
Parramatta's Building Boom

Old Government House—no longer Parra's tallest building

I grew up a few train stops west of Australia's second oldest white settlement, Parramatta. For the 20-something years I lived nearby, not a great deal changed to the built environment. They finished the 83m-tall [Commonwealth Centre](#) in the Bicentennial year. There were a few similarly-sized [commercial buildings](#) completed in the early 1990s, just in time for the nationwide office glut.

Around the same time, Westfield Parramatta started metastasising to the south of the train tracks, sucking away a similar quantity of life from the street-level environment. Kicks nightclub closed (and they say binge drinking is a growing problem?).

Over the subsequent 20 years, to today, quite a bit of mid-level residential has been built, particularly down by that ancient river that did most of the grunt work carving out Sydney Harbour, plus around the highways and in fringing suburbs like North Parramatta. In the last 5-10 years, there's been increasing decentralisation of government commercial offices towards Parramatta.

But something has definitely shifted abruptly over the past five years, roughly coinciding with the [Wanderers](#) and [The Pozna?](#) coming to town, and hopefully nothing to do with the [Eels](#)' demise. A pro-development council has been in charge for a while. Life is spilling onto the streets. The claim 'Sydney's second CBD'—a term now actively embraced by [all three levels of government](#)—no longer rings hollow.

The 89m [Eclipse](#) became the city's tallest structure in 2012, perhaps the last ever commercial building to claim the title. It was already itself eclipsed by the residential [B1 Tower](#) (90 metres) in 2013. That's currently the area's tallest building, officially at least.

But there is a potential tsunami of development in the pipeline. Not all of it will get built (it never does), perhaps not even most of it. But those lamenting or relying on NSW's lack of housing supply might want to take a look.

The 92m [Rise Apartments](#) (mixed use) is topping out at the moment. It will soon, briefly and theoretically, be called Parramatta's tallest. But it already isn't in practice. Three buildings have already surpassed the height of Rise - they just haven't finished growing yet. In total, there are 6 taller towers already under construction for completion this year or next, all residential or mixed use, all above 100 metres. The 177m [Altitude Apartment Tower A](#) will be almost twice the height of today's tallest building.

Then there's the planned and approved stuff, yet to start construction. If it all gets built (again, it won't), a few years from now the tallest building today (B1 Tower) won't even be in the top 30, according to [skyscrapercenter.com](#). According to Westie skyscraper buff (and sibling) Mitchell Brown, if you include plans for immediate fringe suburbs like North Parramatta, Rosehill and Camellia, B1 might not even make it to the top 50 tallest buildings. The first site alone to be developed in a reimagined Camellia is proposed to have 9 buildings as tall as anything

completed in the Parramatta CBD today, and a few shorter ones too.

Developer's ambitions have unsurprisingly grown to meet the council's. A few anecdotes are illustrative. The under-construction Altitude apartment complex was first approved as a 32- and 22-floor complex. In a deal with authorities the 32-level tower grew to 55 levels in exchange for an adjoining car park being gifted to council to convert to 'green space'. You're thinking playground, right? While plans are not finalised, it now seems likely that this green space will itself contain two towers of a similar height to Altitude (unless the state makes good on its threat to usurp the land for a relocated Powerhouse museum - much to council's chagrin). Subsequent to this horsetrading, it was felt that the shorter tower in the Altitude complex needed to grow from 22 to 39 levels, to give the complex a 'more balanced aesthetic'.

Perhaps an even more striking example of growing ambition is with the long ago completed and occupied Meriton complex on George Street. It is a relatively low rise, large floorplate building of barely 10 levels. A year or two ago, plans were submitted to build twin, 12 level towers directly atop this structure. Before this plan had even gotten through the approval process, new amended plans have been drawn for twin 180m towers (50-55 levels) instead, bang on top of an existing building.

Almost all these skyscrapers either under construction or being planned are intended for residential use. The [tallest will be as low as 240m and as high as 300m](#), depending on if the architects or the aviation authorities win the argument.

While the Sydney CBD long-ago succumbed to skyscraper tall poppy syndrome, focusing on infill and allowing its height to be dictated by that relic of what the future looked like from 1970, [Sydney Tower](#), other Australian capital city CBDs have grown up, and up.

Parramatta is keenly joining them, full throttle. And it's not just skyscrapers, there's also plenty of mid-sized apartments being built or planned. Those wondering about Sydney's housing supply might want to take their eyes off outer suburban land releases and take a look.