

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

SYDNEY'S SNEAKY STRATEGIC PLAN

EVEN IF NO single physical feature of the well publicised Strategic Plan for the City of Sydney is ever realised, the plan has already proved valuable. It has made many people look again at Sydney, and think.

Sydney is a remarkable city. In fact, if it weren't for Melbourne it would be unique. Only recently has the world, including the rest of Australia, realised that Sydney is now a big city even by the world's new standards. It has, after all, nearly three million people.

And it could be called a city of tomorrow. A recent United Nations study forecast that by the end of the century six people out of 10 will live in cities, "posing unprecedented planning and building problems for all nations." Sydney already is the home of six out of 10 in New South Wales; and it is already posing those unprecedented problems.

Blackmail

The first controversy over the Strategic Plan flared up over the question of plazas and something called the floor-space ratio. This term, once hardly heard outside the offices of developmental plotting, has suddenly become almost a part of everyday language. It was even familiarly referred to by some papers as FSR. Architect Harry Seidler called the new plan's FSR proposals a "major step backwards" because they offer no incentives to developers to create open space at ground level.

FSR refers to the volume of building permitted on a site. A higher ratio means a bigger building and thus, on expensive land, a more ef-

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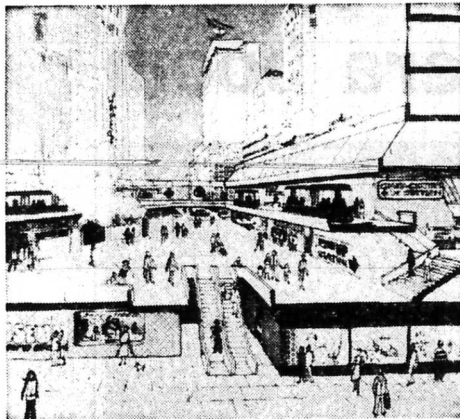
cient development. City councils may use their power to grant higher ratios for benevolent blackmail. They can expand the permissible profitable office space on condition that the developer provides a plaza, a restaurant, a theatre, flats, or whatever else the council considers desirable from time to time.

Whatever the outcome of the continuing debate about how Sydney City Council's power over floor space may best be exercised, it is certain that in future the power will be exercised, somehow, much more vigorously than now. It is also clear that an over-riding aim of the Strategic Plan is to use this power, and any other powers available, to inject life into what is now a skyscraper jungle of daytime offices that die at night.

The restoration of life to the city, rather than any technical planning details, will be the test of success for the Strategic Plan. This really is what it is all about.

All over the world except in Europe, the problem is much the same: the desertion of the country and of the central urban business districts. So, naturally enough, one of the main elements of the Strategic Plan for Sydney is strategy for coaxing people back to live in the central area, or the City (always a capital C in the plan).

The planners take for granted the desirability of a living city, lively with restaurants, theatres, and maybe people sitting, on a



Inner-city plaza envisaged by Sydney's strategic plan.

fine evening, at the tables of a street cafe, sipping coffee or aperitifs and swiping away the flies — almost like life in Europe.

Anyone who is excited by bright lights, color, people, and the promise of places to go must agree with them, as I do, but a perfectly valid alternative is sometimes advocated. It is called the suburbs.

Divergent

The Strategic Plan makes much of the city's decline in residential population, and suggests schemes for arresting that decline. Like all nice planning schemes, it is proud to have consulted "community opinion" extensively. Yet Australian community opinion thus consulted informally is noto-

riously divergent from Australian community action. Restoring life to the city means more than a scatter of bright lights and fun places to go.

City life means, as the planners well know, city people. And that means residential buildings in quantity throughout the centre. And does Sydney really want those? If so, can enough people afford them?

With all the bonuses in the world given to their developers, city flats inevitably cost a lot — more than is economically feasible to nearly all Australians in our present state of depressed affluence.

The first difficulty in planning for a reasonably long term is to decide how vague, or if you prefer how flexible the plan should be. Previously the result of the exercise was called a Master

Plan. Everyone understood that it was master of nothing and slave of all evolving conditions and any whims of change. Now we have another word in development jargon and master plans will henceforth be called strategic plans. And it is a better word, for it is properly modest. It recognises that no one, however masterful, can plan what the next generation should do. It can at most make it harder for the next generation to exercise its own taste.

Choice

The choice confronting the master or strategic planner is whether to be specific and dramatic and thereby capture the imagination of a fair number of influential living people, or whether to speak of broad principles which may still be held valid in a few years and thus may be followed, more or less, by those now in jealously.

The Strategic Plan for Sydney enunciates broad principles. It advocates all the proper rules for planning which have been advocated by practically every book on the subject written this century. It is stoically self-denying in its rejection of imagination, and in its refusal to present any concrete image that might be controversial.

There is, however, a flexible promise of some such images to come. Almost certainly they will be concerned with brightening up a city which in fact might be happier if left to sleep peacefully at night among its silent IBM machines. Happier, but ever duller. The really grand strategy of the Strategic Plan is evidently to sneak up on Sydney slowly from behind.