenticity.

- Member responses revealed anxiety about how survey and other findings may be weighted and affect decisions. As one member commented: *I really worry at the extensive surveying that suggests all responses be given equal value when so many now have little or no understanding of the unique history etc.*

We insist that an understanding of Camden history, as referenced in the UDF and *Heritage Report* included in the documentation, requires that the town be conserved and not changed into something it was never intended to be or has been throughout its long history. To do other than enhance its original character would damage its value both culturally and economically.

RECOMMENDATION 1

We question why the *Heritage Report* did not extend to analysis of the proposed changes to John Street, and strongly recommend that a thorough expert analysis is required as a starting point for the Project.

- **27 John Street**

We congratulate Council on this initiative. We believe the creation of more open community space will greatly beautify and enhance activation of John Street and the town.

- **Draft signage and Wayfinding Strategy**

We appreciate the way the signage designs reinforce what makes Camden special through featuring the jacaranda motif, the town silhouette focussed on the spire of St John's and the inclusion of sandstone where possible.

The colour palette also reinforces sandstone and leafiness elements of the town with cream and green, and we appreciate that the colours are very similar to the heritage colours recommended in the heritage colour matrix of Camden's Material and Colour Guide (p. 24). The green is preferably, and seems to be similar to, Dulux's traditional Deep Brunswick Green².

There are two options for the Gateway sign. Overall, we prefer Option Two as the sandstone shapes reflect the shapes of building materials including cornerstones and kerbstones.

- **Police Station and Court House**

Many members mentioned that John Street needs an answer to the disused Police station and Court House. Clearly both are historically integral to the civic function of John Street and have the potential to be used to enliven and enhance the town.

RECOMMENDATION 2

We suggest that the current situation and efforts of Council to determine their likely future be shared with the community.

- **Upgraded street furniture and lighting**

The Project documentation does not specify the street furniture and lighting except through the UDF manual (Appendix 01 Public Domain Manual).

We do understand the philosophy of new work being identifiable as such. The Burra Charter³ indicates that it should also support the significance of the place and be designed to have a positive role in its interpretation.

The street furniture and lighting depicted in the UDF is the same as that chosen and installed in the earlier Argyle Street "enhancements" into which the community had no input. The findings and principles of the UDF, which was the result of proper community consultation,

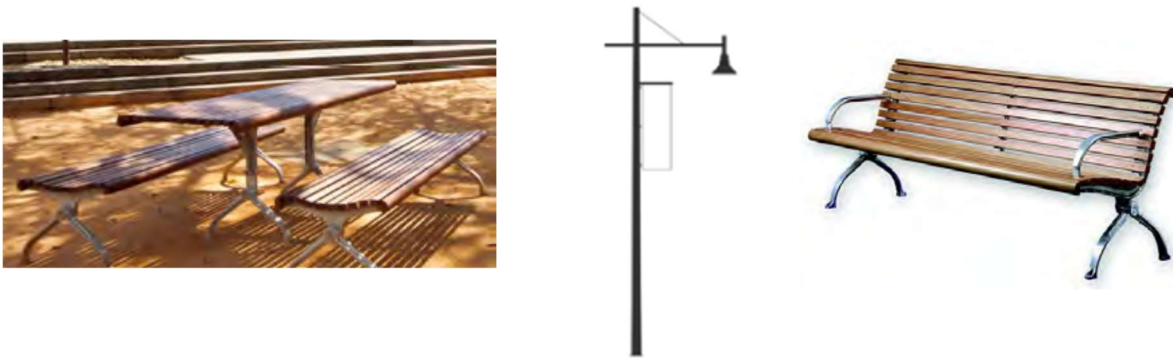
² <https://www.dulux.com.au/colour/traditionals/deep-brunswick-green/>

³ ICOMOS November 2013 *Burra Charter Practice Note Article 22- New Work* Available at <https://australia.icomos.org/publications/burra-charter-practice-notes/>

are not consistent with their choice, and we understand that the brief to the UDF consultants was to incorporate what had already been installed in Argyle Street.

The community at the time did not consider the new furniture an upgrade, nor as high quality as that it replaced. Like ubiquitous grey granite paving, the new furniture is seen as modern generic.

Our response is that the new furniture will not make a positive contribution to the town's special sense of place and we strongly suggest something more appropriate be incorporated.



Source: Extract from UDF manual (pp. xii; xiii)

The artist's impressions of the proposed John Street works include similar lighting to that depicted in the UDF and installed during the unpopular Argyle Street works.



We understand that one reason for the choice of lighting in Argyle Street is to accommodate banners as shown in this photo.

Our opinion is that the proposed lighting is somewhat spindly and untidily reminiscent of telegraph poles, and that the banners create distracting clutter and do not enhance the streetscape. Banners would be particularly inappropriate in John Street with its vista to the Church and its range of different uses.

RECOMMENDATION 3

We strongly suggest that instead of mimicking Argyle Street that further investigation be undertaken into an option for John Street of interpretive and reflective street furniture and more substantial and elegant lighting as expected in a heritage town.

- **Paving**

We understand that the pressed common brick paving as already laid in some small areas of Argyle Street (subsequent to public pressure to soften the dark granite), and depicted in the UDF's Public Domain Manual (appendix p. ix) is intended to be continued into John Street. It is more appropriate than the dark grey granite (quarried in South Australia), but the response is that whilst it seems logical to now at least integrate John Street paving with the brick sections in Argyle Street that this perpetuates the mistake. As stated in the *Public Domain Analysis* of the UDF (p. 47):

From the earliest convict constructed colonial buildings through to modern additions, there has been a material consistency in the use of brick that has enabled Camden to keep its unique character. Sandstone is used selectively both as an engineering solution as well as to embellish and highlight important elements. The use of sandstone and brick is a significant feature throughout the Town Centre, from the remnant sandstone kerbs and gutters, to the occasional use as a building/streetscape detail.

The brick referred to in the above UDF analysis is not that featured in Argyle Street or the UDF's Public Domain Manual.



Laneway paving



John Street paving

Source: Extract from UDF manual (p. ix)

As shown in the extracts from the UDF Manual the recycled bricks for the laneways are more in keeping with expectations of a heritage town, but the John Street paving is arguably not consistent with the findings and principles of the UDF which focus on retaining Camden as a historic rural town.

The pressed common bricks with their dark and industrial look are difficult to imagine in this context. For instance, a suggestion is that sandstone or sandstock brick, materials readily available at the time the town was founded and when its significant building was undertaken would be consistent with the Camden DCP and the Burra Charter's principles of interpreting and complementing a significant element of the heritage place.

Although outside the scope of the John Street Project, we also take this opportunity to suggest that a review be undertaken of the state of granite paving in Argyle Street. There have been many comments about its unsightliness including stained dirtiness particularly outside food shops.

RECOMMENDATION 4

We strongly recommend that the paving for John Street be reconsidered.

- **Trees and vegetation**

We note that Camden is renowned for its historic exotic tree plantings, especially as William Macarthur as a horticulturalist propagated them at Camden Park.

We trust that no advanced trees are removed during the works, and that all additional trees would be of sufficient size and distance apart to provide a good head start in beautifying the street. Also, beds of smaller plants and shrubs too close to trees can impede their growth. It goes without saying of course that there needs to be a commitment to frequent maintenance of beds to maintain their positive impact.

The species composition of trees and beds was not specified in the diagrams and documentation. The UDF Public Domain Manual (p. xi) refers to selecting trees from the 2015 Tree Management Policy (Appendix A).

A suggestion is that deciduous trees providing shade in summer and sun in winter, ones that provide a pleasing shape and colourful seasonal display would be a good inclusion.

- **Upper and Lower John Street**

In general, proposed changes such as raised pedestrian crossings, additional tree plantings, additional places to rest, formalised drop off zones and accessible parking were welcomed.

However, specific issues were raised by members as follows.

- It is a shame that access to St John's steps from the footpath at the top of John Street could not be made an even more inviting feature.

The *Heritage Report* (pp. 38;42), states that the steps, built in the interwar period, long after the Church, would require further investigation before providing heritage advice on appropriate treatment.

CRAG understands that the steps leading up from John Street are today in a difficult location at the busy T-intersection of Broughton and John Streets.



The steps and iron railings, were donated in 1935 by General J. W. Macarthur-Onslow and equipped with electric light and copper fitting as a memorial to Mr & Mrs James Wentworth. Google maps and the Precinct's boundary fence suggest that they are located on public land and we believe, subject to further investigation, that at least half and probably all are within council jurisdiction. Even so, the Macarthur family as part of the town plan entrusted all of St John's Anglican Church Precinct to the

community in perpetuity and we cannot in any case see any impediment to the Church agreeing to their restoration.

Whilst the project as it stands does propose significant improvements to access and connection from John Street to the Precinct, there is room for a more creative approach. We are of the opinion that efforts should be made to include work on the stairs into the Project.

RECOMMENDATION 5

We strongly recommend that as a minimum the flight of stairs and associated fittings be repaired and integrated creatively into the streetscape to restore what was intended to be a welcoming connection between St John's and the street.

- The pedestrian access path to the Council car park between John and Hill Streets is too narrow and does not provide disabled access.

It is unfortunate that the opportunity to address this historical anomaly was not taken during the assessment and 2022 approval of the DA to redevelop 60 John Street.

The footpath cannot accommodate people walking together or a wheelchair, forcing use of the vehicle laneway. It is also unattractive and detracts from the aims of the Project to beautify and increase pedestrian amenity in John Street.

RECOMMENDATION 6

We strongly recommend that this laneway footpath be addressed as part of the Project.



- Where there is currently grass which is easily walked upon, the drawings show trees/shrubs forming a hedge/garden bed between the gutter and the footpath. Yes, Camden needs more trees but not loss of convenient and safe access between gutters and footpaths. For cars reversing into parking spaces the configuration of beds as depicted would block easy access to the footpath and to the boot. In upper John Street this difficulty is exacerbated by the gutter being much lower than the footpath in front of Dr Crookston's House. In lower John Street in particular this may cause safety problems with school children having to walk on the road in front of parked cars to be able to easily access the footpath.

RECOMMENDATION 7

We recommend that the placement of the beds as depicted in the diagrams be assessed to ensure their everyday practicality.

- Currently school drop off and pick up are difficult enough and we cannot afford to lose two more car spaces. Two spaces were already lost when the raised pedestrian crossing outside the Primary School, which is functioning well for school children and seniors from the retirement units on the Old High School site, was recently installed and entrances to it widened.

This issue of loss of parking is further addressed below.

- **Central John Street.**

Most feedback from members about the project involved the central heart of John Street. Feedback is very positive about additional tree plantings, raised pedestrian crossings, crossing points in Argyle Street and formalised bus and drop off areas. However, this area is very sensitive and a number of vocal concerns were raised.

Raised area “plaza” and widened footpaths

There were negative comments from members about the very idea of the plaza space, with a preference to keep the area as it is.

- A number of members commented that they could not see a need to “reimagine” what is already a spacious area that worked well for the community.
- Similarly, concerns were expressed about the relative scale of road and fabric including loss of delineation between buildings and roadway, and how the original feature of the very wide road and its vista to the church is potentially being somewhat lost through expansion of footpaths. As one member commented: *While I understand the need for a safe crossing point, I balk at the ‘town square’ elements masking the long streetscape up the hill to the church.*

CRAG is afraid that works intended to activate and beautify John Street may potentially result in loss of some of John Street’s meaning and place within the original town design, using the colony’s first planning regulations of 1829, drawn up by James and William Macarthur and Surveyor General Sir Thomas Mitchell.

This concern is consistent with the cautious approach of Article 3⁴ of the Burra Charter, about ensuring proposed changes do not diminish heritage and cultural significance and sense of place. A very careful balance between the imposition of an art culture and retention of original fabric and scale is necessary to retain heritage significance.

- Another concern was loss of residential history and softening lawn. As commented:

While acknowledging the care of the design to try to meet the various demands/desires in their brief, I have spoken to many people since. Increasingly I worry about the loss of the remnants of grass that give Macaria a link to its residential history. I noticed that, in photos taken at Unlock Camden, the grass gave colour and texture that would be lost with all hard surface. Similarly, the removal of yet more hand- hewn sandstone guttering is feeling like too high a price to pay yet again.



The reference to the sandstone kerbstones relates to the Argyle Street works in which much was lost. We do trust that this old sandstone is safe and will be re-used. Universally no-one wants to see any sandstone lost or not positioned in John Street and believe the works should carefully lift the stones during works and put them back appropriately.

- More positive comments about the idea of the proposed plaza space included:

The small plaza outside the Library/Museum complex could be better integrated with the proposed new plaza.

There should be provision for pop-up food and other vendors in the new plaza. These facilities would give people a reason to visit the new place and provide more business opportunities.

Removal of 60° parking and the untidiness of parked cars along the western side could open up St John's vista and provide better views of the original building stock.

The existing Burragorang Valley/Silver Ore memorial should be preserved, restored and given a prominent position in the new plaza.

⁴ ICOMOS 2013 *The Burra Charter* available at <https://australia.icomos.org/publications/burra-charter-practice-notes/>
Cautious approach

3.1 Conservation is based on a respect for the existing fabric, use, associations and meanings. It requires a cautious approach of changing as much as necessary but as little as possible.

3.2 Changes to a place should not distort the physical or other evidence it provides, nor be based on conjecture.

We note that the *Heritage Report* does not directly address the appropriateness of the reconfiguration of road and footpaths, but does state (pp. 41; 42) that the width of the street should be retained and that the previous alignment of fences in front of the Court House and Police Station should be interpreted.

RECOMMENDATION 8

We strongly recommend that an independent heritage expert be engaged to evaluate the appropriateness of the proposal for central John Street and how it impacts the originality and heritage significance of John Street.

Parking and Traffic

Members often pointed out that central John Street is also the heart of a working town with schools, medical facilities and shops that many in the community visit often and routinely as part of their lives.

- Concerns were often expressed about the impact on everyday use of the town through loss of parking in John Street (approximately 55-65 parking spots mainly in the central section between Argyle and Mitchell Streets).

We note also that this concern about loss of parking is subject to much discussion on social media.

The *Existing Conditions Report* (23 January 2025) of traffic in John Street refers to the capacity of the Oxley Street decked car park and that the total capacity of it and Larkin Place off-street parking is counted as 323 spaces.

This Report (pp. 10;11) states that the parking survey found that the Oxley Street car park experienced low occupancy all day. This finding should not be used to suggest that spare spaces in the Oxley Street Car Park can offset the loss of parking in John Street.

There is a good reason why the Oxley Street car park is underutilised – many people will not use the deck under any circumstances due to its tight access and likelihood of damage to their cars. The ground level is also difficult to access with cars often taking space beyond the designated driveway to manoeuvre.

It is understood that Oxley Street car park was likely constructed in accordance with AS/NZS 2890.1:2004 standard as a Class 3 town centre car park. This standard did not account for the trend to larger vehicles which have always been very common in Camden, and a public circulation draft of AS/NZS 2890.1 proposes larger bay dimensions. A Class 3 classification means the car park is not suitable for a shopping-centre environment with a rapid churn and a need for increased manoeuvring allowances. (Class 3A Double loaded module has a wider aisle width).

The Oxley Street car park seems to just reach the minimum standards as a town centre car park in most places. We find that there are likely compliance exceptions at the ramps where the aisle width does not seem to reach the required 5.8m as the kerbs, bollards and railings extend into the aisle by 200-300mm.

We take this opportunity to point out that the Oxley car park is also a last resort because it is uninviting being dark and dirty, often with litter strewn about. The lift does not inspire confidence which also discourages those who need it from using the deck.

At this point the community is not necessarily happy to use the Oxley Street car park and the deck in particular is avoided. Its capacity cannot be fully counted as adding to available parking or compensating for the loss of parking in John Street.

RECOMMENDATION 9

We strongly suggest that an audit of the Oxley Street car park be undertaken to ensure that it is fully compliant with the standard and an investigation made into how it can be made safe and easy to use. Once its usability is ascertained the *Existing Conditions Report* should be updated and made public.

- Concern was expressed about loss of disabled parking and stop-off outside the Library and Museum providing easy access for the elderly and children or deliveries.

As one member stated: The removal of the parking outside the library might compromise the operation of the Library and the Museum as there is no space of deliveries, disabled parking/access or even quick return of books to the library.

Another member referred to the bus tours of Camden, centred on the Museum and Family History Society, and John Street. Many visitors are less mobile and the popularity and functionality of the tours would be seriously compromised if easy access to and pick up from the Museum/library complex was lost.

- Making the two-way lane between John Street and Larkin Place one-way was raised by members as a major concern.

As one member commented: The Larkin Place one-way has been widely objected to in my discussions. It will add to traffic congestion in Argyle Street and be particularly cumbersome for those coming from the Cawdor side of town.

One member was familiar with a disused ramp access to the Library/Museum complex along the laneway and stated if the Larkin Place/John Street connection was to be made one way, which he did not support, that it could be activated to partially mitigate issues of dropping off children and the disabled.



Members pointed out that pedestrian access along the laneway was not needed as there is already a functional pathway beside the Library/Museum between Larkin Place and John Street.

It was further commonly commented that the laneway was made one way during the 2023 *Larkin Place To Be* project, which caused traffic congestion particularly at school pick up times. It was felt that the fairly new exit gate from St Paul's School directly into Larkin Place and concerns about the inviting colourful painting of a path between the gate and the arcade, which is not a pedestrian crossing, has exacerbated the concerns of parents and the intensity of car pickups from the school.

We therefore completely understand what would seem to be a general negative public reaction to the idea of losing so much parking in John Street and a one-way Larkin Place laneway.

RECOMMENDATION 10

We strongly suggest that all of the parking and traffic issues raised above be quickly and openly addressed if the Project is to gain community support.

Conclusion

We again thank the John Street Project Team for their professionalism in properly engaging with the community. Those that attended the formal consultation sessions were uniformly appreciative of the opportunity to be heard and be provided with explanatory detail. The initiative of reclaiming 27 John Street as open community space and the sensitive signage strategy are welcomed.

It is unfortunate that the town is left with the legacy of the Argyle Street works which were not based on an understanding of the town's significant history or subject to proper community consultation. This makes the appropriate treatment of John Street and the Project more difficult.

On balance we submit that it would be a mistake to repeat inappropriate elements of the Argyle Street works in John Street. We strongly suggest that other more appropriate options be explored.

We understand that it makes sense to try and harmonise with the paving, street furniture and lighting as carried over from those works into the UDF. However, John Street is not Camden's retail street and not necessarily beholden to it. John Street was originally designed to have a different civic and residential function and that is evident in present day Camden. We maintain that the essence of these

functions should remain fully represented and that any cultural hub and arts precinct should work with it and not change it.

This approach is consistent with the principles of the Burra Charter which is adopted in Camden's DCP, and we submit that these principles should be an overriding consideration when evaluating various opinions of what people would like in John Street.

Additional trees and vegetation are of course welcomed.

As explained, we believe that the project should go further in relation to St John's steps and the laneway between the John Street and the Council car park between John and Hill Streets. We hope that both of these will be investigated further and become part of the Project. It is generally considered that the grant of \$23.1m is very sizable for one street and we trust that funds are available to direct towards these additional enhancements.

The issue of accessing car boots and footpaths when parking if there is a bed between the footpath and gutter was raised. We trust this practicality will be addressed in the landscape plan.

The idea of the raised plaza and widened footpaths in central John Street were triggering concerns for many, due to both heritage conservation issues and loss of parking.


We believe the plaza idea was part of the brief given to the UDF consultants and was not an idea that came from the community. In that sense this is the first time the community has had to properly consider its impact on the iconic street. We strongly suggest that an independent heritage report be sought about its appropriateness in terms of its effect on heritage significance.

As explained the loss of parking and making the Larkin Place laneway one way were very negatively received. We strongly suggest that both be revisited, and that an audit of the usability of the Oxley Street car park be undertaken. We do not agree with the current conditions reported by the traffic consultant.

We submit as explained throughout this submission that the scope of the Project could be extended and that more expert analysis is required, particularly in relation to heritage conservation and parking. It should then be re-exhibited based on further heritage and parking analyses and feedback received during this consultation.

We do not think the proposal is ready at this point to be submitted to Council for approval.

Yours sincerely,



Glenda Davis
President