



# CAIRNS REGIONAL COUNCIL NEIGHBOURHOOD CHARACTER STUDY

Final Report, June 2010

## Acknowledgements

### Cairns Regional Council

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## Chapter 1: Brief and Method

## Background to the Study

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Prior to the preparation of the CairnsPlan Amendment 2007 (now implemented through the CairnsPlan 2009), areas of distinct neighbourhood character and heritage significance were recognised through the CairnsPlan. These controls were introduced to ensure that new development was compatible and respectful of cultural heritage and streetscape values.

Many of the areas recognised through the character precincts contained Queenslander dwellings, highly valued for their distinctive appearance and style. In addition, several of these areas were identified through the Residential 3 Planning Area as being appropriate for higher density residential development due to their proximity to the CBD or an activity centre, which resulted in a conflict between protecting existing neighbourhood character values and providing for a sustainable urban form.

In 2006, Council commenced a review of the CairnsPlan. One of the proposed actions was to back-zone cultural heritage precincts in the Residential 3 Planning Area to the Residential 1 Planning Area in an attempt to resolve the conflict and also seek community opinion on the matter. Following a review of the numerous submissions received in response to the proposal, Council decided not to proceed with the back-zoning and requested a detailed review of all Cultural Heritage Precincts.

Conflict also arose from the confusion between heritage and character values in the CairnsPlan. With areas of neighbourhood character and heritage significance being recognised by the one code, there was no distinction between the two very different concepts.

## Brief

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In mid-2008 the Cairns Regional Council commissioned a Neighbourhood Character Study of its Cultural Heritage Significance Areas and possible areas of Heritage Significance.

The major aims of the Study were to:

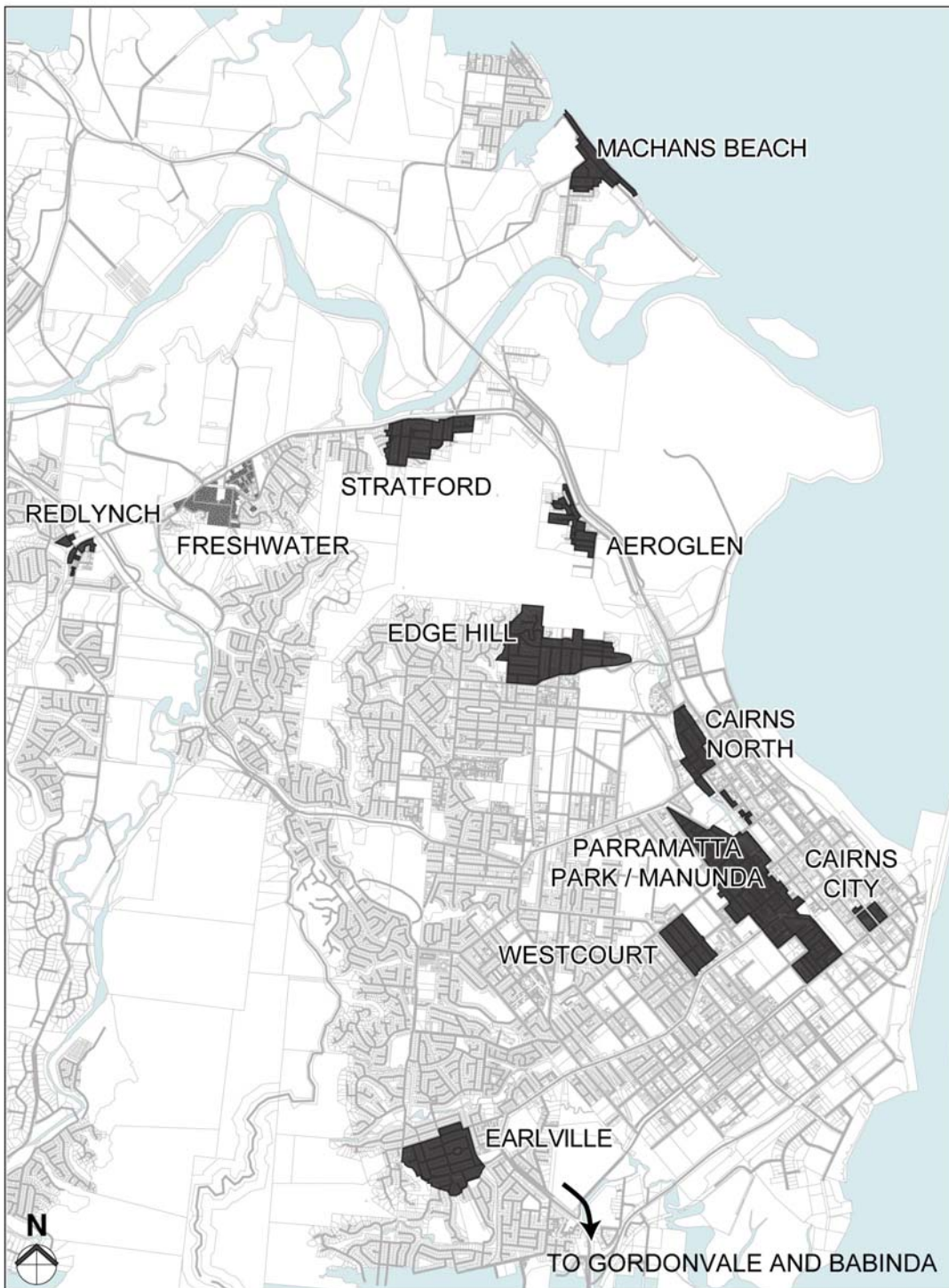
- Delineate areas of distinct character;
- Prepare statements that describe that character;
- Provide design guidelines to guide new development in these areas;
- Identify and document places within the study areas that have potential local heritage significance.

In consultation with the community, precinct brochures were prepared, documenting all of the above. Areas of potential local heritage significance were identified.

### Study Area

The majority of the Study Area includes areas currently within character precincts or listed as heritage sites and are subject to the Cultural Heritage Significance Code within the Cairns Plan. Some additional areas were identified as being of potential neighbourhood character significance.

The maps below show an outline of the areas analysed by the Study Team. These areas were later refined into precincts.



**Legend**

- Identified Character Areas
- Additional Character Investigation Areas



## Method

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### Stage 1: Inception and Background Review

During Stage 1, the Study Team confirmed Council's requirements and the overall approach and established a detailed timeline. All background documentation was reviewed and information was provided to the Study Team in preparation for desktop analysis and a site survey.

### Stage 2: Survey and Analysis

Stage 2 involved a site visit by the Study Team, a meeting with Council officers and an analysis of the survey data to begin the delineation of neighbourhood character precincts. A staff workshop was also held to discuss the scope of the Study and gain an insight into the background issues facing neighbourhood character in Cairns. During Stage 2, Heritage Alliance also undertook a site survey to determine which areas were of potential heritage significance.

The detailed neighbourhood character survey involved the collection of data and noting of different elements for each streetscape or consistent parts of each streetscape such as building era and style, land use, building heights, setbacks, materials, fencing, garden styles and views and vistas. A photographic record of all areas was also compiled during the survey.

The survey results were then mapped and sub-precincts within the existing precincts were delineated by identifying streets or areas with similar characteristics.

During Stage 2 a Bulletin was sent to all property owners in the Study Area informing them of the project and providing information about the project process.

### Stage 3: Draft Precinct and Statements

During Stage 3, a final map of the neighbourhood character precincts was prepared and character statements were written for each precinct in a brochure format. For each precinct, the brochure included a statement of neighbourhood character and a list of key elements. Once the character statements were finalised, guidelines were prepared specific to each Precinct. The guidelines provide objectives and appropriate design responses for new residential development, including alterations or renovations visible from the street.

For each precinct, the Design Guidelines address the following Character Elements where relevant to that precinct:

- Existing buildings
- Height and Building Form
- Building in underneath Queenslanders
- Siting
- Vegetation
- Height and building form
- Materials and design detailing
- Front boundary treatment

For each Character Element, an *Objective*, *Design Response* and *Avoid* statement was prepared. Broad summary information was also included where relevant to address public domain treatment.

A second Bulletin was sent to property owners during Stage 3, along with a copy of the relevant draft neighbourhood character brochure and a feedback form. The purpose of the Bulletin was to inform property owners about the draft brochures and to gain feedback about their content. The



bulletin also notified property owners about upcoming information sessions. Six community information sessions were held with Council staff available to provide information and answer questions.

Two stakeholder workshops were held to discuss the implications of the Neighbourhood Character Study on the architecture, building and design field and also to go through the content of the brochures.

Feedback from property owners and stakeholders was collated, responded to and taken into account in the preparation of the final draft of the brochures. In response to community feedback most areas previously recommended as having potential heritage significance were incorporated into the Character Areas, and the brochures amended accordingly.

#### Stage 4: Final Report and Implementation Recommendations

The Neighbourhood Character brochures were finalised during the final stage of the Study taking into account all feedback received from Council staff, stakeholders and residents. The report was finalised and implementation recommendations were provided.



## Chapter 2: Policy Context

## CairnsPlan

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There are a number of sections of the CairnsPlan that are relevant to or have implications for the preparation and use of the Neighbourhood Character Study. These are briefly summarised below and the implications for the Study are outlined.

### Chapter 2: Desired Environmental Outcomes

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The Desired Environmental Outcomes (DEOs) of the CairnsPlan provide a link between the purpose of the Integrated Planning Act of seeking to achieve ecological sustainability and the measures of the CairnsPlan. A number of DEOs are relevant to the Study:

#### 2.2.4 Risk Management

Risk Management addresses the need for development to minimise potential risk as a result of events such as flooding or storm surge. Some precincts identified through the Study are at risk of flooding. In these locations, the Study and design guidelines have taken into account the need for buildings to address the impacts of flooding.

#### 2.2.5 The Scenic Landscape

The Scenic Landscape outlines the importance of the natural landscapes within the region. This Study seeks to encourage development that responds to surrounding landscapes including the coastline and hillslopes.

#### 2.4.1 Liveable, Sustainable, Tropical City

Among other things, Liveable, Sustainable, Tropical City encourages the built form to respond to the tropical climate zone through the integration of tropical design, materials and detailing that perpetuate the outdoor lifestyle. The Study and guidelines are consistent with this objective and aim to promote the physical, environmental and lifestyle benefits of building styles that respond to the tropical climate.

#### 2.4.2 Housing

Housing focuses on providing a diversity of dwellings and living options. The Study and guidelines recognise the need to provide for diversity, while still ensuring that new development responds to the character of an area.

#### 2.4.3 Cultural Heritage

Part of the brief for the project required the identification of any areas of potential cultural heritage significance. Work has been undertaken to identify any potential sites or precincts, which have been referred to Council for further investigation at a later date.

#### 2.4.4 Sense of Community

Sense of Community recognises the contribution of all the different elements that come together to form the identity and character of the villages, towns and suburbs. Careful design of new development is expected in order to ensure that it is compatible with the identity and character of the locality and contributes to strengthening the sense of community. This Study directly fulfils these objectives, through the provision of guidelines that show how development can and should respond to its location.

## Planning Area Codes

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The Study and guidelines recognise the various codes that apply within the character precincts. The Study seeks to provide guidance for all new development to ensure that it responds to the character and identity of the neighbourhood regardless of density or dwelling type. The following is an outline of the codes that apply to the majority of the Study Area:

### 4.5.1 Residential 1 Planning Area Code

The Residential 1 Planning Area Code applies to the majority of the Study Area. The code facilitates the development of predominantly detached houses on single lots while respecting the character and amenity of neighbourhoods.

### 4.5.5 Residential 2 Planning Area Code

The Residential 2 Planning Area Code applies to parts of Westcourt and aims to achieve a wider choice of housing to meet the needs of a diverse population. Higher densities are encouraged in locations within reasonable walking distance to public transport, shops and services.

### 4.5.6 Residential 3 Planning Area Code

The Residential 3 Planning Area Code applies to parts of Parramatta Park, Manunda and Cairns North. The purpose of the Code is to facilitate the development of medium density housing in a range of accommodation types that contributes to a high standard of residential amenity.

### 4.5.14 Commercial Planning Area Code / 4.5.8 City Centre Planning Area Code

The Commercial Planning Area Code facilitates the establishment of commercial uses that serve the needs of the community. It also allows for the establishment of medium density residential development in appropriate locations. The City Centre Planning Area Code facilitates development that fulfils the role of the City Centre as the principal focus for Cairns, the region and the regional tourism industry. It encourages higher order and specialised forms of retail, business and other commercial uses and also encourages the provision of housing.

Distinctive non-residential areas including Edge Hill, the City Centre and parts of Parramatta Park have been retained in the Study Area, however, given that neighbourhood character studies generally focus on predominantly residential uses, the Study does not provide guidelines for these areas. Business and commercial areas require a more detailed approach that takes into consideration all of the factors affecting commercial development.

## Overlay Codes

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### 4.6.2 Character Precinct Code

The Character Precinct Code aims to ensure that precincts retain their cultural heritage significance and streetscape values. Precincts within the Code have provided the basis for the Study Area boundaries. The precinct brochures will complement the Character Precinct Code and provide additional guidance specific to the individual character of each precinct.

### 4.6.5 Hillslopes Code

The Hillslopes Code recognises the natural features that attract both residents and tourists and contribute to distinguishing the character of Cairns. Relevant to the Study, the Code aims to ensure that the landscape character and visual quality of the Hillslopes are protected from development so as to retain the scenic backdrop to the City. Land affected by the Hillslopes Overlay is required to respond to several performance criteria. Where there are overlaps between the Study Area and the overlay, the Study and guidelines are consistent with the information contained in the Code. The

neighbourhood character guidelines complement the information contained in the code and are intended to be used in conjunction with it.

## Other Relevant Documents

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### Cairns City Heritage Study – The Report, Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle, 1994

This study was conducted in response to concerns over loss of character following rapid urban development and the international tourist boom. It 'was commissioned to identify places within the Cairns City Council boundaries and the special attributes of the city which are so important that something should be done to protect them'. It documents how history has affected the built form of the city. This introduces the following chapters about how topography, the tropical climate, telecommunications and transport have affected Cairns as well as the chapters detailing its economic and social development.

### Cairns City Heritage Study – The Inventory, Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle, 1994

This Inventory is a companion to the Cairns City Heritage Study Report. It contains details for each of the heritage sites that are found listed in the report. The criteria used to determine the significant sites is provided.

### Mulgrave Shire Heritage Study, Pawsey and Prowse, July 1996

This study concerns the newly-formed Mulgrave Shire that includes the city of Cairns. It builds upon the work done in the 1994 Cairns City Heritage study. This is done by outlining strategic planning recommendations for the conservation of listed places. The study aims to rectify the Council's lack of knowledge about cultural heritage by providing additional information to the Council for the identification, documentation and protection heritage places. It includes procedures for successful liaison with local Aboriginal groups and other parties with regard to cultural heritage issues.

### Cultural Heritage Study Town of Babinda, Natural Resource Assessments, March 2000

This study of Cultural Heritage in Babinda identifies and assesses places within and nearby the town that have cultural significance. A historical overview provides a basis for the study. The report details the chosen methodology which involved much community input and the National Trust's workshop model for criteria. The twenty-one sites selected are listed and explained. They recommend the inclusion of these sites in the Cairns City Council Heritage Register. This is to help redress the imbalance that the majority of sites are found in the Central Business District as found in previous heritage studies.

### Cairns Plan Amendment 2007, No. 1, Part F – Character Precincts, Report to Council Special Meeting 27 September 2007

This document makes recommendations in response to a large collection of submissions following the Cairns Plan amendment proposals which concern Character Precinct Areas. It advises that the change from Residential 3 to Residential 1 in majority Character Precinct Areas be abandoned. The report proposes that Demolition/ Removal provisions be improved and that mimicry or replica building be discouraged, namely by greater clarity in the Local Heritage and Character Precinct Codes. The Character Precinct Code is also to be modified to respond better to the local context and be less restrictive. Infill development is encouraged to increase density by creation of a new code.

The report forms a basis for this study. Action has been postponed pending the results of the Character Assessment. The study will provide a foundation for future amendments to the Cairns plan.

### The Gordonvale Initiative – Townscape and Tourism Strategy

The Townscape and Tourism Strategy for Gordonvale documents the existing condition of the town's built environment and character, as well as ways to maintain and enhance this in the future. The report contains five brochures: the town square, town storylines, town furnishings, town style and town action plan. The town's heritage is documented for preservation and drawn upon for inspiration. The brochures aim to make Gordonvale more attractive, encourage economic gain and develop identity. This is to be achieved through upgrading the town square, using town stories as an attraction, coordinating street furnishings with a design theme, using the town style identified to assist building and planning decisions and undergoing improvements in each of the six neighbourhoods identified.

This study identifies the character of Gordonvale and how improvements in residential areas can be undertaken. The brochure on town style in particular identifies how to maintain and develop character. It specifically seeks *'to assist design guidelines for appropriate infill development and to provide a background for the protection of existing buildings'*. The town action plan is also key because it focuses on specific neighbourhoods within the town, explains their character and suggests detailed actions for enhancement.

### Character Precincts and Cultural Heritage Areas – A re-evaluation of the Cairns North Character Precinct, Gordon Grimwade and Associates

This report concerns the Cairns North Character Precinct. It aims to evaluate how well the distinctive character is being maintained. The results are a list of issues with proposed actions. Most of these propose that owners in the Precinct be better encouraged to preserve the character of the area and that the Council should provide incentives and educational resources for this to take place. Further research and consideration of a Heritage Adviser to be employed by Council are also advised.

This report provides a basis for further investigation into heritage places in Cairns North Character Precinct. It evaluates what constitutes desirable and undesirable development and design in the Precinct.

### Cairns Style Design Guide, April 2007

Cairns Style Design Guide *'describes – in words, pictures and diagrams – the tropical style that is the desired design direction for the City of Cairns'*. It covers a range of buildings that are classified under 'Queenslander' houses, contemporary houses, multi-unit dwellings and commercial and civic buildings. Design suggestions focus on aesthetics and sensitivity to the local context. The guidelines make recommendations concerning such details as frontages, materials, colours, setbacks, fences and landscapes as well as for infill development. These are introduced with historical background.

### Transcript of Proceedings – Planning and Environment Court, P&E Appeal No. 36 of 2007 – McDonald's Australia and Cairns City Council and The Chief Executive, Department of Main Roads State Reporting Bureau, 10 December 2007

This transcript concerns the appeal and approval of a McDonalds food outlet at 7-11 Martyn Street, Parramatta Park following the rejection of the proposal by the local council. The site, located on a corner, is currently occupied by three detached dwellings. The report concludes that the site is no longer suited to residential use nor is it an important part of the streetscape. The suggestion that the residences be converted to commercial uses is deemed inappropriate.

This transcript illustrates how debate over the character of an area affects planning decisions. This outcome of the planning decision was a result of identifying McDonalds at the site as more in character with the area than the detached housing.

The guidelines help in the undertaking of residential design in new buildings and renovations in Cairns. The only section not relevant to the Neighbourhood Character Study is that which relates to commercial and civic buildings.



## Chapter 3: What is Neighbourhood Character?



## Neighbourhood Character Defined

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The concept of Neighbourhood Character, its components and its value has been widely discussed and debated over the last ten years in the planning of Australian cities. It has been demonstrated well that neighbourhood character is something that can have a range of meanings for different people or situations and is difficult to define. In the neighbourhood character studies that Planisphere has undertaken, we have attempted to arrive at a definition of neighbourhood character to form the basis of our study methodology. This understanding of what constitutes neighbourhood character has been developed over the course of many studies and collaboration with local communities, Councils and government departments.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with a clear understanding of Neighbourhood Character: what does it mean; how it is practically administered within the statutory framework; what are the principles of Neighbourhood Character; and what are Neighbourhood Character typologies?

### What is Neighbourhood Character?

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Victorian planning codes have led the way in Australia in recognising and documenting the need to respect the character of residential areas in new development. Other states have now followed suit with NSW, SA and WA introducing State-wide controls that require consideration of existing character in development approvals processes. Queensland has a mixed approach, with some Councils, such as in Cairns, taking a proactive stance to the issue.

People attribute widely differing meanings to the term 'neighbourhood character'. For many, character is about the people who live in the area; for others it is broad attributes of the area, such as closeness to shops or transport, how much open space or traffic there is. Because this character study has been commissioned to provide planning scheme policies and controls, it needs to be focussed on the physical planning outcomes that are capable of being influenced by planning scheme tools. Fundamentally we are aiming to answer the question: how do buildings and landscape interact? Built form, vegetation and topographical characteristics are the physical manifestation of neighbourhood character.

The term 'qualitative interplay' has been used to define neighbourhood character. Qualitative interplay refers to the way that the main distinctive components of an area's character combine to produce a particular sense of place. This concept carries important implications:

- Neighbourhood character needs to be described in a written character statement; it is insufficient to simply produce a catalogue or list of characteristics.
- Character statements must be skilfully written to describe the synthesis of qualities that make one area distinct from another.
- Character statements should make clear which characteristics are most important, and the manner in which they relate to each other.

The term 'qualitative interplay' transcends 'private and public domains'. The character of buildings and their grounds cannot be divorced from the character of the street scene in which they sit. For example, in the inner suburbs of most Australian cities buildings often present as solid 'walls' to the street, producing a hard, urban character. In some landscape-dominated areas on the urban fringe, natural bush vegetation flows across private property and public domain alike, only stopping at the edge of the roadway. Clearing all the trees on a private allotment would completely change the character of this type of area. So would the construction of kerb, channel and footpath, or planting of street trees of an incompatible species or in a formal pattern.

Therefore, in summary, neighbourhood character is a synthesis of public and private domain characteristics,. It is the qualitative interplay between those characteristics that make a place, town

or neighbourhood distinctive. Some of these characteristics are more important than others in creating a distinctive character.

Surveying all characteristics, then listing the 'key' characteristics, is a useful analytical tool. However a written statement that explains the interplay of the character components is necessary to properly describe, assess and evaluate the character of a particular area. This is the theoretical and statutory basis for the Preferred Character Statements that have been drafted for each Character Precinct within the study area.

The following definition of neighbourhood character, used by Planisphere in all neighbourhood character studies, seems to us to accommodate all of these requirements. It forms the basis of the work undertaken in this Neighbourhood Character Study:

*Neighbourhood character is the qualitative interplay of built form, vegetation and topographic characteristics, in both the private and public domains, that make one place different from another.*

## Neighbourhood Character Elements

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In many areas, building type, era and spacing, the proportions and combined appearance of the 'walls' and 'floor' of the street space, and the amount and type of vegetation, are the key determinants of the area's character. How the buildings 'sit' in their landscape is critical. Vegetation includes street trees, front garden vegetation, and canopy trees in rear yards and public reserves forming a backdrop. Critical elements of the 'walls' and 'floor' of the street space are the height, permeability and profile of the 'walls': the depth of front setbacks; type of garden (eg lawn and roses, shrubs and trees, or an apparent continuation of the street space planting); presence and permeability of a front fence; and the formality (or otherwise) of the street space.

Other character components can include traffic, noise, type of activity, and demographic characteristics. Members of the public often cite these as important characteristics of their neighbourhood. People often raise amenity issues such as access to open space in character consultation sessions. All of these can be argued to be an essential part of an area's character.

### Focussing on planning scheme implementation options

The important question in each case is: how relevant is this to the task in hand? In preparing policy and controls for implementation through the planning scheme, then the focus of the study needs to be on elements that are mentioned in the planning code and can therefore be addressed and influenced by the appropriate statutory tools. Many neighbourhood character elements can be addressed through other mechanisms such as social development strategies or public awareness campaigns that are outside the scope of planning schemes.

### Neighbourhood Character is Not

The differentiation between different types of character area is not simply a question of architectural style or era of development. Neighbourhood character is founded on the layout and form of the areas, and the way that the built form interacts with and relates to the landscape. These factors should be the basis for the application of neighbourhood character policies. Neighbourhood character is not about the imposition of design styles. Rather it should be about recognising the distinctive characteristics of different urban forms, and their relationship to topography and vegetation. Getting this right is the best way of maintaining and enhancing the sense of place of the municipality's residential areas.

Nor is neighbourhood character about the amenity of adjoining properties or dwelling densities as such, although it has implications for both of these issues. In practical terms it does not dictate planning controls for either. For example, the recommended guidelines contained in the area papers with regard to spaciousness between dwellings may require that new buildings should be setback from both side boundaries. This may reduce the amount or number of buildings that can

be accommodated on a site, and may also reduce potential amenity impacts from overlooking and overshadowing of adjoining properties. Front setback controls may also have a similar effect in some instances. These are secondary outcomes of the neighbourhood character guidelines, and while not the primary intent, may reduce community concerns about other aspects of new development.

## Neighbourhood Character Principles

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The following principles of neighbourhood character were prepared by a former Victorian Department of Infrastructure working party into neighbourhood character that met in late 1999. They provide a useful set of criteria by which neighbourhood character can be assessed and distinguished as a tool. The principles are:

### Community Values

*The values of the local community are part of determining the appropriate response to neighbourhood character. Planning controls that aim to protect, change or improve character must draw on professional and community views.*

The community should be involved in identifying the neighbourhood character measures appropriate to their area. Professionals assist in developing and translating these ideas into techniques to manage design.

### Physical Focus

*Character, in its broadest sense, can include environmental, social and economic factors, but the planning system is concerned with managing the physical evidence of character and related social impacts.*

The planning system is primarily focussed on achieving a wide range of objectives through the physical environment. Character is not concerned only with the private domain, as much of neighbourhood character is manifested in the public street space. However, some character issues are related to social outcomes or impacts. For example, the height of front fences is a town planning issue with character implications that may be physical (does a high fence contribute positively to the 'look' of the area?) and social (how do high fences affect social interaction?).

### Special Qualities of an Area

*All areas have a character that can be described, evaluated and, in many cases, improved. In some areas protection of particular qualities may be warranted; but there is no distinction between areas of special character and 'the rest'.*

The aim in placing greater priority on character is to improve the quality of the environment throughout residential areas, not just in retaining or improving a few select 'special' areas that already have high amenity values. For this reason, a neighbourhood character is equally relevant everywhere. Planning controls should aim to protect identified distinctive and valued elements.

### Interaction between Elements of Character

*Character is about the interrelationships between various elements of an area, and so cannot be described or evaluated by considering individual elements in isolation.*

Design responses need to consider the whole picture of a neighbourhood, rather than focussing upon one or two elements of the building form or siting.

### Neighbourhood Character and Other Planning Policies

*State and Council policies provide the rationale for decisions about whether to protect, change or improve the neighbourhood character of an area. Area-specific controls should be developed in the light of these strategic directions.*

The *Far North Queensland Regional Plan 2009-2031* includes strategic directions to manage future growth. The third direction, Urban Consolidation and Land Use Efficiency, aims to ensure that future growth in the region predominantly reflects the existing urban network and consolidates growth within and immediately adjacent to centres. These are important considerations for the location of new housing in the region.

### Preferred Character

*Neighbourhood character descriptions and evaluations should focus on the preferred character of an area.*

Descriptions of existing characteristics are an important part of the process of identifying the 'starting point', but the desired character needs to be evaluated and considered in the context of other policy priorities. It may be that some areas should be encouraged to develop a new character, just as there may be some areas where critical elements need to be protected or reflected in all new development. The concept of preferred character is discussed in detail in section 5.1.

### Neighbourhood Character Typologies

*There are a limited number of consistent precinct types that can be defined, and frequently appropriate policy responses can be formulated without the need for expensive studies.*

This is not to say that detailed analysis of each individual situation can be completely avoided, but much can be gained from shared understandings.

### Site Analysis

*A site analysis, specifically from the neighbourhood character perspective, is necessary whether or not a detailed character study has been undertaken.*

A site analysis is necessary to identify characteristics that might be unusual or particular to the locality. This may not prescribe the answer, but inform the decision. A site analysis should be undertaken as part of the development assessment process. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 6: Implementation.

### Character and Heritage

*Character and heritage share many attributes, but there are important differences between the two concepts. Community values are a key justification for the protection of neighbourhood character. Policies to transform character may be appropriate in some areas.*

Character studies evaluate the interplay of built form, vegetation and topographical qualities, with reference to styles and ages where relevant, whereas heritage studies evaluate cultural heritage significance, with some reference to built form, vegetation and topographical qualities. Heritage studies designate levels of significance for sites or precincts by assessment against established criteria and by way of comparison with other heritage places. The basis of neighbourhood character is that every place has character regardless of its age or appearance and community feedback is an important means by which the value of this character can be understood. (See below for further discussion.)

### Character and Amenity

*The difference between neighbourhood character and amenity must be recognised.*

Character and amenity are terms often used interchangeably, but issues of immediate impacts on adjoining properties like visual and acoustic privacy and overshadowing should continue to be treated as issues separate to neighbourhood character.



## Chapter 4: Neighbourhood Character in Cairns

## Survey

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During the initial stage of the project, a survey was undertaken to firstly determine what character types were evident throughout the study area, secondly to determine where precinct boundaries may be drawn, and finally to take note of the different character elements on a street-by-street basis.

The following character elements were noted throughout the survey:

- Landscape setting
- Vegetation
- Building form (including roof form)
- Siting including building spacing and setbacks
- Design detail and finishes
- Building materials and colours
- Frontage treatment
- Façade treatment
- Car Parking and vehicular access

## The Character of Cairns

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### Distinctive Qualities of Cairns

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Cairns has a distinctive and varied character that has emerged over many decades and draws on the different characteristics of the urban city centre, surrounding suburbs and a series of villages that are bounded by striking topography. Although this description focuses on areas with a particularly distinct or intact character within the study area, it is likely that other areas share one or more of the characteristics that makes Cairns a distinctive city and region.

#### The city, the suburbs and the villages

The layout of the city and the region has been predominantly shaped by the limitations of the local topography and the need to protect the significant landscapes surrounding built up areas. The settlement of the City Centre was followed by the establishment of surrounding suburbs, the outward spread of which is ultimately limited by the Great Dividing Range to the west. Built up areas located beyond the rainforest and hills surrounding the inner suburbs have a suburban function but have the appearance of villages with defined edges. The sugar cane industry also led to the development of more isolated towns including Gordonvale and Babinda.

#### Tropical Climate

One of the greatest influences on the character of Cairns is its tropical climate. The different aspects of this climate, including the wet and dry seasons which bring with them hot and humid temperatures, dry and sunny and overcast days and the potential for flooding and cyclones, have necessitated and encouraged the inclusion of certain features in dwellings. Some of these include: the elevation of dwellings off the ground to cool the house from underneath, provide a ground level retreat and reduce the impact of potential floods; the semi-enclosure of verandahs with lattice, battens and louvers that can open or close depending on the weather; and the use of bright colours to offset the impact of dull, overcast days during the wet season.

### The Queenslander

The unique Queenslander building style was a response to the tropical climate and has come to be one of the defining elements of the character of Cairns. Although Queenslander buildings are found throughout the state, the style varies slightly in different locations and an individual version of the style is evident in Cairns, particularly in inner suburbs such as Parramatta Park.

In Cairns, the Queenslander style spans across different eras, including the Victorian, Federation, Interwar and post-war eras. Elements of the Queenslander style can also be found in more recently developed buildings, however it is in the Victorian, Federation and Interwar eras that the Queenslander style is most distinctive and recognisable. There are many different features that can be attributed to the Queenslander style, with the only feature common to all being the elevation of the building off the ground.

### Vegetation

The tropical character of Cairns can predominantly be attributed to the presence of tropical vegetation that is prominent throughout most of the study area. Vegetation is found on nature strips and on less formal roadways in roadside verges. It is also a prominent feature of front and rear gardens. The Cairns Style Design Guide acknowledges the important role of fruit trees found usually in rear gardens. Plantings such as these are well established, particularly in inner areas and provide a landscaped backdrop that can be seen from the street. This character is complemented by smaller shrubs and garden beds in front yards.

### Surrounding Landscapes

The landscapes surrounding the urban areas of Cairns offer highly valued views and backdrops to the built form.

The Great Dividing Range provides physical separation between different urban areas and also offers a mountainous and green backdrop that can be viewed from many different locations. Some areas are set into the hills and are surrounded by tropical vegetation with views to the landscapes below.

The coastal landscape is also an important element in the character of Cairns. Although only one precinct (Machans Beach 1) directly abuts the coast, there are reminders of its presence in other precincts.

In the Gordonvale area, the sugar can industry and its associated rural landscapes have an impact on the character of precincts. The canefields are evident at the edges of the urban area, providing an interesting visual aspect as well as a reminder of the origins of the township.

### New development

Almost all precincts within the Study Area have been subject to more recent development – some of which respects and fits in with the valued character and some of which fails to respond to the valued character of the precinct. Infill development continues to change the character of Cairns and contributes to the evolving nature of the city.

## Character Precincts

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Following the field surveys, individual precincts were identified. It is important to note that *preferred* character is the main criterion for precinct delineation. Character studies that attempt to delineate every variation in *current* characteristics often produce very large numbers of areas. While this approach might have some benefits in achieving a finer grain of information, it also may result in an overload of information that relates to segmented areas and this often tends to not be responsive to the community's aspirations for their area as whole.



## Precincts and Preferred Character

Furthermore, preferred character should be a concept that provides a broad direction rather than prescriptive detail. Achieving an uninterrupted flow of landscape and vegetation across private and public domain might be the main aim of a preferred character statement. From this aim, numbers of policies and guidelines are derived. These are cognisant of the existing situation with boundary treatments, site coverage etc, but fine grain local variations in these characteristics today should not preclude the setting of an aim to create, in the future, a consistent character across a broader area. Town planning is, after all, about creating desired futures. Town planning policy should be arrived at after considering existing conditions. It should not necessarily be determined by them.

## Precincts and Neighbourhood and Site Description

The CairnsPlan provides for a process of neighbourhood and site description that encompasses an assessment of neighbourhood character. The preparation of a neighbourhood character study does not negate the value in preparing a site analysis, which should be considered an important factor in the assessment of proposed developments. To this end Council could consider introducing a statutory requirement for a site analysis to accompany each application. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6: Implementation. Local conditions and the specific circumstances need to be assessed and considered alongside the preferred character for the area. They may also change over time. It is not necessary for a character study to provide a detailed brief for every site. The character study should provide the broad future direction, complemented by the neighbourhood and site description, which assesses detailed local conditions.

## Precinct Delineation

Character area delineation is arrived at by considering a number of important factors: preferred character, similarity of characteristics and threats, and useability of the precinct definition. Some emphasis is placed on the detailed survey findings, but because the basis of delineation is preferred character, all the other factors may also be relevant. The actual boundaries between precincts are often well defined by the characteristics, and thus preferred character of an area. When this clear delineation occurs, there is always a physical separator such as a road or railway between areas. Where the characteristics change more gradually across an area, for example due to sporadic development or a gradual thinning of the tree canopy, a boundary must nevertheless be determined for reasons of useability. In these instances a road or other obvious physical element is used to provide an easily identifiable boundary between precincts.

## Interface Issues

There are three situations where interface issues are of importance. The first relates to the immediate interface between two adjoining precincts. Precincts are usually delineated using identifiable physical elements such as roads. In many cases, however, the actual boundary may be slightly blurred such that the characteristics of the adjoining precinct may also apply to the land in question. Where this occurs, the adjoining precinct guidelines should be taken into account in the assessment of proposals on land adjoining another precinct.

The second occasion where interface issues are of importance is in specific situations where a residential area adjoins an area outside the study boundaries. This includes public reserves, institutions, the railway or freeway corridors and commercial or industrial areas. Thirdly, the style and era of development within Heritage Overlay areas often has an influence upon the existing and preferred future character of adjoining neighbourhoods. In most cases it will be necessary for new development to pay particular attention to building and siting requirements to ensure that it is respectful of the heritage significance of the adjacent overlay area.

## Precincts

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Twenty-three (23) character precincts were identified in the Study Area. These are listed in the table below. For each character type a set of guidelines were produced to apply to the precincts classified under that type. These were then tailored to local circumstances.

PRECINCT NAME	NOTES
Machans Beach 1	
Machans Beach 2	
Stratford	
Freshwater	
Redlynch	
Edge Hill 1	
Edge Hill 2	
Edge Hill 3	
Edge Hill Commercial	No guidelines are provided due to the commercial nature of the precinct. Development will be guided by future work to be undertaken.
Aeroglen	
Cairns North	
Westcourt 1	
Westcourt 2	
Manunda	
Parramatta Park 1	Incorporates area previously identified for potential heritage significance: Martyn Street.
Parramatta Park 2	Previously part of the Parramatta Park Precinct, split due to commercial zoning. Incorporates area previously identified for potential heritage significance: Lumley Street. No guidelines are provided due to the commercial nature of the precinct. Development will be guided by future work to be undertaken.
Cairns City Commercial	No guidelines are provided due to the commercial nature of the precinct. Development will be guided by future work to be undertaken.
Gordonvale 1	
Gordonvale 2	
Gordonvale 3	
Gordonvale 4	
Gordonvale Town Precinct	Incorporates area previously identified for potential heritage significance: Gordonvale Town Precinct.
Eastwood Street, Babinda	Incorporates area previously identified for potential heritage significance: Eastwood Street, Babinda.
Earlville	Incorporates area previously identified for potential heritage significance: Earlville.



## Chapter 5: Character Directions for Cairns

## Character Statements

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The preparation of character statements for each precinct identified as a result of the analysis of the survey data involved identifying the characteristics that are key to each area. The content of each Precinct Brochure is derived by a careful analysis of the 'qualitative interplay' of the various elements that comprise the area, and an assessment of the characteristics that are critical to retaining and enhancing the essence of the place. The components of the Precinct Brochure contents

### Precinct Description

The Precinct Description encapsulates all of the existing neighbourhood character features of the precinct. The interplay between existing characteristics and any unique aspects of the precinct's neighbourhood character are described. The precinct description is important because it paves the way for identifying elements that may need to be either maintained or changed within the precinct.

### Key Existing Characteristics

Key Existing Characteristics that were recorded throughout the field survey are summarised in this section. The dot points provide a catalogue of information related to elements such as architectural style, building materials and garden types.

### Issues / Threats

Issues and threats applying to each precinct are identified within this section. These were identified through community consultation and by the Study Team. The issues may be current (i.e. examples may already exist in the precinct) or there may be potential for them to threaten the preferred neighbourhood character of the precinct in the future.

### Character Statement

The Character Statement outlines the desirable character features for that precinct, and how they should be achieved. The Character Statement is a lead-in to the Character Guidelines, illustrating key elements for which guidelines need to be prepared.

## Character Guidelines

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Based on the Precinct Issues Papers and the feedback received on these, guidelines were prepared for each precinct. Together with the Precinct Issues Papers, the guidelines form a brochure for each precinct.

The Design Guidelines address the following character elements where relevant to the precinct:

- Existing Buildings
- Vegetation
- Siting
- Height and Building Form
- Front Boundary Treatment
- Materials and Design Detailing
- Specific interfaces

Each character element is accompanied by a Design Objective, Design Response and Avoid statement. The Design Objective states the desired action relating to each character element, the

Design Response outlines specific ways in which the objective can be achieved and the Avoid statement summarises design treatments to avoid when trying to achieve the objective.

## Key Character Issues

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In order to determine appropriate implementation methods, the key character issues applicable to the Study Area need to be considered. These are summarised below based on the survey findings of the Study Team and through consultation.

### Raising Queenslanders

As mentioned in Chapter 4, Queenslanders are an important defining element of the character of Cairns. Being raised off the ground provides them with an informal downstairs retreat, cooling of the dwelling through the circulation of air under the house and protection against flooding.

The area beneath Queenslanders is now seen as a valuable space with which to extend a dwelling, however some issues have arisen from the demand to build-in underneath Queenslanders. Minimum ceiling heights and controls dictating the floor level of habitable rooms in areas liable to flooding mean that buildings often need to be substantially raised to meet these standards. This increase in building height can result in dwellings that are out of proportion, with an emphasis on the vertical form of the building as opposed to the horizontal form commonly emphasised in Queenslanders. It can also result in dwellings that are out of proportion with others in the street.

In addition to a substantial increase in height, there are some examples of poor design in the lower levels of Queenslanders. The use of materials is an important consideration that is sometimes overlooked, with the use of heavy masonry and finishes that dominate the building. Lower level facades that are set back the same distance as upper level facades also increase the apparent bulk of the building.

### Contemporary infill

Infill buildings have played an important part in the level of change experienced throughout the Study Area. Infill has occurred in the form of replacement houses, subdivision of sites and infill buildings towards the rear of existing ones, and the consolidation of sites to accommodate higher density residential development, particularly in inner urban areas.

The quality of design of infill buildings is varied. Some are respectful of the existing and valued character of a precinct, while others fail to reflect their location and comprise features that disregard the character of existing buildings. For example, there are a number of newer developments that are dominated by car parking structures set forward of the dwelling in streets that comprise consistent Queensland style buildings with traditional car parking provision to the side or rear of the dwelling. The introduction of a prominent element not commonly found in the precinct diminishes the valued character of the neighbourhood.

The concept of neighbourhood character does not seek to prevent infill development from occurring, rather it aims to ensure that new buildings reflect their location and respect the surrounding built form in a contemporary way. A contemporary development could successfully respond to its location by reflecting the form of surrounding dwellings and including simple building detailing.

The Multiple Dwelling (Small-Scale Development) Code guides the development of multi-dwelling infill in established and new areas. The Code is an important part in the assessment of a proposal's response to the neighbourhood character of an area and includes performance criteria and acceptable measures that cover streetscape and built form, tropical design and energy efficiency, residential amenity, access and parking, and services.

### Reproduction styles

Period reproduction styles are often thought of as the best design response in a street of period homes, with the intent of 'blending in' new development. Many would argue that in fact period reproduction style homes detract from the integrity of older authentic homes, rather than complementing them. In areas where period homes exist, contemporary architecture that is distinguishable from existing buildings should be encouraged, in order to add another layer to the architectural history of the suburb or town.

### Removal of vegetation

The prominence of vegetation and its contribution to the Study Area is discussed in Chapter 4. The large-scale removal of vegetation has an obvious negative impact on the character of an area. In areas where there is a prominent tree canopy or vegetation backdrop, the removal of only a few trees can have a destructive impact on the overall canopy or skyline. While in some cases the removal of vegetation may be justified, it is important to encourage replacement with similar or native species that will grow to a similar size.

### Lack of response to the local climate

The architectural styles of Cairns are heavily influenced by the tropical climate. Although neighbourhood character does not directly address the environmental sustainability of development, in Cairns the responsiveness of development to the local climate is intrinsic to the style, appearance and character of development. Design features that are more commonly found in the southern parts of Australia, such as the use of heavy masonry and expanses of render or concrete are appearing in some developments throughout Cairns. Building styles that incorporate such features not only have a reliance on unsustainable resources for air conditioning, but are also often out of character with their neighbourhoods.

### Fencing

The treatment of front and side boundaries varies throughout the Study Area however there is a predominant use of either fences that allow views to the front garden or dwelling, vegetation as a border treatment or open frontages. All of these boundary characteristics result in an open or vegetation-dominated atmosphere where fences are a less prominent feature. In some areas, new development is beginning to include more dominant fencing styles that block views to gardens and dwellings and create an inconsistent wall along the street. High, solid front fences detract from the character of all areas.

Safety, security, privacy and noise reduction are often used as reasons to justify the use of high or solid fencing. Low and permeable front fences, however, allow views to dwellings and gardens while still indicating the property boundary and providing security for children and pets. In addition, the presence of lower, permeable or non-existent front fences can actually increase security for homes and the street, and improve the overall sense of community by allowing informal surveillance of the streetscape and other properties. In terms of noise reduction, mitigation should be focused on the style and design of the building instead, and techniques such as double glazing should be employed.



## Chapter 6: Implementation

## Implementation of this Study

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There are two types of implementation available to Council: statutory and non-statutory. The outcomes of the study will inform a future amendment to the CairnsPlan. Effective implementation in the short-term is more likely to take the form of using the neighbourhood character brochures as a tool that is complementary to existing policies, codes and documents. A range of other non-statutory options are also outlined below.

### The existing suite of controls

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It is useful to outline how the Neighbourhood Character Study should be used in conjunction with the Plan and other existing documents.

#### CairnsPlan

The CairnsPlan is the planning scheme that applies to the Cairns region, including all of the character precincts identified through this Study. There are a number of Desired Environmental Outcomes, planning area codes and overlays that could apply within any given precinct. As the planning scheme for the region, CairnsPlan is the overarching statutory document that guides future development.

#### Inclusion of a Site Assessment Requirement

One possible improvement to the existing Character Precinct Code would be to include a requirement for proposals to include a site assessment. This could include a description of the site and its surrounds and an explanation of how the proposal responds to these. Site analyses should be undertaken with reference to the Character Precinct Code and the relevant Character Area Brochure, but should include more detail specific to the location of the site and its immediate surrounds.

#### Cairns Style Guide

The Style Guide provides guidance for the development of buildings according to the type of development and is based on the following types:

- Queenslanders
- Contemporary houses
- Multi-unit dwellings
- Commercial and Civic

The Style Guide provides detailed design recommendations for each type of development in a way that is not specific to particular locations. For example for Queenslanders, the document provides recommendations for materials, roof profiles, windows and awnings, verandahs, garages/carports, fences, colours, building in underneath and landscape.

#### Neighbourhood Character Study

The Neighbourhood Character Study now provides a brochure that is specific to each location identified as a character precinct. The Study provides a character statement for each precinct, describing the valued characteristics of the area and also includes guidelines for each precinct. It is intended that the brochures are used as a tool that is complementary to the existing controls in the CairnsPlan as well as the Style Guide. The brochures should be used as a way to communicate Council's expectations to the development community and also to provide certainty and reassurance to existing residents.



## Non-statutory Implementation

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Non-statutory tools can provide an important means of implementing Council's neighbourhood character objectives. The public domain, which includes elements such as street trees, roads, footpaths, kerbs and channels, parks and reserves, has a significant impact on the neighbourhood character of an area. It is not only a question of appearance, but also of location, and the desired geometrical arrangement of all the elements, and how they will relate to each other. The Council is often directly or indirectly responsible for the undertaking of these works and management of assets, and therefore is ideally positioned to maximise the achievement of character objectives.

## Design Coordination in the Public Domain

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While this study was not asked to make specific recommendations about the public domain, decisions about changes or strategies will ideally have some reference to the neighbourhood context determined by this Study. The key character contributions of the public domain are included in each precinct description. This generally relates to distinctive street planting, such as avenue trees or planter beds, bluestone kerbing or a precinct's location alongside a public reserve.

The best way of coordinating works in the public domain with the design principles established for each precinct by this study is, in the short term, to establish a coordination mechanism.

This could take the form of an officer group with the following objectives:

- Coordinate all aspects of design in road reserves and other parts of the public domain.
- Build up a consistent character across defined local areas (preferably the precincts defined in the Neighbourhood Character Study).

The group would comprise representatives from the design engineers, infrastructure, development approvals (both statutory planning and building), strategic planning, environment and social planning, street lighting, landscape architecture and parks services.

The group would:

- Ensure that design decisions relating to a single street, park or other facility are consistent with the various strategies.
- Resolve conflicts, overlaps or gaps in the strategies.
- Establish guidelines for the conduct of public consultation about public domain design, with mechanisms designed to accommodate pressures for divergent treatments in every location within a strategic, consistent approach.

## Community Encouragement and Education

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Education and encouragement, partly by means of forming partnerships, is an essential aspect of implementation.

The following strategies could be adopted:

- Education of real estate agents, developers and landowners generally.
- Education of design and building professionals.
- Encouragement schemes for 'good character' developments.

The kinds of techniques that could be used to give effect to these strategies could include:

- Information leaflets
- Workshops

- Award schemes
- Displays
- Media articles/events

The partnership aspect of this option could be fostered by bringing stakeholders with differing perspectives (e.g. residents and developers) together into the same forum. This may be best accomplished independently of a contentious planning application with statutory time limits.

## Staff Skilling and Design Advice

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It takes time to come to grips with a topic like neighbourhood character. The Council's statutory planners need continued support and skilling to make the best use of this Study's recommendations. Correct approaches to site analysis, knowledge about acceptable design solutions, familiarity with architectural styles, and consistency of decisions are all important. Training sessions, workshops and review of current applications by urban design consultants are useful techniques. In addition, training may be required by other parts of the Council organisation where the recommendations impact upon public domain works designed and undertaken by engineering personnel or contractors in accordance with specifications prepared by Council staff.

Two staff workshops were held as part of the Study process, enabling staff to be involved in the preparation of the Study and to learn more about the concept of neighbourhood character. Additional or ongoing workshops would help to further develop staff skills and could also provide a forum for discussion regarding current applications or other issues that may arise in relation to neighbourhood character.

Resourcing may be an issue in the implementation of the recommendations of this study, as some recommendations such as increasing controls over buildings and vegetation and more detailed assessment of design, may result in increased workloads for planning staff. The Council must be aware of this potential and monitor the effect of introducing new controls to ensure that implementation of the study is effective.

Above all, the Council must determine to 'send out the right message' to the development community through consistent decision making as well as communication techniques discussed earlier. That message must foster an expectation that good quality design is expected, and that applicants will be subject to delays or refusal if they fail to meet this expectation.

### Cairns Regional Urban Design Board

Council has recently established a Regional Urban Design Board consisting of the Council Mayor, Council's General Manager of Planning and Environment as well as eight other industry professionals. The Board will facilitate an improvement in urban design and the quality of the built environment through the provision of information, expert advice and recommendations. One of the tasks of the Board will contribute to policy matters dealing with urban design in the Region and in particular, issues of urban design policy, local character, regional image and bonuses for good design. The contribution of the Board will be a valuable resource for Council in terms of providing design advice.

## Statutory Support

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The main vehicles for statutory support are the Precinct Brochures described above. Planning controls will also provide significant help, as will the community education and encouragement initiatives referred to above. However, there are allied or associated measures that can be taken.

Possibilities include:

- Permit conditions.

- Better enforcement of planning conditions.
- Increased publicity about penalties.
- Active monitoring of works undertaken without permission (eg illegal carports).
- Local Laws.