

Google abandoned the Bays Precinct for an obvious reason - a lack of public transport options, writes Jacob Saulwick

In Sydney terms, the waterside residents of Glebe, Rozelle and Lilyfield might be considered blessed: they wake to the breeze of the harbour and they live, as the crow flies, a mere swoop into town.

But this amenity, for some time now, has come at a price. Residents of the so-called Bays Precinct in recent years have had to live exposed to the swirl of property industry patois that tends to emerge in this city where there's a buck to be made. As there is around the Bays, one of the last semi-industrial stretches of Sydney's inner harbour and, therefore, a developer's water-front dream.

"There is great potential between Barangaroo and the Bays Precinct to really remake the western half of the harbour, to use it for residential and commercial purposes, for public transport and quite possibly for entertainment and events," Labor's Kristina Keneally said of the area in 2008.

"We will be going to market... to turn this power station into a technology hub that will drive the future of not just Sydney and NSW but I believe the national economy," another former premier, Mike Baird, declared in 2015 at the disused White Bay Power Station on the border of Rozelle and Balmain.

"We are going to have an incredible precinct, with huge opportunities for people to live, work and play and it's something that we are very proud to be delivering."

But as with so many seemingly obvious initiatives, extracting more use out of the 80-odd hectares of the Bays Precinct - mostly government-owned land that includes the former power station, the Rozelle Rail Yards, as well as Glebe Island and White Bay itself - has proven intensely difficult.

The announcement this week that the technology giant Google had abandoned plans to establish an Australian base in a refurbished White Bay Power Station was a striking embarrassment for a famously business-friendly state government.

One of the world's largest companies wanted to concentrate its growing workforce of thousands in an area in which the government insisted would be a technology hub. But Premier Gladys Berejiklian's government failed to seal the deal.

According to Berejiklian, the reason Google opted out of the Bays was because of the disturbance when a WestConnex motorway interchange and potentially a metro station were built in the area.

"When you're moving a large number of people to a location, having those disruptive elements was the biggest deterrent for them," Berejiklian says.

Berejiklian's explanation is too cute, or simply incorrect. The reason Google declined to develop its base there is the obvious one: there are as yet no decent transport options for thousands of staff to easily get to and from the area. The Bays might look close to the city as the crow flies, but it's serviced by inadequate and overcrowded roads.

For some, however, the failure to secure Google's Australian base at White Bay could be a trigger to re-think how development around the Bays might proceed.

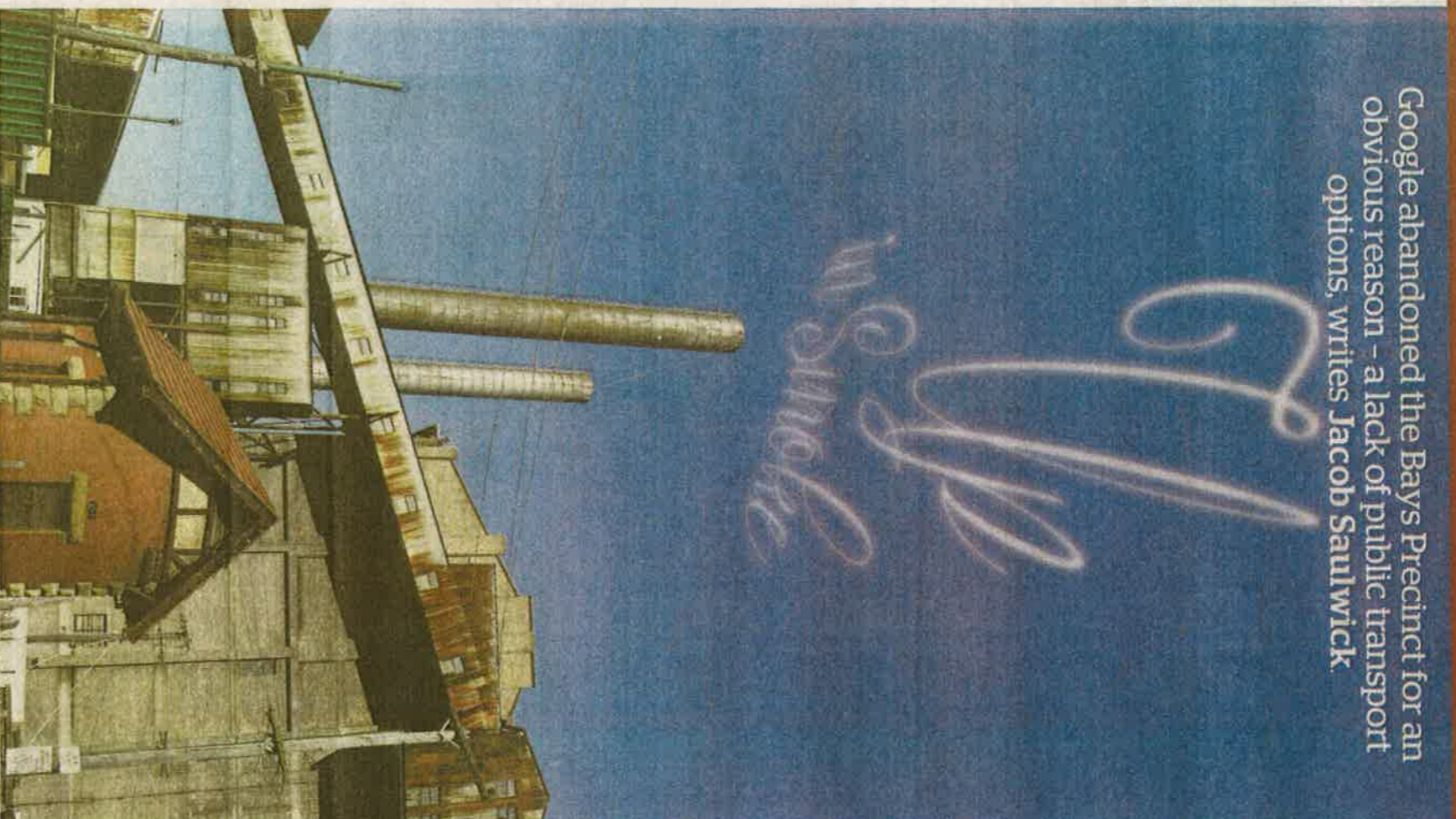
The government has, for instance, indicated that within the next decade it would build a metro line shuttling between central Sydney and Parramatta, possibly with a stop at the Bays.

But Sydney University has already started lobbying for a station to be located at its Darlington campus, which would probably have to come at the expense of the Bays.

For David Borger, the western Sydney director of the Sydney Business Chamber, the merit in Sydney University's idea is that it would concentrate the government's efforts on areas where activity already occurs, sparing authorities the more ambitious task of creating an innovation hub out of nothing.

"The idea of governments trying to force things is a bit silly," says Borger.

If a metro line ran through Sydney University, Borger says, it would make sense



to connect it past Parramatta to the tens of thousands of medical and medical research jobs around Westmead.

"Over at Westmead it is worth taking a punt, because it is the biggest medical agglomeration in Australia really, and it does have the potential to attract other jobs in biotech and like industries," says Borger.

"If the government doesn't develop the Bays Precinct any time soon it's not the end of the world," he says.

Tim Williams, the chief executive of advocacy group the Committee for Sydney, expressed sympathy for UrbanGrowth, the government-owned development agency

charged with remaking the Bays area.

"Many problems happen because politicians rush and make announcements before analysis or before the system is ready," says Williams.

"In this case a key condition of success for an innovation district - good public transport access - was not in place. If that is delivered by the public sector I am confident the market can over time deliver the world-class outcomes envisaged in this key location."

It is not as if the government was not warned. David Pitchford, the former chief executive of UrbanGrowth, said in 2015 that

the Bays would be a "disaster" without major public transport initiatives. The transport Pitchford was referring to was most likely the metro proposal.

Nevertheless, the failure of the Google deal has also put the spotlight on the role of UrbanGrowth. UrbanGrowth has been without a chief since late last year - a remarkable interregnum for what is purportedly one of the key housing agencies for a government nominating housing as its primary focus.

UrbanGrowth was created in 2012 to combine the functions of Landcom, which had focused on land release in the urban fringe, and the Sydney Metropolitan Development Authority, which had tried to encourage large-scale developments close to the city.

"The approach of targeted government intervention in the property market is already a feature in every other state and the NSW industry has been crying out for such

"The idea of governments trying to force things is a bit silly."

**David Borger,
Sydney Business Chamber**

an organisation," the then minister for planning Brad Hazzard said at the time.

But last month Berejiklian, in effect, split UrbanGrowth into its original parts. The Premier would take control of the large-scale inner-city development sites such as the Bays Precinct, while Landcom would stay under the Planning Minister's control.

The split was in response to a government perception that UrbanGrowth was struggling to meet the expectations created for it. This perception is echoed by parts of the property industry.

"UrbanGrowth has gone away from what they do best," says Steven Mann, the chief executive of the Urban Development Institute of Australia.

"Ideally we see them getting back into that development trouble-shooting role where they agglomerate sites, co-ordinate infrastructure delivery and remove development constraints before wholesaling developable land to the private sector," says Mann.

Chris Johnson, from the developer group the Urban Taskforce, says there's a "a bit of a feeling there was a lot of talk and not quite enough action".

"I would have assumed that an organisation like that would have cut through with drive and made things happen, but it appears that that's not the case," says Johnson.

Around the Bays, to be sure, UrbanGrowth has not been idle. It has negotiated the intricate task of securing agreements with the owners and lessees of the Fish Markets for a redevelopment. The existing Fish Markets will be replaced by a new facility closer to the head of Blackwattle Bay, a designer for which will be selected in May.

The existing Fish Markets area, meanwhile, is intended to be redeveloped for housing, retail and a "waterfront promenade" across from Wentworth Park.

How these developments will fit in with the rest of the area, and with much-needed transport improvements, remains to be seen.

"UrbanGrowth is the co-ordinating organisation across the Bays revitalisation," Barry Mann, UrbanGrowth's head of projects, told ABC Radio this week.

"That means we then talk to all the other areas of government and coordinate how that master plan and long term outcome will work. But that doesn't mean we understand every other bit of government policy across the city."

One does not need to turn to Google to suspect that might be a problem.



What is and what will never be: White Bay power station (above) and Google's unrealised plans. Main photo: Tamara Dean