



160 Whitehorse Road, Blackburn

Planning & Urban Design Evidence

Prepared for the City of Whitehorse by Message Consultants, June 2019

PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT ACT 1987
WHITEHORSE PLANNING SCHEME

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ADVERTISED MATERIAL

CITY OF WHITEHORSE

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1 Introduction

Message Consultants has been instructed by Whitehorse City Council to review the urban design merits of a mixed use proposal for 160 Whitehorse Road, Blackburn. The following plans set out the design response:

- Architectural plans produced by Ascui and Co. Architects dated 4 April, 2019 and;
- Landscape plans produced by MDG Landscape Architects dated 21 March, 2019

This report describes the urban design merits of the proposal and provides recommendations to Council.

2 Background

2.1 Prior Approval & Submissions

On March 25, 2019 planning permit WH/2017/277 was issued by the City of Whitehorse for a proposal produced in December 2017 by Taouk Architects (Taouk plans). This permit was issued pursuant to VCAT order P1636/2017 made on the 22 February 2018. The proposal consisted of a four building residential development with ground floor retail frontage and building heights of between 6 and 10 storeys.

The approved proposal was subject to a number of conditions, most notably Condition 1 which included:

- The deletion of two levels from the two tallest towers;
- A reduction of roof cover in the mid-block link and;
- A public realm improvement plan noting, among other things, the continuation of street tree plantings.

No plans meeting the requirements of Condition 1 of the March 2019 permit have been endorsed by Council.

In March 2019 a new set of plans produced by Ascui & Co. Architects were submitted to Council as an amendment to the existing permit WH/2017/277. These plans retained the approved proposal for the two buildings on the western half of the site, while proposing a new design for the two eastern towers, to be completed in separate stages.

In April 2019 a further set of plans produced by Ascui & Co. Architects (Ascui & Co. April 2019 plans) were submitted to Council with a new proposal of four buildings for the entire site. This proposal is the focus of this report.

identifiable by a consistency in land use and promotional signs, but lacking in any signals to a 'sense of place' within Blackburn.

The subject site has been identified as a key redevelopment site and an opportunity to provide a gateway development to the Blackburn Activity Centre.

The subject site is approximately 550m from Blackburn Railway Station, is on bus routes 271, 279 and 901 providing connections to Box Hill, Doncaster, Ringwood and Melbourne Airport and is within walking distance of public primary and secondary schools.

2.3 Summary of Planning Controls

The subject site lies within the Commercial 1 Zone, and is affected by Design and Development Overlay Schedule 8.

2.3.1 Commercial 1 Zone

The purposes of the Commercial 1 Zone (C1Z) are as follows:

- *To implement the Municipal Planning Strategy and the Planning Policy Framework.*
- *To create vibrant mixed use commercial centres for retail, office, business, entertainment and community uses.*
- *To provide for residential uses at densities complementary to the role and scale of the commercial centre.*

A planning permit is required to construct a building or construct or carry out works pursuant to Clause 34.01-4.

2.3.2 Design and Development Overlay Schedule 8

The Design and Development Overlay Schedule 8 – Blackburn Neighbourhood Activity Centre and *Megamile* (west) Major Activity Centre has a series of objectives, which can be summarised as follows:

- To ensure consistent development with policy relating to the *Megamile* and the *Blackburn Activity Centre* while generating a positive and distinct image for these precincts.
- To encourage high quality design and appropriate accentuation of building form in the redevelopment of key gateway sites.
- To encourage sensitive design which compliments the character of the area and a transition of building heights between residential and activity centre areas.
- To encourage efficient utilisation of space and the incorporation of principles of

Environmentally Sustainable Development in developing sustainable urban form.

- To activate street frontages and create high quality pedestrian environments to encourage walking, while ensuring access for all forms of travel and levels of mobility.
- To preference high quality landscaping in frontages over car parking
- To consider the interface between new development and the railway corridor.

Pursuant to Clause 3.0, the site is subject to a 21m preferred maximum height with 3.5m preferred front and side street setback. The preferred maximum building height excludes rooftop services, which should be contained within architectural roof top features as described in Clause 2.0.

Clause 3.0 also contains built form outcomes for the subject site, nominating it as a 'gateway site' requiring a visually prominent built form, encouraging high quality design of public and private realm, supporting the consolidation of smaller sites and encouraging concealment of vehicle access and parking from the street.

2.3.3 Particular Provisions

Additionally, the proposal is subject to assessment against *Clause 58 Apartment Developments*, the objectives and standards of which encourage apartment development that provides reasonable standards of amenity and is responsive to site and area.

3 How have the Plans Changed?

In assessing the urban design merits of the Ascui & Co. April 2019 plans, this report compares them with the Taouk plans amended by the VCAT decision of February 2018. Following this is an analysis of the impact of these changes, as well as a consideration of particular urban design issues.

The principal changes between the Taouk plans and the Ascui & Co. April 2019 plans can be summarised as follows:

- A maximum building height of 8 storeys transitioning down to 6 storeys has been adopted.
- Buildings A and B have been merged, though designed to appear as distinct entities.
- Street frontages remain largely the same. The Ascui & Co. April 2019 plans add a supermarket to the ground floor retail tenancies.
- Contrasting aluminium and concrete façade elements have replaced the variegated glazing proposed in the Taouk plans.
- Street tree plantings have been reinforced along both street frontages.

3.1 Consideration of Changes

The plans by Taouk Architects proposed four buildings ranging in height from 6 storeys at the west end of the site to 10 storeys at the east, as can be seen in **Figure 2**. The VCAT decision included a condition that 2 storeys be removed from the two tallest buildings, resulting in a maximum height of 8 storeys.

The Ascui & Co. April 2019 plans adopt the VCAT required graduation in building heights, namely;

- 8 storey building 'D',
- 7 storey buildings 'B' and 'C' in the centre and;
- 6 storey building 'A'

The subject proposal also includes a sculpted roof form intended to obscure roof-top plant on building D, which will be discussed later in this report.

The building height of the Ascui & Co. April 2019 plans responds effectively to the VCAT decision on the site.

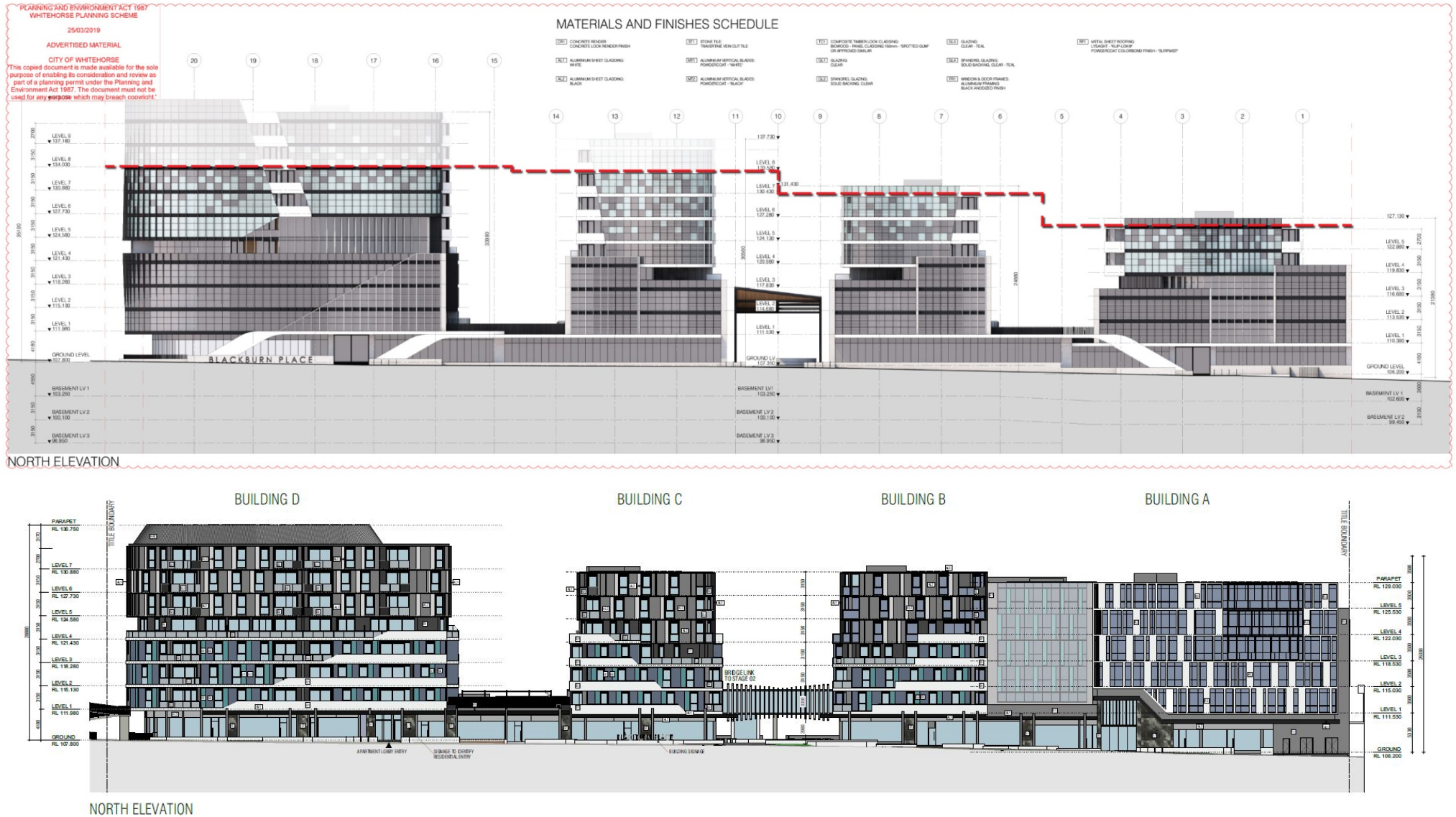


Figure 2. Taouk Proposal elevation with VCAT showing amended building heights (top) and Ascui April 2019 proposal elevation (bottom)

3.2 Layout

The Taouk plans envisaged four separate building forms when viewed from either Whitehorse Road or Railway Road. The Ascui & Co. April 2019 proposal largely follows this layout. The primary difference is within the two western building forms, nominated as buildings A and B on the plans. In the Taouk proposal, these are discrete buildings with a shared ground floor, linked with a communal courtyard on level 1. In the Ascui & Co. April 2019 proposal these two buildings are effectively one envelope, albeit distinguished materially and by a fully glazed recess above ground floor when viewed from Whitehorse Road.

Other changes to layout include a proposed 1686m² supermarket tenancy on the lower ground floor, the removal of dwellings from ground floor plans and the addition of a significant 11,964m² of office space at the western end of the site.

There are no noticeable changes to access and circulation, other than the addition of a footbridge connecting buildings B and C at Level 1.

The layout of the Ascui & Co. April 2019 plans is considered satisfactory.

3.3 Street Frontages

The Taouk proposal was distinguished by a curved form echoing the intersection of Railway Road and Whitehorse Road and providing a visual cue to the layout of the site and a prominent visual signal of transition between the *Megamile* and Blackburn Activity Centres. Along Whitehorse Road, buildings were set back approximately 6.6m to allow for generous landscaping and pedestrian thoroughfare, with ground floor retail frontages punctuated by pedestrian access points. Along Railway Road, a combination of ground floor and elevated retail was proposed, along with modest landscaping and the site's only vehicle crossover.

The Ascui & Co. April 2019 proposal has recreated a 'curved prow' form at the intersection of Whitehorse and Railway Roads, achieving a similar prominence in the landscape of Whitehorse Road as established by the Taouk proposal. The Ascui & Co. April 2019 proposal also contains a similar number of retail tenancies along Whitehorse Road, setback the same distance as the Taouk plans and with partial cover. Again, the Railway Road frontage is similar to the Taouk proposal, although now with an entrance to a supermarket.

The address of the buildings to their respective street frontages is considered satisfactory.

3.4 Massing & Materials

The Taouk proposal contains multiple 'podium forms' framed with aluminium cladding and vertical blades in dark and light shades, and curved upper forms glazed in clear, teal and spandrel glass. Other materials include rendered concrete and travertine tile.

The Ascui & Co. April 2019 proposal utilises aluminium façade frames in black and charcoal on the upper floors, and 'zinc light' colour to building A. Lower floors are primarily glass wall cladding in clear and green, with concrete and tinted glass balustrades.

The Ascui & Co. April 2019 plans utilise a more consistent architectural language than the Taouk proposal. While there is a clear diversity across the series of structures, there is a homogenous materiality and use of articulation that unites the four building forms. This consistency and restraint reinforces the sense of congregation in the buildings seen within the streetscape.

A concise palette of materials is juxtaposed in composition within each building, distinguishing the upper and lower building forms. The office use building A utilises a familiar rhythm in vertical façade elements, though inverts the dominant tone of the residential buildings to clearly distinguish its purpose.

The tone and reflectivity of glazing is an important consideration in analysing the qualities of the proposed development. The Taouk plans show variegated glazing patterns across the upper buildings to provide visual interest where portions of the façade lack articulation. The Ascui & Co. April 2019 plans show a more subtle variation in glazing tones, which partner with regular vertical design elements and deep window reveals to break up the façade.

In addition to scale and materiality, the legibility of balconies and clear distinction of levels in buildings A, B and C assist the passer-by in understanding these as residential buildings. There is no such distinction between building use in the Taouk proposal which uses a discernibly commercial architectural style.

The elevations show a recessed 'waist' that will be read in abutting streets as a subtle means of breaking down the building volumes into smaller components. These components are sufficiently cohesive and read as a single building composition. Given the height of these structures at 8 storeys or less, this is considered a very suitable design response to the precinct and adjoining public realm.

The general massing and material choices of the Ascui & Co. April 2019 plans will work successfully in this location. Some refinements are recommended in the consideration of the urban design merits at 4.3 and 4.4.

3.5 Landscaping

A key contribution to the regeneration of this precinct is the ability of the new architectural forms to work within the landscape of the site and the public realm.

No detailed landscaping plan was provided with the Taouk plans however some inferences can be made by landscaping shown on the architectural plans. Plans and 3D perspectives from this proposal show intermittent canopy trees along Whitehorse and Railway Roads with low height containerised plantings and ground landscaping wherever possible at street frontages.

Condition 1(f) of the planning permit issued in March 2019 requested a public realm improvement plan detailing landscaping and treatment of Whitehorse Road and Railway Road public realm areas. A landscape and public realm improvement plan dated 21 March 2019 has been produced by MDG Landscape Architects along with the Ascui & Co. April 2019 proposal.

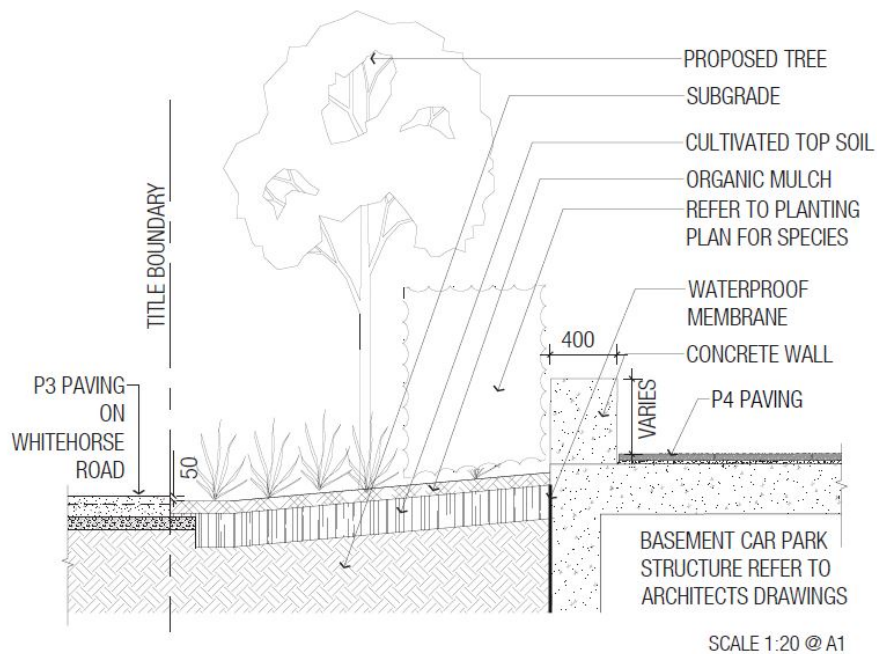
The landscape plan by MDG addresses statement 2 of condition 1(f) of the permit; requiring the continuation of Railway Road street tree plantings to complement existing treatments to the west and within the Blackburn Activity Centre. Mature Eucalyptus street trees are emblematic of this area of Blackburn as a whole. There are mature examples of various species seen on the verges and median strip of Whitehorse Road to the east and west of the subject site, as shown in Figure 3. These mature trees prefigure the transition from the *Megamile* precinct into the Blackburn Activity Centre and beyond to leafy Blackburn.



Figure 3 Mature Eucalyptus trees in the Whitehorse Road median strip east of subject site

The landscape plan nominates consistently planted *Eucalyptus Melliodora* along the Railway Road interface complimented by additional smaller trees. The landscape plan shows *Angophora Costata* (Smooth Barked Apple Myrtle) ground plantings along the Whitehorse Road interface. If

these reach the estimated mature height of 12m they will complement the existing Eucalypts along Whitehorse Road and ensure the proposal is in keeping with the leafy character of Blackburn. Guaranteeing the feasibility of street tree plantings is critical and the landscape plans prepared by MDG consider this, as shown in Figure 4 below. Street trees planted adjacent to the basement structure must be able to reach the height of nearby street trees and provide a pedestrian friendly scale to the street wall of the proposed buildings.



DETAIL 4 - TREE PLANTING IN DEEP SOIL ZONE AT WHITEHORSE ROAD INTERFACE - TYPICAL DETAIL

Figure 4. Street tree planting in 'deep soil zone' from MDG landscape plans

It should also be noted that the subject proposal includes a containerised garden bed on level 1 within the recess separating buildings A and B. The landscape plan nominates species of up to 6x10m mature size for this use. Should these trees reach maturity, they will provide a pleasant outlook for office workers and contribute to the visual interface between office and residential uses.

The Landscape Plan foreshadowed by MDG will answer the important design response requirement of integrating the built form with the public realm, of which there is already a strong contribution made by earlier plantings of Eucalypts in adjacent streets.

3.6 Engaging the Locality

Local planning policy understands the importance of this site in complimenting the existing character of nearby areas, while fostering the emerging character of this transitional location. This emerging character is exemplified by the growing number of mixed use developments concentrated in the Residential Growth Zone between 160 Whitehorse Road and the Blackburn Train Station. This scale of development encourages compact and walkable neighbourhoods in close proximity to shopping, schools and transport. The Ascui & Co. April 2019 plans are in line with this developing character and propose an efficient use of space in a well-connected location.

The Ascui & Co. April 2019 plans, coupled with the landscape plans, show a balanced response to the objectives of the Design and Development Overlay for this site. This is primarily achieved by proposing a gentle accentuation of building form on the eastern gateway part of the site, in an ensemble of buildings that will serve to compliment the emerging residential mixed use character of the area. The setting of these largely residential towers within the public realm is enhanced by the proposed planting. The consequence is a precinct that will develop a different character to the areas zoned C2Z where residential use is not permitted, and where the current functioning is low rise 'big box' retailing.

4 Are the Plans a Satisfactory Urban Design Response?

4.1 What does Policy Call for?

The policy framework guiding the strategy for this site supports a higher density, mixed-use development with a well-considered interaction with the public realm. This framework is built on the zoning of the site, and the Design and Development Overlay.

The Design and Development Overlay (DDO8) lays out what must be considered in the development of this site, including precise locational requirements. Firstly, as a gateway site, there is an obligation to create a visually prominent landmark. Larger format buildings are encouraged, though with thoughtful planning of parking and access to maximise the activation of street frontages. The design of public and private realms through considerate architectural and landscape treatments must complement the unique character of Whitehorse Road and create a quality pedestrian environment.

The subject site lies within the Commercial 1 Zone (C1Z) distinct from the Commercial 2 Zone to the east and Industrial 1 Zone to the south. Other than distinguishing the area from the *Megamile*'s consistent scale of 'big box' retail, the C1Z functions in this instance as a mixed use zone, allowing residential as an 'as of right' use. The C1Z is performing here as an intermediary between commercial and industrial character, and the character of the General Residential Zone to the north and the Neighbourhood Residential Zone to the south.

The role of this site within the C1Z and in achieving the goals of the DDO8 informs the following urban design objectives:

- Provide a density of residential use appropriate to the scale of the commercial zone.
- Enhance the existing landscape character of Whitehorse Road and of Blackburn with significant street plantings and integrated landscaping.
- Create a landmark development signalling the transition between the *Megamile* and the Blackburn Activity Centre, with an emphasised visual prominence at the eastern edge of the site.

This report has acknowledged that the changes made in the Ascui & Co. April 2019 plans are satisfactory in terms of:

- Building height
- Site Layout
- Street frontage address
- Massing and materials
- Landscaping and;
- Engagement with the locality

Urban design matters that should be addressed before the Ascui & Co April 2019 plans are approved are as follows:

4.2 Building 'D' Roof Form

The Ascui & Co. April 2019 proposal includes a raked roof form on the roof level of building D, designed to contain the lift overrun and roof top plant. While the structure, material and even size of the service cover are not nominated on the plans, it appears to play a part in the formation of overall prominence in building D and so warrants discussion.

The design of this element aims to allow it to disappear in perspective, avoiding the addition of further height where absolute height is in question. The form shown in the plans achieves the masking of plant, but is not perceived as another storey.

It could be argued that this is an unnecessary tactic, and that a roof top form is an opportunity to further elaborate on the landmark potential of the eastern end of the development. This is especially so given that the sequence of height that distinguished the eastern building in the Taouk proposal has been flattened. A roof top form that is more prominent and deliberate may be of more benefit to the proposal than seeking a modest alternative for this location.

4.3 Definition of Buildings A and B

The recessed area between buildings A and B of the Ascui & Co. April 2019 plans requires consideration on whether a satisfactory visual distinction is achieved between the office use and residential use. These two buildings, which were separate in the Taouk plans, appear to have been amalgamated to increase the available floor space for office use.

The recessed area is 6.4m deep and 14.15m wide, and in north elevation appears to be fully glazed. As mentioned in the discussion of landscaping, planting will be introduced within the recess on level 1 to emulate the courtyard design in the Taouk plans and provide a pleasant outlook for north facing offices.

As this recessed area is shallow relative to the size of the building as a whole, and is almost the same height as the residential building C, it is easy to understand that the buildings are in fact linked when viewed from Whitehorse Road. However there are a number of options to provide for some attenuation of this link in a visual sense.

As with the whole of the building, the glazing type is important. Glazing within the recessed section should be of low-reflectivity and uniform colour to appear as a distinct break or void in the sequence of building forms when viewed from Whitehorse Road. It would be prudent to have a sample of the glazing supplied to Council for approval.

Secondly, while it would result in a small loss of floor space, setting the recessed section of the uppermost floor back would allow the recess, through the effect of perspective, to be understood as being lower than building B from street level. Alternatively, the recess in the upper floor could be converted into a terrace, which would reduce the bulk of the recessed area, while benefitting from a north-facing aspect. Neither of these measures would have a significant effect on the layout or circulation within level 5.

4.4 Treatment of Concrete Walls

The separation between office building A and residential building C can be seen on the south elevation as a full height, blank concrete wall. This wall functions as a buffer between the office use and residential use and limits overlooking into west facing bedrooms and balconies. This is an undesirable outcome, both as an outlook for west-facing apartments and from the Railway Road aspect. One of two solutions could be employed. Firstly, the wall could be patterned or textured in order create visual interest at a scale readable from street level. Figure 5 below shows some examples of this technique. Alternatively, south-facing highlight windows could be introduced to the office area, to reduce the visual dominance of the concrete wall while avoiding overlooking into adjacent apartments.

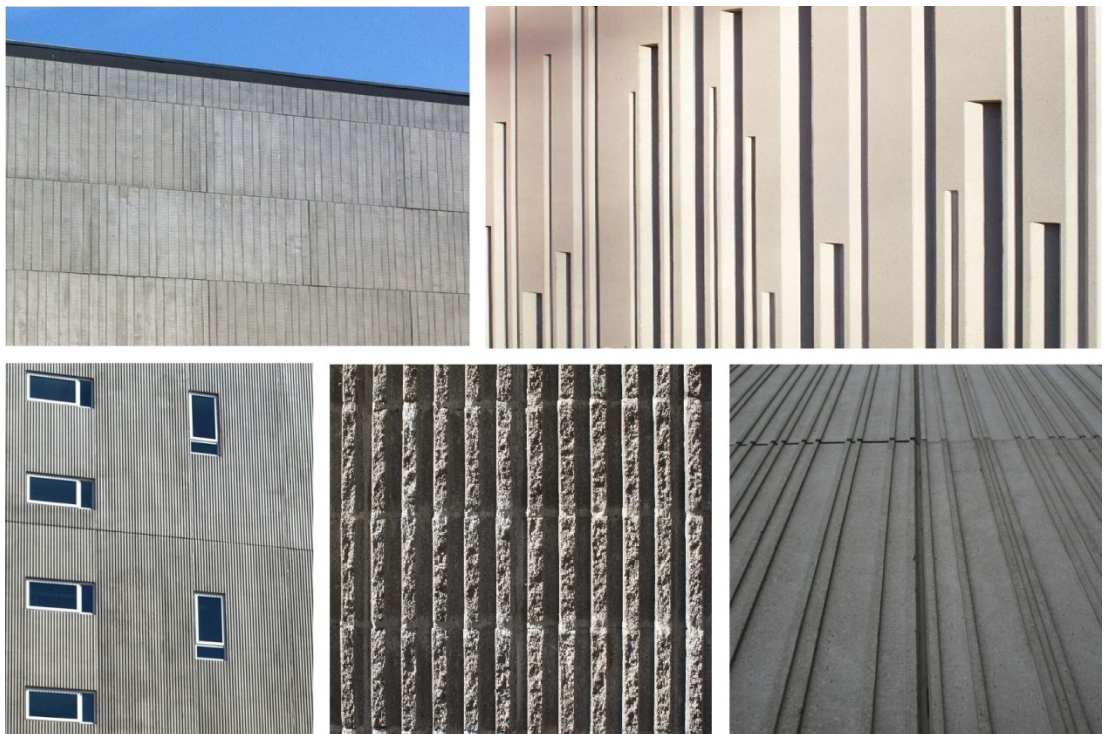


Figure 5. Examples of concrete textures in precast elements

A second blank concrete wall proposed on the western boundary of the site is approximately 17m wide and runs from ground level to level 4 inclusive. Building to the boundary at this abuttal provides for maximum office floor space while anticipating future development on consolidated lots to the west. While this is a reasonable solution to the planning of this interface, **the treatment of the wall itself needs to be considered.**

The west elevation of building A in the subject plans show that this wall has been chosen to host internally illuminated signage of approximately 8m by 9m. This application is subject to the objectives of Clause 22.02 of the Whitehorse Planning Scheme, which aims to prevent signage from becoming a dominant element in the built form it is located in and be sympathetic to the

function and aesthetics of the location. While commercial promotion epitomizes the street front character of the *Megamile* precinct to the east, this development site has a call to transition away from this character in to the residential character in the heart of Blackburn.

Clause 52.05 of the Victorian Planning Provisions lists the decision guidelines used in determining an application for signage, and importantly these include '*the compatibility of the proposed sign with the existing or desired future character of the area*'. This development is to set a benchmark for future residential development in the area. It ought to be distinguished by a cohesiveness of built form and well-considered street frontages and avoid the visual clutter of commercial signage.

Commercial signage on this wall is not recommended. There is an opportunity to make use of the west-facing boundary wall to further the ambition of the development as a landmark site. A large-scale artwork that represents the character and 'natural charm' of Blackburn is preferred. The benefits of such a piece of public art in instilling a sense of place and character to the site will respond more effectively to the aspiration of the Design and Development Overlay and Activity Centre Urban Design Framework.

5 Recommendations

The Ascui & Co. April 2019 plans present a thoughtful design response to the objectives set out in the local policy framework. The proposal is a well-considered strategy addressing the particular requirements and opportunities of this unique site. Recommendations for refinements to the plans are as follows:

- **Support an emphasis of built form at the intersection of Whitehorse Road and Railway Road by encouraging the design of a roof top element on Building D that contributes more effectively to the desire for a ‘gateway’ architectural response at this location.**
- **Ensure that proposed landscaping treatments, in particular the proposed street tree plantings, are able to reach the maturity indicated in the landscape plan and form part of the broader landscape character of the area.**
- **Require the submission of a materials board, detailing in particular the glazing types proposed to ensure low-reflectivity subject to NABERS assessment.**
- **Improve the attenuation of the link between Buildings A and B by setting back the upper floor of the recessed section of office, so that it becomes visually submissive when seen by pedestrians on the south side of Whitehorse Road.**
- **Request a specification of concrete texturing to be used for the large walls proposed on the south and west elevations of Building A.**
- **Request a large scale urban art work for the concrete boundary wall on the west elevation of Building A in place of the proposed outdoor advertising sign. Specify that the work should reference the landscape character of wider Blackburn.**