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NATIONAL PLANNING

# State government launches competition for Sydney's public spaces

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By **Andrew Taylor**

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The COVID-19 crisis offers a unique opportunity to transform Sydney's public spaces, as the

Minister for Planning and Public Spaces, Rob Stokes, urges Sydneysiders to "seize the moment" and come up with ideas for parks and public facilities.

From parks and plazas to pop-ups, the state government is seeking ideas for improving public spaces across the city. The [Public Space Ideas Competition](#) has an additional four prizes including a People's Choice Award run on [The Sydney Morning Herald website](#).



Minister for Planning and Open Spaces Rob Stokes says the COVID-19 crisis provides an opportunity to experiment with new forms of public space. RHETT WYMAN

Mr Stokes said the pandemic also provided an opportunity to experiment with new ways of sharing streets and public facilities. But he said the city had to utilise its existing open spaces more effectively to ensure it was comfortable and safe, easy to access and catered for the specific needs of residents.

The competition, which closes on August 28, will be judged by a jury of planning experts including NSW government architect Abbie Galvin who said the COVID-19 crisis had demonstrated "with extraordinary power" the importance of public spaces.

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"People have flooded to our parks, streets and squares - to walk, cycle and exercise - with a renewed appreciation for their value," she said.

Ms Galvin said existing public spaces had to be improved as the city's population increased.

"We can't continue the infinite spread of new low-density suburbs, it's simply not sustainable," she said. "So we have to make our public spaces work hard – and provide for all of us."

Extending the hours and use of public buildings such as libraries, galleries, museums and schools and planting more trees were among the other measures on Ms Galvin's wishlist. "Our older inner-city streets are often more successful than those in our newer suburbs," she said.

Robyn Dowling, dean of the University of Sydney's School of Architecture, Design and Planning, said the pandemic had accelerated a long-term trend of people spending more time inside and with people they know.

Professor Dowling said good public spaces facilitated social interactions among strangers, and allowed people to experience social diversity.

"I think there will be more attention to microclimates in

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these spaces – how does air flow through them, for example?" she said. "How can we design them to cope with a city that is getting hotter?"

Shaun Walsh, national president of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects, said the COVID-19 crisis had reinforced the importance of green space in cities.

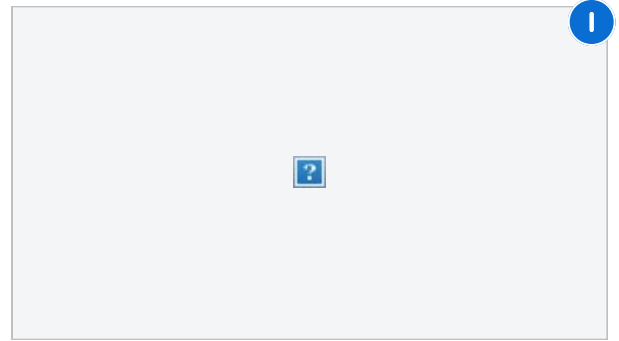
"Just having greenery and fresh air alleviates anxiety," he said. "Moving forward we need to make sure our parks aren't too crowded to allow people to recreate at safe distances."

But not all open space is equal, he said. "We have many examples of hot paved squares around Australia that are promoted as valuable open space but are actively disliked by humanity and are essentially failures."

Mr Walsh also said property values will increasingly be linked to surrounding amenity including parks.

"To attract people to high-density living rather than the suburban block, the developments need to have good green space," he said.

However, Lynda Voltz, Labor's spokeswoman for sport and recreation, said there was concern that the call to reimagine public spaces was code for encroachment on public lands.



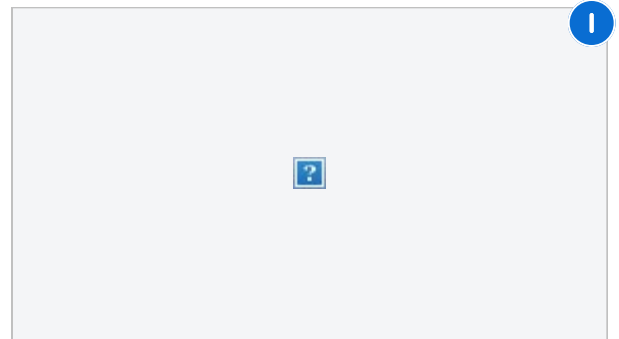
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Ms Voltz also called on the NSW government to meet current commitments to open space in high density areas such as Wentworth Point.

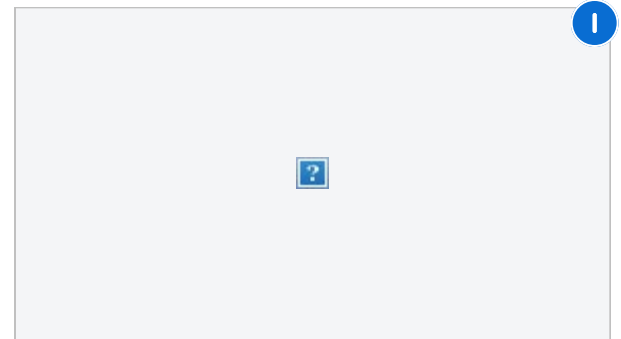
"It is also fundamentally important that development of "new public spaces" does not override the heritage value of existing open spaces," she said.

Ms Voltz also said not all public spaces needed to be "reimagined" or redeveloped: "It is important that children just have space to play on, where you can see the sky and run freely, climb trees and relax."

The competition is also searching for ideas for streets and plazas. Elizabeth Moss, dean of the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology Sydney, said thoroughfares such as Parramatta Road and Oxford Street had too much traffic.

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"This needs to be reconsidered and the main streets need to be redesigned to allow space for pedestrians, to introduce trees and to facilitate small and local businesses," she said.

Professor Moss said city streets should have more trees to mitigate heat and improve air quality and amenity as well as space for pedestrians and cyclists to move safely.

"Streets can have different configurations for different times – traffic during the week and people, bikes and markets on weekends," she said.

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**Andrew Taylor**

Andrew Taylor is a Senior Reporter for The Sydney Morning Herald.

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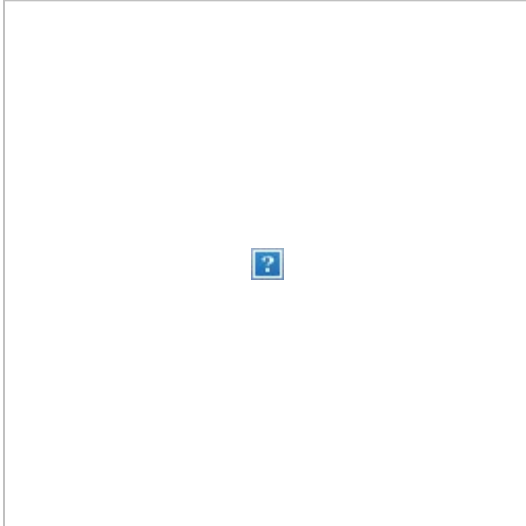
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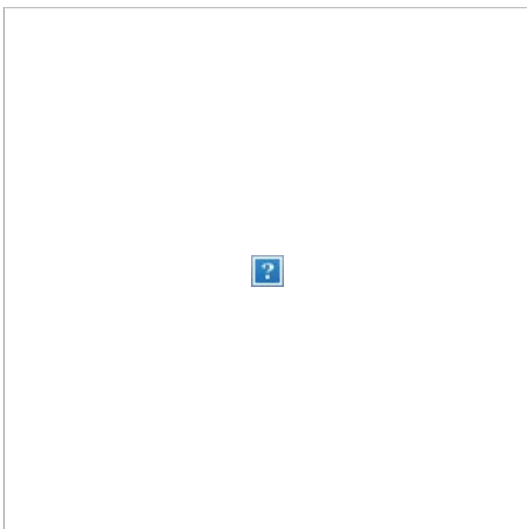
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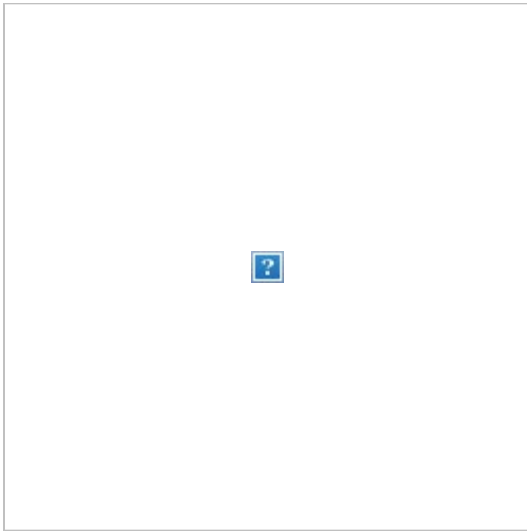


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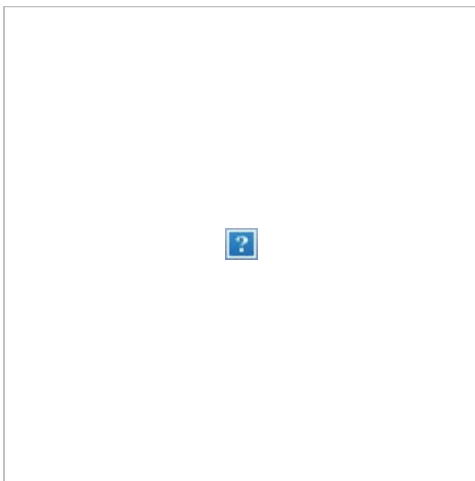
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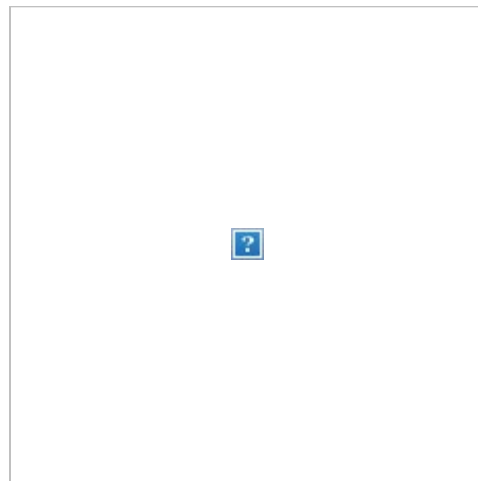
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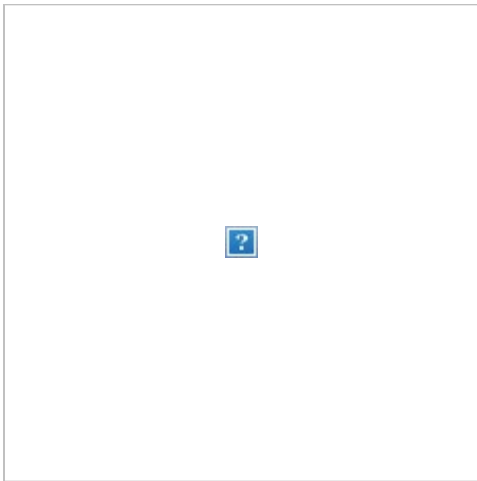


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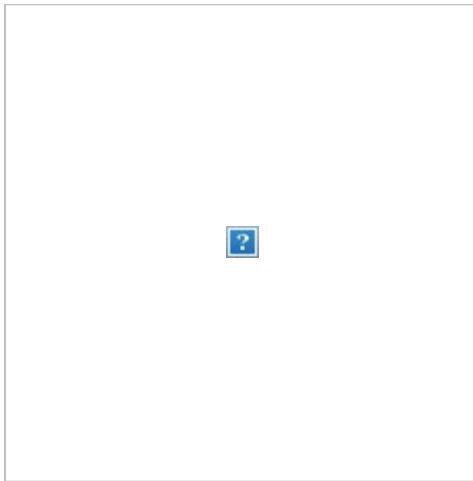
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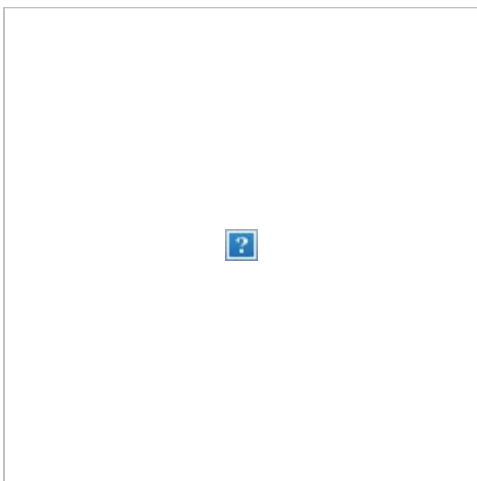
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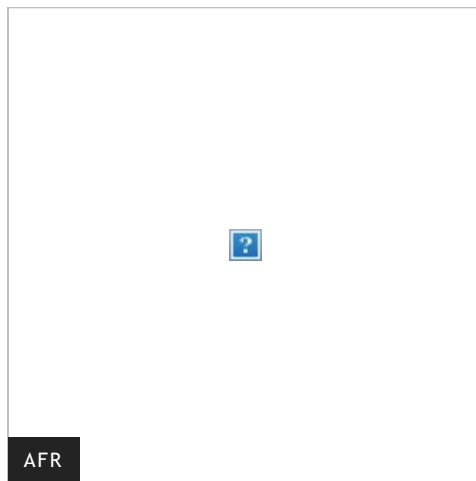


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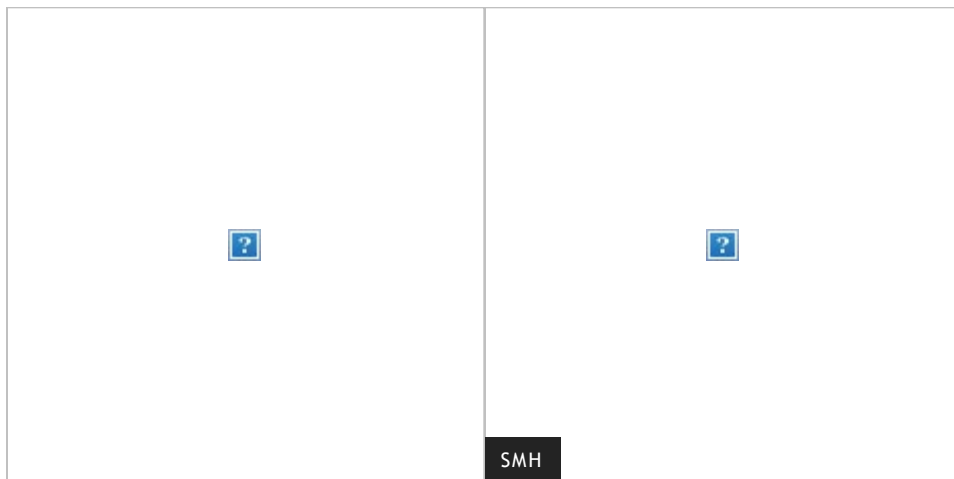


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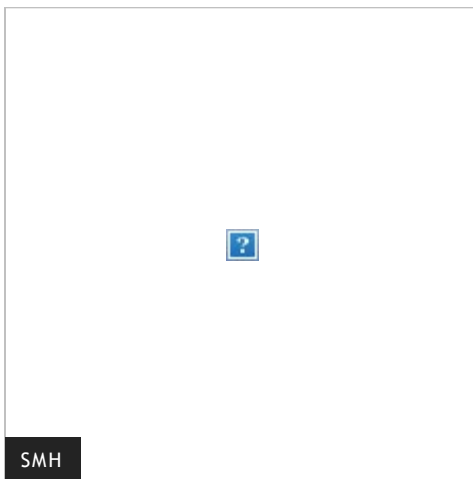
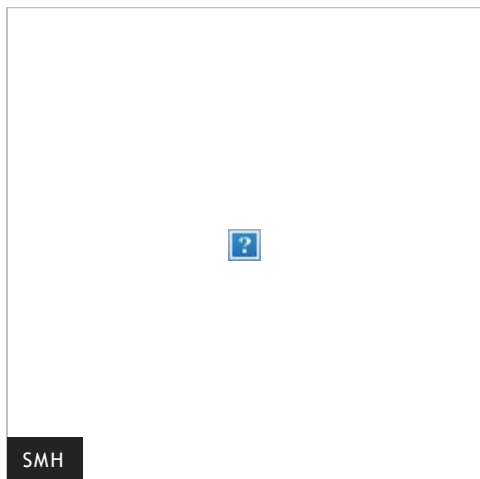


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