

# North Sydney Sun

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## What can North Sydney learn from New York City?

By Grahame Lynch

As Frankie sang, New York City definitely makes the small town blues melt away. It's a place which gets more than its share of bad knocks—9-11, airliners in the Hudson to name two—but through this adversity, it always manages to rebound with an essential and relentless energy.

And it's a place which shares something in common with our own North Sydney: both places see high rise residential and commercial share the same streets at the same time attempting to balance their history with modernity.

Cr Ian Mutton certainly thinks

North Sydney can learn something from New York City. He has been travelling there regularly since the 1980s, most recently in August for the first time since the COVID lockdowns.

This time Mutton spent time in both SoHo and Midtown, observing: "New York took me by surprise. It's a boom economy. Absolutely buzzing away. So there's no leftover from COVID. There was a vibrance on the street, there was a community on the street. So we'd go and have, breakfast at the restaurants, and people would

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walk into the restaurants and know each other. So these weren't people coming from outside, these were people who actually live in a really densely populated area."

Mutton continued: "The vibrance of that community took me a little bit by surprise, and I started thinking about it, how is it different to North Sydney? And it's really different in a very significant way. There's an enormous amount of street activity."

So what's causing that activity?

"Firstly, with the beginning of COVID, the government in New York decided that they would do everything they could to boost the restaurants, so they effectively said to all of the restaurants, you can expand onto the sidewalk, and you can self-license and pay 1,000 bucks a year total. And that gave rise to an enormous number of restaurants putting tables and chairs out on the street. And tables and chairs attract people," Mutton explained.

"Secondly, they are expanding the pavements, the footpaths. They're actually taking lanes off the road, and expanding the pavement, so there's more space for pedestrians. And having done that, and you see it in front of Macy's and you see it in some of the other streets, having expanded it, they then put chairs and tables there. Put chairs and tables there, people sit down and talk. So there's this massive activation of the community."

Outdoor seating in North Sydney is not a trifling expense for shop owners. North Sydney Council currently charges as much as \$680 excluding GST per square metre per annum in premium locations such as the North Sydney CBD, Kirribilli and Crows Nest high streets, and \$510 ex GST per square metre in secondary locations such as Cammeray and Neutral Bay.

Mutton also saw encouragement

for cyclists but in a different manner to Sydney: "They're also putting bike paths everywhere, but in a way that is totally different to what's going on in Sydney. We've got an obsession here with the velodromes or speed bike channels, whereas in New York, they've just got an obsession with separating the bike riders from the people on the pavement. So it's not as if they put a bike path along 34th Street from one end to the other. It breaks it into every intersection. There's railing, there's pot plants, there's fences, gutters, all sorts of things."

Mutton said North Sydney needs to learn how to genuinely live along side its high rise: "We have always found a utility from tall buildings dating back to the clock tower rising 7 storeys in the late 1890s and the weather station on the MLC building in the 1960s. Another example is the Greenway public housing apartments, that provides a real amenity."

Mutton believes there needs to be more flexibility around development policies, with more of an emphasis on the public amenity and utility of specific development proposals and not just a broad tolerance or prohibition of developments based on number of floors. "We've got to start asking, what is the community benefit we get out of having that particular building, be it 12 stories or whatever it is," Mutton explained. "The way we're going at the moment, North Sydney and Neutral Bay are just going to be a whole lot of shoe boxes with no real community areas around them."

"Because you're going to find that the developers, the owners of properties, can only build to three or five stories, so they'll maximise their building footprint, and we've got to do something better," he continued.

Mutton fears what might become of Crows Nest, with the new Metro station on the Pacific Highway inexorably

moving the centre of gravity of the suburb away from Willoughby Road.

"The part of Crows Nest that we know, that is to the east of the Metro, is withering and dying, and we're sitting back at Council saying we're not going to allow any particular developments and do the negotiations we need to get the community amenities down there. No, we say leave it as it is which is another way of saying let it go to rock and ruin," he said.

"That is not a way for North Sydney to go. There's no vision if you say no all the time. We've got to have the vision, and we've got to have the courage to get out and argue for the things that we want."

Mutton returned to his original New York observations. "Maintaining North Sydney today as it was 20 years ago is just not going to fit with the new society that we're seeing which is about street activation and people working from home. All sorts of changes are going on in our communi-



Cr Ian Mutton

ty, which makes it even more important that we them actually functioning, so that people get out of their houses and get out of their apartments and meet each other. And we're sitting back saying, we don't want anything that's more active than a gum tree!"



### TOP 5 ITEMS BORROWED

- Water Pressure Washer
- Hedge Trimmer
- Food Dehydrator
- Ice Cream Maker
- Bread Maker

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