

Reforming Urban Planning for a Liveable, Design-Led and Sustainable South Australia

A design-led approach to planning reform for liveable, sustainable communities.

Why It Matters

Why a design-led planning system is essential to South Australia's future

Cities and communities shape the daily lives, health and wellbeing of every South Australian. The way we plan, design and deliver housing and infrastructure influences how people move, connect, age, work, play and belong. When growth is designed well, it lifts quality of life, supports community cohesion, strengthens local economies and protects the identity and heritage of our State. When it is not, it can entrench disadvantage, increase emissions, accelerate heat stress, erode character and amenity, and place long-term strain on government services and infrastructure.

A design-led planning approach ensures that the places we create today remain desirable, sustainable and resilient in the decades ahead. The current policy landscape rightly recognises the need for more homes, delivered faster. However, meeting housing targets alone will not guarantee liveability. Success depends on *how* we grow — the quality of our neighbourhoods, the accessibility and diversity of housing, the integration of nature and public open space, and the cultural and social value of the built environment.

Good design strengthens community wellbeing by fostering a sense of belonging, safety and place. It promotes mental and physical health by enabling walkable, connected environments with spaces for social interaction. It upholds the character and heritage that define South Australia's identity while enabling sensitive adaptation and contemporary expression. A focus on design also supports economic resilience by attracting talent, cultural activity and investment, and by reducing long-term maintenance, health and infrastructure costs through thoughtful, durable and climate-responsive planning.

Planning systems must respond to the accelerating impacts of climate change. South Australia faces increasing heat, reduced rainfall and more frequent extreme weather events. Urban environments must mitigate and adapt through design that increases canopy cover, integrates water-sensitive urban design, prioritises active and public transport, and embeds climate resilience in buildings and public spaces. These outcomes are not achieved through planning policy alone — they require design leadership and multidisciplinary collaboration.

Embedding design as a cornerstone of planning reform will ensure that the transformation of our cities and regions delivers lasting value — socially, culturally, environmentally and economically. It will protect what South Australians cherish, while enabling thoughtful, well-integrated growth that reflects our State's unique character and identity.

Density Done Well in South Australia

Defining the qualities that make higher-density living desirable, liveable and distinctly South Australian.

Density is often misunderstood. For many South Australians, it has become synonymous with overcrowding, loss of character, traffic congestion and poorly designed apartments that prioritise yield over liveability. Yet density, when done well, is not about squeezing more people into smaller spaces — it is about creating places where more people can live well.

Density Done Well is people-focused, design-led and grounded in the belief that higher-density living can enhance, rather than diminish, quality of life. It enables more diverse and affordable housing options close to jobs, education, health services, shops, transport, nature and cultural life. It strengthens communities by bringing daily needs within easy reach, reducing car dependency, and encouraging more walking, cycling and social connection. It protects our regions and agricultural land by curbing urban sprawl and making better use of existing infrastructure.

To achieve this, density must be designed, not just delivered.

Done well, density creates vibrant and inclusive neighbourhoods where people feel safe, connected and proud to live. It integrates nature, supports shade and cooling, and provides access to high-quality public spaces. It supports a mix of housing typologies — including apartments, townhouses, duplexes, courtyard housing and co-housing — so that people of all ages, incomes and household types can find a suitable home in their community. It enables downsizing within the same neighbourhood, helps older South Australians stay connected to their support networks, and provides options for key workers, students, young families and single-person households.

At the heart of Density Done Well are the ODASA Principles of Good Design — *Context, Inclusive, Durable, Value, Performance, Sustainable and Amenity*. These principles provide a clear, place-based framework to guide development that responds to local character, fosters belonging, considers cultural identity and Country, prioritises climate-responsive design, and delivers social, environmental and economic value over the long term.

Density Done Well also strengthens trust. Communities are more likely to accept increased density when they can see and experience the benefits — beautiful, well-designed neighbourhoods, green and shaded streets, accessible public open spaces, thriving local centres, and development that contributes positively to its surroundings. Transparent design processes, early engagement and design review build confidence that change will be managed with care and quality.

Achieving Density Done Well requires leadership, collaboration and a clear commitment to design quality across policy, planning and delivery. South Australia now has an opportunity to demonstrate how higher-density living can strengthen neighbourhoods, uplift community wellbeing and enhance the distinct character of our State. By embedding design quality at the heart of growth, we can ensure density is not only accepted by communities but embraced as a pathway to better living — a foundation for delivering the homes we need with the liveability,

identity and climate resilience South Australians expect. This is the standard against which future planning decisions must be measured.

The implementation of the Greater Adelaide Regional Plan presents the critical opportunity to apply these principles in practice and ensure that South Australia's growth is design-led, climate-ready and centred on liveability.

Implementing the Greater Adelaide Regional Plan with Design Integrity

Ensuring South Australia's growth is liveable, climate-ready and community-focused.

The Greater Adelaide Regional Plan (GARP) sets a defining vision for how our state will grow, adapt and prosper over the next 30 years. Its stated intent to create a “vibrant, sustainable and connected region” is strongly aligned with the values of the architectural profession and the aspirations of South Australians. The Australian Institute of Architects welcomes GARP's focus on housing diversity, infill, transit-oriented development, climate resilience, and the protection of our environmental and cultural assets.

However, for this vision to be realised, GARP must move beyond high-level ambition and embed design quality as a core implementation requirement. While the Plan identifies *where* growth should occur, greater clarity is needed on *how* this growth will be delivered in a way that upholds liveability, heritage, climate readiness and community trust. Without design leadership at the heart of implementation, there is a risk that South Australia delivers housing supply without the quality that ensures enduring value.

A design-led approach to GARP implementation will ensure that both infill and greenfield development create walkable, mixed-use neighbourhoods where people can live well — with high-quality public spaces, diverse housing choices, access to nature and local services, and strong cultural and place-based identity. The ODASA Principles of Good Design offer a ready-made framework to anchor GARP in design excellence, ensuring decisions support wellbeing, performance, belonging and sustainability.

To support successful implementation, the Institute recommends the State Government adopt the following measures:

AIA Recommendations for GARP Implementation

- **Embed design quality requirements within Structure Planning and Code Amendment processes.**

Design considerations must inform the earliest planning stages, not be retrofitted during assessment. Structure Plans should set clear design performance outcomes, public realm and greening standards, and climate-resilience expectations aligned with ODASA principles.

- **Require Design Review for Structure Plans, rezonings and major development.**

Independent, multidisciplinary Design Review should be mandatory at key decision points to ensure that growth areas and higher impact rezonings contribute positively to neighbourhood character, climate performance and community benefit.

- **Link growth to timely, sequenced enabling infrastructure.**

Increased housing supply must go hand-in-hand with delivery of essential transport, education, health, open space, cultural and community infrastructure. Infrastructure timing should be transparent, accountable and aligned with a 20-minute neighbourhood approach.

- **Prioritise infill that enhances local character and identity.**

Sensitive, context-responsive infill that strengthens local centres, heritage and cultural identity will build community acceptance of growth and support vibrant, people-focused neighbourhoods.

- **Adopt minimum climate and environmental performance standards for new neighbourhoods.**

To support resilience and State climate targets, growth areas must include minimum requirements for urban greening, canopy cover, passive design, walkability, water-sensitive design and access to quality public space.

- **Monitor and report on design and liveability outcomes — not just supply.**

Annual reporting should measure liveability, climate performance, housing diversity, access to services, heritage outcomes, public realm quality and community satisfaction.

If GARP implementation is grounded in design integrity, South Australia can lead the nation in demonstrating that growth can strengthen — rather than compromise — liveability, identity and climate resilience.

Adelaide's CBD provides a critical early test of this principle.

Adelaide CBD Height Uplift – The Institute's Position and Design Safeguards

Ensuring height delivers public value, liveability and design excellence.

The State Government's decision to increase allowable building heights in the Adelaide CBD presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shape the future of the city. The Institute supports the intent to encourage more residents to live in the CBD, activating streets, supporting local businesses, enhancing the night-time economy and strengthening cultural life. A more populated city centre is essential for economic vitality, safety and long-term sustainability.

However, height must come with responsibility. International experience shows that height uplift policies without design safeguards lead to poor-quality housing, overshadowed and wind-affected streets, loss of heritage character, and communities viewing density as a threat rather than a benefit. For the uplift to succeed, it must deliver public value, not just private yield.

A design-led approach will ensure taller buildings enrich Adelaide's skyline and streets, prioritise resident wellbeing, enhance the public realm and honour the heritage and cultural identity that define the city. Height should be earned through design excellence, not granted as-of-right.

To achieve this, the Institute recommends the following design safeguards:

Design Safeguards for CBD Height Uplift

- **Design Excellence Pathway for additional height.**

Height beyond base levels should be conditional on meeting clear design excellence criteria assessed through a strengthened Design Review process.

- **Mandatory design standards for residential amenity.**

Tall buildings must provide high-quality living conditions — natural light, ventilation, acoustic performance, universal design, communal space and long-term adaptability.

- **Protect and enhance heritage and fine-grain character.**

Height uplift must not erode what makes Adelaide distinct. Adaptive reuse, contextual responses and retention of heritage fabric should be required, ensuring growth honours the city's past while shaping its future.

- **Deliver public realm and community benefit as part of uplift.**

Additional height should contribute to the public good: shaded, green and inclusive streetscapes; active laneways; cultural spaces; cycling and pedestrian networks; and accessible community facilities.

- **Climate-responsive tower design.**

Performance benchmarks should address operational and embodied carbon, cooling, shading, greening, wind and water management. Tall buildings must mitigate heat and improve urban comfort.

- **Ensure human comfort at street level.**

Design must prioritise safe, welcoming and climate-resilient ground-plane environments with clear requirements for wind mitigation, solar access and fine-grain activation.

If paired with these safeguards, the height uplift can catalyse a new era of sustainable, vibrant urban living that enhances the heart of Adelaide for generations to come.

Delivery mechanisms must now match the ambition — which requires addressing the barriers slowing high-quality development.

Barriers to Delivery: Aligning System Reform with Design Quality

Removing the right obstacles to enable faster, better and community-supported development.

Delivering more homes quickly is a shared priority across government, industry and the community. The Institute recognises areas of alignment with the UDIA *Fast Track Housing Delivery* report, particularly regarding the need for better coordination, resourcing, infrastructure sequencing and clarity in policy settings. However, the solution cannot be to weaken design safeguards. When design quality is portrayed as a “barrier”, it risks short-term gains that lead to long-term social and environmental cost.

Planning efficiency and design quality are not competing goals — both are essential to delivering affordable, desirable and climate-ready housing that stands the test of time. System reform must focus on removing the right barriers — those that slow well-designed development — while retaining the protections that uphold liveability, community trust and public value.

Key barriers that require action include:

System and Process Barriers

- **Fragmented governance slows coordinated delivery.**

Multiple agencies influence planning, housing, infrastructure, heritage, environment and design — often with misaligned priorities and timeframes. Clearer cross-government accountability and coordination are needed to support integrated, design-led outcomes.

- **Insufficient design and assessment resourcing.**

Under-resourced design review and planning teams create bottlenecks. Investing in ODASA capacity, expanding the Design Review Panel and embedding design expertise within government will support faster and better decisions.

- **Policy complexity creates uncertainty and rework.**

Ambiguous performance outcomes lead to risk-averse “tick-box” compliance rather than genuine design excellence. Clearer benchmarks and expectations for early-stage design engagement would reduce rework and delays.

Infrastructure and Delivery Barriers

- **Housing outpaces enabling infrastructure.**

When density is delivered before transport, community facilities, schools and green/open space, quality of life suffers, and public trust is lost. Infrastructure delivery must be sequenced and transparent.

- **Climate-readiness is not yet treated as core infrastructure.**

Canopy cover, cooling, biodiversity, walkability and water-sensitive design should be embedded from the outset — not retrofitted at higher cost later.

Industry Capacity and Culture Barriers

- **Skills and capability constraints limit delivery quality.**

Workforce pressures across planning, architecture, engineering, construction and local government constrain delivery. Government investment in skills and design capability is needed to lift outcomes at scale.

- **Procurement culture prioritises cost over value.**

Lowest-cost, speed-first models rarely deliver long-term value. A shift to value-based procurement that prioritises sustainability, quality, social value and design excellence will pay economic and community dividends.

Addressing these barriers will enable faster delivery of well-designed homes and neighbourhoods — not just more housing, but better housing.

To achieve this, clear and design-led actions are required from Government.

Recommendations and Key Actions

Priority measures to ensure South Australia delivers both housing supply and liveability.

To ensure South Australia delivers the housing it needs with liveability, sustainability and design quality at its core, the Institute recommends the following actions. These measures will strengthen planning reform, improve community confidence, and support successful implementation of the Greater Adelaide Regional Plan and CBD height uplift.

1. Embed Design Leadership Across the Planning System

- Reinforce design as a core pillar of planning policy and decision-making, ensuring that planning, infrastructure, housing and sustainability agendas are integrated through design.
- Expand the role and resourcing of the Office for Design and Architecture SA (ODASA) to lead design capability, innovation, design review and design literacy across government and industry.
- Ensure early design involvement in major projects, rezoning and structure planning to avoid costly redesign and delays.

2. Strengthen Design Quality Requirements for Infill, Greenfield and High-Density Development

- Adopt clear design performance requirements for housing at all scales, supported by the ODASA **Principles of Good Design** as a baseline expectation for development.
- Ensure that increases in density — whether through GARP implementation, Code amendments or CBD height uplift — are matched with design excellence pathways, public realm improvements and climate-responsive outcomes.
- Expand Design Review to apply at key stages of planning and development for significant projects, growth areas and high-impact infill sites.

3. Deliver Climate-Ready, Nature-Positive and Resilient Neighbourhoods

- Establish minimum climate and environmental performance standards for new and renewed neighbourhoods, including canopy cover, urban cooling, walkability, water-sensitive design, biodiversity, and active transport integration.
- Ensure that new density contributes to achieving South Australia's climate targets, supporting both mitigation (reduced emissions) and adaptation (cooler, healthier neighbourhoods).
- Treat climate adaptation — shade, greening, water, materials and cooling — as core infrastructure, not optional amenity.

4. Align Housing Delivery with Sequenced Infrastructure and Social Value

- Ensure all infill and greenfield growth areas are supported by timely and sequenced delivery of transport, community facilities, schools, health, public open space, cultural spaces and local services.
- Link housing approvals and rezonings to infrastructure provision, with transparent cross-agency planning and dedicated funding mechanisms to support complete, walkable communities.
- Embed social value and community wellbeing outcomes into planning policy, development assessment and infrastructure investment.

5. Protect Heritage, Character and the Identity of South Australian Places

- Require heritage and character to be respected and enhanced through sensitive, context-led design that contributes to the evolution of place over time.
- Prioritise adaptive reuse, retention and reinvention of heritage and character buildings as key to sustainable development, cultural identity and community pride.
- Ensure that higher-density development is balanced with high-quality public realm outcomes that reflect Adelaide's distinct scale, culture and human experience of the city.

6. Improve Delivery Efficiency Without Undermining Design Quality

- Focus planning efficiency reforms on system and process improvements — including clearer assessment pathways, coordinated policy, early engagement and design review — that reduce delays without removing quality safeguards.
- Support capability-building across government, industry and local councils to accelerate well-designed development.
- Encourage value-based procurement that rewards design quality, sustainability, social value and long-term outcomes, rather than lowest-cost delivery.

7. Monitor and Report on Liveability and Design Outcomes, Not Only Supply Metrics

- Expand success measures for planning reform beyond housing numbers to include: liveability, climate resilience, housing diversity, affordability, access to transport, public realm quality, community wellbeing, heritage outcomes and community satisfaction.
- Establish transparent reporting to track long-term outcomes and support continuous improvement of planning policies and delivery models.
- Work collaboratively with industry, local government, community and professional bodies to evaluate performance and share best practice.

Taken together, these actions will ensure that planning reform delivers both supply and liveability, strengthens public trust and creates places that reflect the values, identity and aspirations of South Australians.

The next step is harnessing this moment to lead — and reset the narrative on what planning reform can achieve.

Conclusion and Call to Action

Positioning South Australia as a national leader in design-led planning reform.

South Australia is at a pivotal moment. The decisions made in the lead-up to the 2026 State Election will shape the future of our communities for generations. We have an opportunity to demonstrate national leadership by showing that housing growth and urban transformation can be achieved without compromising liveability, identity, heritage, climate resilience or community trust.

Design-led planning is not a “nice to have” — it is the foundation of long-term economic, social, cultural and environmental value. When design quality guides decision-making, we create neighbourhoods and cities that people want to call home: places that are inclusive, connected, resilient, culturally rich and distinctly South Australian. When design is overlooked, the cost is borne by communities, future governments, and the health and sustainability of our urban environments.

The Australian Institute of Architects (South Australian Chapter) is committed to working in partnership with the State Government to ensure that planning reform delivers both supply and liveability. We welcome the Government’s intent to increase density, unlock the CBD, accelerate delivery and prepare for growth. We offer our support, expertise and collaboration to help ensure these reforms lead to lasting community benefit and public value.

A Call to Action

To secure the future liveability of South Australia, the State Government is encouraged to:

- Embed design quality as a core success measure of planning reform and regional growth
- Ensure height uplift, density and infill are matched with design excellence and public value
- Align housing delivery with infrastructure, climate resilience and community wellbeing
- Partner with design experts early to guide implementation, rather than repair outcomes later

The Institute stands ready to collaborate through:

- **A Design-Led Reform Working Group** with Government to support GARP implementation, planning improvements and high-impact policy decisions
- **Early-stage design advisory** on major projects, Code amendments and structure planning
- **Capacity-building and best-practice sharing** between Government, industry and the design professions

South Australia can lead the nation in proving that well-designed density is not something to resist — it is a path to better living. A path to more housing choice, stronger communities, healthier neighbourhoods, climate-ready cities and a more vibrant, prosperous and inclusive State.

By choosing a design-led approach today, we create a legacy of places that honour South Australia’s character, respect Country, and leave future generations with neighbourhoods and cities they are proud to inherit.

Legend of Acronyms

ABCB — Australian Building Codes Board
ASBEC — Australian Sustainable Built Environment Council
DEW — Department of Employment and Workforce Relations
DIIS — Department for Industry, Innovation and Science
DIT — Department of Infrastructure and Transport
HIA — Housing Industry Association
MMC — Modern Methods of Construction
NCC — National Construction Code
ODASA — Office for Design and Architecture (SA)
RAIA — Royal Australian Institute of Architects
TAFE — Technical and Further Education
UDIA — Urban Development Institute of Australia

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