



# Apartment Design Guide

Tools for improving the design of  
residential apartment development

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Planning &  
Environment

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## Minister's foreword

Apartments are an increasingly popular housing choice in New South Wales and Sydney more significantly. In the decade up to 2011, the proportion of Sydney households living in a house fell from 68% to 60% while the share living in apartments rose to almost 30% in that same period. Although a house with a backyard will remain the preference for many, the number of people living in apartments will continue to increase across Sydney and in our regional centres. In fact, the City of Sydney is expecting around 80 per cent of residents to be living in apartments by 2030. With this demand for apartment living growing, the design of this popular housing choice and its potential to improve liveability is more crucial than ever.

The first major policy initiative in New South Wales to lift the quality of apartment design was the introduction of State Environmental Planning Policy No. 65 – Design Quality of Residential Flat Development (SEPP 65) and the Residential Flat Design Code back in 2002.

There have been a number of achievements since the introduction of this policy thirteen years ago. We have seen a shift to well designed, high quality apartment buildings with improved internal amenity and we have seen significant improvements to how apartment developments relate to their neighbourhood. This has also meant the growth of new, well designed apartment based communities surrounded by public transport, shops and services, as well as open spaces that encourage more active lifestyles.

There is no doubt that good apartment design helps to create healthy, safe and liveable communities. Apartments also provide housing choice for those with a range of incomes and lifestyle preferences. We need more and different types of homes as our State's needs change over time.

With this in mind, the New South Wales Government embarked on a review of SEPP 65. Throughout the review one thing was clear – our stakeholders, including councils, industry, practitioners and the community all commended the policy for the positive effect it has had on apartment design in the State.

The review has resulted in amendments to both SEPP 65 and the Residential Flat Design Code, now called the Apartment Design Guide. The name of SEPP 65 has also been amended to update terminology throughout the SEPP and align it with the updated Apartment Design Guide. These amendments have updated the policy based on extensive feedback from our stakeholders and ensure that design quality of apartments is maintained, while promoting housing supply and affordability. The changes introduce greater flexibility into the design process to encourage more innovation, and provide clarity and consistency in the way design issues are dealt with for apartments.

In preparing the Apartment Design Guide, expert advice has been widely sought. I thank our councils, industry partners, organisations and the community who have all contributed to the review.

My vision is to see New South Wales delivering the best apartments in the country. We've been setting the benchmark since SEPP 65 was introduced, with architects striving for innovation in apartment design and contributing to diverse communities. In future, councils and industry partners will continue to work together to create these places, and more great neighbourhoods. Good apartment design is a key factor in delivering quality homes for communities that are light, well ventilated and flexible to suit the many needs of our modern lifestyle. Most importantly, I envisage diverse neighbourhoods and great places for communities to live. Working together, I have no doubt that we can achieve this vision and continue to be the leaders, setting the benchmark for apartment design in Australia.

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**The Hon. Rob Stokes MP**  
Minister for Planning

## About this guide

### What is the Apartment Design Guide

This Apartment Design Guide is a resource to improve the planning and design of residential apartment development in NSW. It updates and replaces the Residential Flat Design Code introduced in 2002.

The Apartment Design Guide is to be used in conjunction with *State Environmental Planning Policy No 65 – Design Quality of Residential Apartment Development* (SEPP 65) which sets out the NSW Government's policy direction for residential apartment development in NSW.



### Aims of the Guide

This Apartment Design Guide will help to achieve better design and planning for residential apartment development, by providing benchmarks for designing and assessing these developments.

It is designed to:

- deliver better quality design for buildings that respond appropriately to the character of the area, landscape setting and surrounding built form
- improve liveability through enhanced internal and external apartment amenity, including better layout, apartment depth and ceiling heights, solar access, natural ventilation and visual privacy
- deliver improved sustainability through better traffic and transport solutions, greater building adaptability and robustness, improved energy efficiency and water sensitive urban design
- improve the relationship of apartments to the public domain including streets, lanes and parks
- deliver design guidance and assist in the provision of more diverse housing mix and choice
- support councils in developing planning controls and master plans through improved guidance.

The Guide has responded to challenges, advances and innovations across a range of social, economic, environmental and sustainable development fields as well as aesthetic and technical changes and opportunities.





Photo: Brett Boardman

### Statutory relationship to SEPP 65

There is a close and integrated relationship between this Apartment Design Guide and SEPP 65.

SEPP 65 sets a consistent policy direction for residential apartment development in NSW and provides a uniform state-wide framework for more detailed planning guidance. It has a statutory effect on development and as a consequence may modify or supplement the provisions of state environmental planning policies, local environmental plans (LEP) and development control plans (DCP).

Although this document is a guide, SEPP 65 refers to some parts of the Apartment Design Guide that must be applied when assessing development applications. Objectives, design criteria and design guidance in Parts 3 and 4 of this Apartment Design Guide that are referred to in SEPP 65 will prevail over any inconsistent DCP control. Parts 3 and 4 set out objectives, design criteria and design guidance for the siting, design and amenity of residential apartment development.

Certain design criteria referred to in SEPP 65 cannot be used as a reason to refuse a development application, if complied with.

SEPP 65 establishes nine design quality principles to be applied in the design and assessment of residential apartment development. This Apartment Design Guide provides greater detail on how residential development proposals can meet these principles through good design and planning practice.

### Residential apartment development

SEPP 65 and the Apartment Design Guide apply to residential flat buildings, shop top housing and the residential component of mixed use developments. They apply to buildings that are three or more storeys and that have four or more dwellings where the development consists of the:

- erection of a new building
- substantial redevelopment or refurbishment of an existing building
- conversion of an existing building to a residential flat building.



## How to use this guide

### Who is this Apartment Design Guide for?

The Apartment Design Guide provides consistent planning and design standards for residential apartments across NSW. It has been prepared to:

- be a tool for developers, planners, urban designers, architects, landscape architects, builders and other professionals when designing apartments and preparing a development application
- assist planning professionals in local and state government with strategic planning and in the preparation of local controls, design guidelines and the assessment of development proposals.

The Guide will also help to inform the community on what is required to achieve good design and planning practice for residential apartments.



### Structure of the Apartment Design Guide

The Apartment Design Guide addresses the design of residential apartment development at the site and individual building scale. It includes the following parts:

#### *Part 1 - Identifying the context*

This part introduces generic apartment building types to inform appropriate site, block and building design responses at a strategic level. It outlines the importance of understanding the context, setting, local character, size and configuration of a development site. It is to be used primarily during the design stage of a development and during the strategic planning process when preparing planning controls.

#### *Part 2 - Developing the controls*

This part explains the application of building envelopes and primary controls including building height, floor space ratio, building depth, separation and setbacks. It provides tools to support the strategic planning process when preparing planning controls.

#### *Part 3 - Siting the development*

This part provides guidance on the design and configuration of apartment development at a site scale. It outlines how to relate to the immediate context, consider the interface to neighbours and the public domain, achieve quality open spaces and maximise residential amenity. It is to be used during the design process and in the preparation and assessment of development applications.

#### *Part 4 - Designing the building*

This part addresses the design of apartment buildings in more detail. It focuses on building form, layout, functionality, landscape design, environmental performance and residential amenity. It is to be used during the design process and in the preparation and assessment of development applications.

#### *Part 5 – Design review panels*

This part explains the role of design review panels in the development assessment process, outlines administrative procedures and provides templates for the successful operation of a panel. It is to be used by councils to administer design review panels at all relevant stages of the development process.

Appendices

This part includes checklists for information required at different stages in the planning process.

**Achieving the objectives**

Parts 3 and 4 of the Apartment Design Guide provide objectives, design criteria and design guidance for the siting, design and amenity of apartment development. Each topic area is structured to provide the user with:

1. a **description** of the topic and an explanation of its role and importance
2. **objectives** that describe the desired design outcomes
3. **design criteria** that provide the measurable requirements for how an objective can be achieved.
4. **design guidance** that provides advice on how the objectives and design criteria can be achieved through appropriate design responses, or in cases where design criteria cannot be met.

The key to working with Parts 3 and 4 is that a development needs to demonstrate how it meets the objective and design criteria. The design criteria set a clear measurable benchmark for how the objective can be practically achieved. If it is not possible to satisfy the design criteria, applications must demonstrate what other design responses are used to achieve the objective and the design guidance can be used to assist in this.

Not all sections within Parts 3 and 4 specify design criteria. In these instances the design guidance should be referred to when demonstrating how an objective is being achieved.

SEPP 65 sets out certain matters in Parts 3 and 4 that apply in place of development control plans. This removes uncertainty when there are conflicting provisions for these matters in development control plans.



**Objective**

outcomes to be achieved by residential apartment development

**Objective 3D-1**  
An adequate area of communal open space is provided to enhance residential amenity and to provide opportunities for landscaping

**Design criteria**

1. Communal open space has a minimum area equal to 25% of the site (see figure 3D.3)
2. Developments must achieve a minimum of 50% direct sunlight to the principal usable part of the communal open space for a minimum of 2 hours between 9 am and 3 pm on 21 June (mid winter)

**Design guidance**

Communal open space should be consolidated into a well designed, easily identified and usable area

Communal open space should have a minimum dimension of 3m, and larger developments should consider greater dimensions

Communal open space should be co-located with deep soil areas

**Design criteria**

measurable criteria to achieve the objective for residential apartment development

**Design guidance**

design advice on how the objective can be achieved through particular design approaches



## How to use this guide

### Development application and assessment process

The Apartment Design Guide provides a resource for pre-development application (pre-DA) discussions between applicants and consent authorities. The guide advocates meetings early on in the design and planning process to focus on how to ensure the best built form configuration, siting and design outcomes.

Appendix 2 of this guide provides recommendations and a list of suggested documents for pre-DA discussions.

Development application submission requirements for residential apartment developments are set within the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation 2000*. Residential apartment developments also need to meet the requirements set out in SEPP 65, which includes a suite of nine design quality principles.

The checklist in Appendix 3 of this guide elaborates on the required information for development application submissions and explains the purpose of each item in more detail.

The SEPP 65 design quality principles act as an important link between the provisions of SEPP 65 and the more detailed design guidance contained in this Apartment Design Guide.

### Application of the design quality principles

The SEPP 65 design quality principles must be considered by design professionals when designing residential apartment development, by design review panels when giving advice on proposals and by consent authorities.



## Design Quality Principles (SEPP 65)

### *Principle 1: Context and Neighbourhood Character*

Good design responds and contributes to its context. Context is the key natural and built features of an area, their relationship and the character they create when combined. It also includes social, economic, health and environmental conditions.

Responding to context involves identifying the desirable elements of an area's existing or future character. Well designed buildings respond to and enhance the qualities and identity of the area including the adjacent sites, streetscape and neighbourhood. Consideration of local context is important for all sites, including sites in established areas, those undergoing change or identified for change.

### *Principle 2: Built Form and Scale*

Good design achieves a scale, bulk and height appropriate to the existing or desired future character of the street and surrounding buildings.

Good design also achieves an appropriate built form for a site and the building's purpose in terms of building alignments, proportions, building type, articulation and the manipulation of building elements. Appropriate built form defines the public domain, contributes to the character of streetscapes and parks, including their views and vistas, and provides internal amenity and outlook.

### *Principle 3: Density*

Good design achieves a high level of amenity for residents and each apartment, resulting in a density appropriate to the site and its context.

Appropriate densities are consistent with the area's existing or projected population. Appropriate densities can be sustained by existing or proposed infrastructure, public transport, access to jobs, community facilities and the environment.

#### *Principle 4: Sustainability*

Good design combines positive environmental, social and economic outcomes. Good sustainable design includes use of natural cross ventilation and sunlight for the amenity and liveability of residents and passive thermal design for ventilation, heating and cooling reducing reliance on technology and operation costs. Other elements include recycling and reuse of materials and waste, use of sustainable materials, and deep soil zones for groundwater recharge and vegetation.

#### *Principle 5: Landscape*

Good design recognises that together landscape and buildings operate as an integrated and sustainable system, resulting in attractive developments with good amenity. A positive image and contextual fit of well designed developments is achieved by contributing to the landscape character of the streetscape and neighbourhood.

Good landscape design enhances the development's environmental performance by retaining positive natural features which contribute to the local context, co-ordinating water and soil management, solar access, micro-climate, tree canopy, habitat values, and preserving green networks. Good landscape design optimises usability, privacy and opportunities for social interaction, equitable access, respect for neighbours' amenity, provides for practical establishment and long term management.

#### *Principle 6: Amenity*

Good design positively influences internal and external amenity for residents and neighbours. Achieving good amenity contributes to positive living environments and resident well being.

Good amenity combines appropriate room dimensions and shapes, access to sunlight, natural ventilation, outlook, visual and acoustic privacy, storage, indoor and outdoor space, efficient layouts and service areas, and ease of access for all age groups and degrees of mobility.

#### *Principle 7: Safety*

Good design optimises safety and security, within the development and the public domain. It provides for quality public and private spaces that are clearly defined and fit for the intended purpose. Opportunities to maximise passive surveillance of public and communal areas promote safety.

A positive relationship between public and private spaces is achieved through clearly defined secure access points and well lit and visible areas that are easily maintained and appropriate to the location and purpose.

#### *Principle 8: Housing Diversity and Social Interaction*

Good design achieves a mix of apartment sizes, providing housing choice for different demographics, living needs and household budgets.

Well designed apartment developments respond to social context by providing housing and facilities to suit the existing and future social mix. Good design involves practical and flexible features, including different types of communal spaces for a broad range of people, providing opportunities for social interaction amongst residents.

#### *Principle 9: Aesthetics*

Good design achieves a built form that has good proportions and a balanced composition of elements, reflecting the internal layout and structure. Good design uses a variety of materials, colours and textures.

The visual appearance of well designed apartment development responds to the existing or future local context, particularly desirable elements and repetitions of the streetscape.



