

Urban Design's Role in Governance: Understanding Institutional Influence, Policy Integration, and Professional Practice in NSW

This research project explores how urban design is positioned within governance systems and decision-making processes in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. Urban design influences how cities are shaped, yet it often operates at the margins of formal governance. This research investigates the extent to which urban designers participate in and influence decisions in governance –and how governance structures, in turn, shape urban design outcomes.

Why the study is relevant:

- Urban design is increasingly recognised in policy rhetoric, but its institutional role and authority remain fragmented and contested across planning, architecture, and development systems.
- In practice, urban designers often operate in advisory roles, with limited formal influence on planning approvals, development outcomes, or infrastructure investment.
- The gap between policy ambition and implementation outcomes raises questions about how governance systems support or constrain good design.

What we are doing:

- **Document analysis** of key state and local policy frameworks, urban design guidelines, and strategic planning instruments to understand how urban design is positioned within governance structures.
- **Semi-structured interviews** with practitioners across government, consultancy, and development sectors to explore their perspectives on the role, value, and limitations of urban design in decision-making.
- **Case studies** of governance mechanisms (such as Design Review Panels and strategic design frameworks) to examine how urban design operates in real-world planning and development contexts.

What we aim to achieve:

- A clearer picture of how urban design is institutionally recognised and integrated into governance systems in NSW.
- Insights into the professional, institutional, and political factors that support or constrain urban designers' influence.
- Recommendations to strengthen the role of urban design within government and development decision-making frameworks—ensuring its value is not just rhetorical but embedded in practice.