

Master plans

The issues we are seeking to address in urban centres, on infill sites and in growth areas alike, are complex and challenging. Master planning is a method for defining clear strategies for the physical, economic, and social transformation of places.

Planning for change in the physical, social, and economic fabric of places requires an integrated process achieved through the efforts of many – clients, professionals and local communities. Master planning is a fluid and iterative process, with many people contributing to the initial investigations, the proposals as they develop and to their delivery.

People – residents, visitors and ultimate users of the spaces and buildings – are at the heart of any master plan. A successful master plan will embody a community's collective vision and values to create sustainable places for living, working, and recreation.

What is a master plan?

Many terms can be used to describe strategies for the physical regeneration of an area. Some of the most commonly used include master plan, concept plan, development framework, regeneration strategy, vision etc. As they are often used interchangeably, and can mean different things to different people, there is frequent misunderstanding as to their purpose and expected outcome.

A master plan is both the process by which analysis is undertaken and strategies are prepared, as well as the resulting coordinated proposals for buildings, infrastructure, spaces, circulation, and land use etc. These are conceived in three dimensions and are supported by carefully orchestrated delivery strategies.

For a master plan to be comprehensive it must be supported by financial, economic, and social policy documents and delivery mechanisms; without these it has little meaning or likelihood of effective implementation.

Master plans are required where the scale of change is significant and the area subject to change is more than a few buildings. In these situations, the master plan provides an 'integrated model' that:

- illustrates how the streets, squares and open spaces of a neighbourhood are to be structured and connected
- defines the heights, massing and bulk of buildings
- sets out suggested relationships between buildings and public

spaces

- determines the distribution of activities and uses that will be permitted
- identifies the movement patterns and networks for people moving by foot, cycle, car, public transport, and service vehicles
- sets out the basis for provision of other infrastructure elements such as utilities
- relates physical form to socio-economic and cultural contexts and stakeholder interests
- reveals how well a new urban neighborhood will be integrated with the surrounding context and natural environment.
- includes an implementation strategy that guides the delivery of this master plan and also informs subsequent master planning.

A master plan addresses the multifaceted aspects that make places successful, including:

- quality and management of buildings and spaces
- integration of buildings and spaces to create unique places
- built form in relation to history, culture and landscape
- provision of services
- engagement of local people and users in defining and being involved in the process of change
- economic and financial realities
- coordination between different agencies in delivering investment and change.

What are the benefits of a master plan?

Master planning embraces a wide range of complex, sometimes conflicting issues and is a positive, proactive process that can bring significant benefits. For example, master plans can help to:

- shape a three-dimensional physical form that responds to local economic and social dynamics
- identify the potential of an area or site for development
- unlock previously under-developed land
- create certainty of capacity and yield to enhance project viability.
- engage the local community in thinking about their role in a development or regeneration process
- build consensus about the future of an area, and identify priorities for action
- increase land values and making proposals viable
- attract private sector investment and identify public and private sector aspirations and roles
- clarify the roles and responsibility of organisations involved
- promote an area and market its development or regeneration
- integrate new development into an existing community
- show political leadership
- define proposals that will deliver high quality, sustainable buildings and public spaces
- coordinate the activities of different services in an area, for example education, health and leisure
- celebrate the natural assets of a

place, for example the landscape, topography, and ecology.

When can master plans be helpful?

Master plans can help to evaluate the current context and propose physical change in the following types of situations:

Regeneration projects

For example:

- the closure of an industry that results in large areas of brown-field and redundant land being available for development
- the need for a city, urban or rural district to reinvigorate its economic performance and attract new development
- the need to regenerate part of an urban area, often precipitated by the sale of publicly owned holdings
- a large housing development failing due to the quality of the housing stock and stigmatisation of the community, leading to the need to redevelop large areas of existing housing.

Development proposals

For example:

- large extensions to urban areas and towns being developed to support housing needs or economic growth and change
- a landowner wanting to establish the scope and quality of development that is appropriate for their land
- the development of previously undeveloped sites.

Opportunities

For example:

- the dissolution of an urban renewal authority and the need to sell or re-assign assets to others, often creating a legacy for agencies that will continue to operate
- developments in city centres that entail site amalgamations and improvements in transport
- the sale of publicly owned land and buildings, for example old utilities or institutional sites
- creation of a major new public investment, such as sports facilities.

The planning context

Master plans operate in the context of the NSW planning system, and they must be produced with a clear understanding of local plans and government policy. Depending on whether a master plan is prepared by the private or public sector, they may affect the planning context or interact with local plans.

A master plan can take on a formal status for elements that are to be fixed for the long term, an advisory status where it is open to interpretation, or may change over time. It may be used to inform planning policy within the wider planning system, for example, in a development plan amendment, to assist specific policies, or to stimulate growth.

The client's circumstances

Many clients may not be in a position to prepare a master plan as a single, continuous exercise. Funding and political climate

may mean that master plans are prepared in phases, with considerable time passing between each phase. Clients may come from a range of groups – public, private, voluntary and community – with correspondingly varied objectives. Depending on the client's aims, a master plan will have a different emphasis. Particular clients may play a part throughout the master planning process, or for a short stage only, or their role may change during the process.

Master planning and design quality

Master planning is becoming more prominent as government, the private sector and the community increasingly recognise the importance of urban design in creating good places to live and work. Current urban design thinking acknowledges that the poor physical environment of some towns and cities is the result of little consideration of buildings and the spaces between them.

The interface between the internal and external domain of buildings and public spaces is an integral part of the spatial experience of urban environments. Master planning is concerned with the integration and quality of buildings, the spaces created between them, hard and soft landscapes, public spaces, roads and car parks, utilities, infrastructure, street furniture, and signage – many of which are determined by the design, massing and placement of buildings. The quality of buildings is also important, as is the way they address the functional requirements of users.

Successful developments depend on physical proposals being complemented by positive change in the social and economic wellbeing of places and of the people who live or work there.

Objectives of a successful master plan

A successful master plan must:

- raise aspirations and provide a vehicle for consensus and implementation
- take into account likely implementation and delivery routes
- fully integrate with the land-use planning system
- enable new uses and market opportunities that fulfil the full development potential of a site
- be flexible and provide a basis for negotiation and dispute resolution
- result from a participatory process, providing all stakeholders with the means of expressing their needs and priorities

Source: This has been adapted from Towards an Urban Renaissance (Urban Task Force, Office of Deputy Prime Minister, London 1999).

How can GANSW help?

GANSW can assist in the planning and delivery of projects by providing a range of design-related advice, including:

- whether a master plan is the right process for your project
- how to approach the master planning process.

Further information

For more information see Better Placed: An integrated design policy for the built environment of NSW (GANSW 2017) available on the GANSW website: ga.nsw.gov.au

Government Architect NSW

GANSW provides design leadership in architecture, urban design and landscape architecture. In this role, GANSW works across government, the private sector and the community to establish policy and practice guides for achieving good design. GANSW provides strategic advice across design, planning and development to support good policy, programs, projects and places.

Contact GANSW

GANSW makes every effort to keep its advice up to date. From time to time we will release new versions of these advisory notes. For further advice, or if you think there is information missing, please contact GANSW.

Ben Hewett
Deputy Government Architect

Jane Threlfall
Principal Urban Design

02 9860 1464

government.architect@planning.nsw.gov.au

Department of Planning and Environment
320 Pitt St Sydney NSW 2000