

Sydney's first road needs restoration and revival

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Parramatta Rd has been with us since the first days of European settlement. Never beautiful, but almost always helpful.

Colonial governors often used our first highway because they preferred more genteel Parramatta and its fresh air to the mayhem and stench of Sydney Cove.

Yet now the nation's first highway has never been in worse shape. Its deterioration has gathered pace even as governments, state and local, have attempted to save it.

If Parramatta Rd is undergoing urban renewal, it is certainly taking place at near glacial speed.

It is a road in crisis but it is somewhat ironic that it might finally see much-needed redevelopment thanks to another crisis – the acute shortage of housing supply in Sydney and NSW.

Parramatta Rd is an ideal candidate for medium-density housing from the western fringe of the CBD at Camperdown all the way to Granville in the west. Victoria Rd from the Anzac Bridge to Parramatta is also an ideal candidate for strong housing investment along with the Great

Western Highway from Parramatta to Penrith.

Except, in Parramatta Rd's case the focus on boosting housing supply could also be a road life-saver.

According to some estimates, Parramatta Rd could accommodate nearly 30,000 additional housing units at a time when affordable housing for essential workers and more rental properties are acutely needed.

Business Sydney recently did an extensive tour of Parramatta Rd from the city to its junction with Church St at Parramatta. It wasn't a pretty sight.

We came across many closed and shuttered businesses. One had a bucket and mop in the window display, appearing almost as a distress signal. The front doors of one empty business were left open leading to a cavernous showroom that hadn't seen a customer for a long time.

Parramatta Rd has become a story of three roads and what appears to be a half-hearted attempt at residential redevelopment in some parts.

The first of the three sections is from Camperdown to Lewisham, taking on foundation suburbs such as Stanmore and Petersham.

There are a number of well-cared-for businesses and shopfronts trying to swim against the tide of urban decay. However, it is impossible to ignore the numerous empty shopfronts giving the area a distinctly down-at-heel look.

Graffiti vandals have used the

decay to get their nefarious spray cans out.

Lewisham to Auburn is the second section. Again there has been some attempt at residential redevelopment here and there but at Homebush the popular Horse & Jockey Hotel soldiers on amid a blighted urban landscape.

Across the road is the near derelict Homebush Theatre, a once-beautiful movie palace from a gilded age that ultimately became an ice-skating rink and then a dinner-and-show venue.

At Auburn, there are signs of relative prosperity with businesses doing their best to keep their commercial premises looking presentable. Keeping up appearances is important to business success.

In the third section through Granville the urban blight returns. But here it appears to be a sign of redevelopment hurdles not keeping pace with progress.

Large modern residential complexes are located near Granville Station with some overshadowing the ubiquitous used-car sale yards fronting Parramatta Rd.

Properties facing the road appear derelict while they await the next step in the urban renewal process.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that our elderly family member – the city's first highway – has been let down.

It is also easy to conclude that the development approval for residential development is just too slow.

It raises an obvious question. What

have the councils that are responsible for Parramatta Rd been doing? We know there are developers just itching to get shovels into the ground but it seems they just have to wait.

The efforts of the previous NSW government to revitalise Parramatta Rd have clearly been completely ineffectual. Premier Chris Minns and Planning Minister Paul Scully now have an opportunity to succeed where their predecessors failed.

Mr Minns has already grasped the housing nettle, acknowledging it is time for Sydney to start building "up" to solve the supply crisis. An option worth considering is the government taking planning controls from local councils to expedite Parramatta Rd developments.

It is possible to imagine a reimagined Parramatta Rd.

Just think of how it might be with attractive and affordable-medium density housing with light rail providing a perfect public transport option.

We could stop counting the number of empty shops. Businesses along a new look Parramatta Rd would be doing a roaring trade with all the new residents living in the area.

Sydney doesn't have to have a housing crisis. Nor does it have to have a thoroughfare that looks like the South Bronx in the 1970s.

We can do better by breathing life back into Parramatta Rd.

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EDIT: Paul Nicolaou and Business Sydney would like to recognise that the history of Parramatta Road pre-dates the colonies as the route was an ancient path tread by the people of the Eora and Darug Nations for thousands of years.