

Rhodes: Major developments transforming industrial land into mini city

It was “one of the most contaminated places on earth” but developers say it is morphing into “the most successful” urban renewal precinct in the nation. See its transformation and what’s planned.

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Rhodes, the once-pungent peninsula suburb in Sydney’s inner west, was a toxic-filled industrial hub until the 1980s but its breakneck growth since the turn of the century has transformed it into one of the city’s most densely populated urban renewal precincts.

In 1917, Lewis Berger & Sons began production of white lead, linseed oil and paint required for the Sydney Harbour Bridge, from Alfred St at Rhodes.

“Rhodes has gone from where people held their noses on the train because of the stench from the industrial area and now it’s a multi-awarding community ... it’s a huge transformation as an urban renewal project,” Billbergia development director Rick Graf said.

Billbergia is the key developer in the suburb, which Mr Graf declared would be the best in Australia.

“If you think about the industrial history of Rhodes, it was one of the most contaminated places on earth; they made Agent Orange for the Vietnam War ... it was terribly polluted.



Homebush Bay circa 1928 showing the Rhodes Peninsula.

“It’s probably the most successful urban renewal project in NSW and when it’s completed it will be the most successful urban renewal project in Australia.”

In the late 1990s, property developer Lang Walker and the Walker Corporation played a pivotal role in the redevelopment of the Rhodes Peninsula and purchased contaminated land for redevelopment from ICI Chemicals, Orica and Berger Paints.



Developer Lang Walker showing Public Works Minister Morris Iemma the plans for the Rhodes peninsula in 2002.

The late real estate tycoon decontaminated the land, obtained rezoning against strong opposition, set all the planning instruments in place and undertook what was at the time the largest new urban shopping centre in Sydney – Walker’s Rhodes Waterside Shopping Centre.

Walker designed and drove the masterplan for the entire Rhodes Peninsula with Cox Richardson leading the urban planning role.



Developer Lang Walker at his Rhodes building development in November 2003. Picture: Frank Violi

Walker's massive decontamination spanned 26 hectares, leading it to be awarded the Case World Clean Up Award for the work in 2003.

Despite then Premier Bob Carr's objections, Walker secured rezoning of the whole peninsula in 2001 and, in 2004, Walker built the first residential development along Shoreline Drive.

It was also behind delivering the first community park and foreshore reserve between 2003 and 2007 – an area that extends to more than 50 per cent of the peninsula.

The first developer to arrive at Rhodes after Walker was Meriton Apartments, which undertook its first project in 2007 followed by Mirvac in 2008.



Billbergia development director Rick Graf and group director Joseph Kinsella.

In 2016, Rhodes had a population of about 12,000.

Rhodes and Wentworth Point have a combined 30,000 residents, making the peninsula one of the most densely-populated communities in Australia.

At Rhodes, Billbergia has completed 15 residential projects in the past decade, when it has delivered homes for more than 7000 residents.

At Rhodes East, where lower-density housing exists, another 7000 inhabitants will occupy high-rise developments at streets including Marquet St and Blaxland Rd.



The Bennelong Bridge between Wentworth Point and Rhodes.

The towers will spring up on land Billbergia has acquired and amalgamated in Rhodes since 2005. In 2014, the state government and Canada Bay Council earmarked Rhodes as a priority precinct, with the potential to house an additional 10,000 residents.

The government's Rhodes Place Strategy states that by 2035, it aims to deliver 4200 new homes, up to 1110 new jobs, a new primary school, a new ferry wharf and upgrades to the train station, 2.3 hectares of open space including a foreshore park and promenade on the Parramatta River.

Here are some developments reshaping Rhodes.

1-9 Marquet St

A \$104m development will rise to 32 storeys and comprise 214 apartments after it sealed the approval from the state government's Sydney Eastern City Planning Panel last year.

The project includes the demolition of existing buildings and includes a basement carpark.

23-29 Marquet St

A 42-storey mixed-use development with affordable housing and a basement carpark is planned for this block, where public open space is also planned.

9 Blaxland Rd and 424 Concord Rd

Tall orders are proposed for this 48-storey Billbergia project which includes affordable housing, retail and commercial uses along with 313 residential apartments including a 15 per cent affordable housing component. To be called Harmony – Rhodes Central East, the Billbergia development is part of the state’s affordable housing reforms project.



The infinity swimming pool at the Harmony tower.

GroupGSA has designed the tower as a “vertical forest” that will “contribute to redefining the Rhodes peninsula with elevated architecture”. The apartments are to be a mix of one and five-bedroom dwellings above a mixed-use podium with a cafe, a rooftop infinity pool, an alfresco dining area on level 20 and 12 levels of carparking and an extension to flow into Churchill Tucker Reserve.

The new building will sit between Rhodes train station, Blaxland Rd, Churchill Tucker Reserve, McIlwaine Park and Brays Bay. The state government is still assessing the project.



The development is on the waterfront.



The proposed tower for 9-13 Blaxland Rd at Rhodes.

15-17 and 25-27 Blaxland Rd and 440-442 Concord Rd

Ecove Group has proposed a 93-bed seniors' village over the three-level podium, a new fire station and 348 units across the two towers reaching 17 and 21 storeys for the development to be known as the [Fire Station Towers](#).

There will be shops and a four-level basement carpark with spaces for 431 cars, 15 motorcycles and 840 bicycles.

The proposal would overlook McIlwaine Park, revitalise an underused precinct near Rhodes train station and generate jobs.

But it has come under fire from Canada Bay Council for a string of problems, including a failure to adequately address critical concerns such as the forecast traffic at the Concord Rd and Mary St East intersection.

The developers will need to revise plans before advancing to the next stage of the project, which the state government's Planning Department will ultimately determine.



The seniors' village is on the podium of the Fire Station Towers.

6-8 Cavell Ave and 65-75 Blaxland Rd

Another affordable and private housing proposal, Cavell Ave plans were designed in an effort to address the state's housing crisis.

The two-building project comprises 13 and 14 storey blocks and five terrace houses, totalling 183 dwellings. A total of 26 will be classed as affordable dwellings and 190 underground parking spaces.

A design excellence competition concluded in December and Billbergia is now consulting with the community about the project.

2a Llewellyn St

Billbergia is also planning a vast development at Llewellyn St, with four apartment towers ranging from 12 to 26 storeys with carparking will be constructed, along with affordable abodes in the mix. The development will stretch into 3B – 57 Blaxland Rd, 2A, 2B and 2D Cavell Ave and 448-458 Concord Rd.



A Billbergia development is planned for Leeds St, Rhodes.

25-27 Leeds St

Billbergia will allocate 15 per cent of its residential projects in Rhodes to affordable housing and this mammoth six-storey development will contribute to the mix.

The towers will range from 10 to 18 storeys, carparking and will have links to the foreshore park and promenade.

Demand to serve influx of residents

While the suburb is no longer battling the waft of toxic waste along the waterfront, the community is still lobbying for more services to cope with its soaring population.

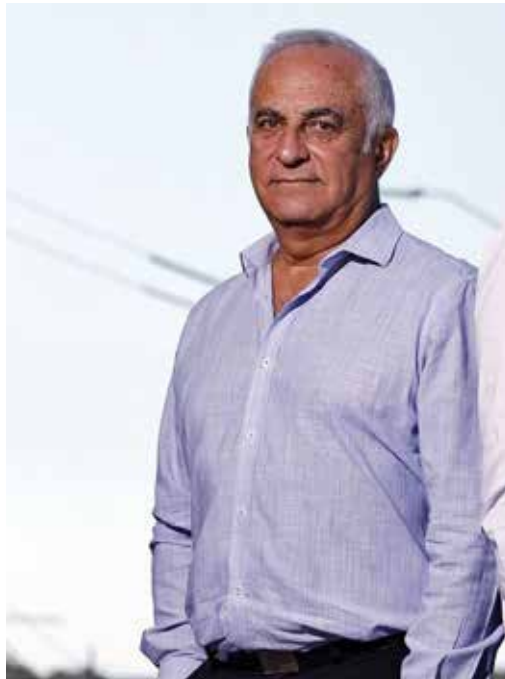
Billbergia's contributions into Rhodes include the Rhodes Central Shopping Centre completed in 2021, the Bennelong Bridge that links to Wentworth Point, the 1.2-hectare Phoenix Park and Baylink Shuttle.

Canada Bay Council and the developer have delivered the soon-to-open \$97m Rhodes Recreation Centre, The Connection community centre and an upgrade to McIlwaine Park.

Billbergia plans to spend more than \$150m in services for future developments.

“The population is growing but the infrastructure has been there early,” Mr Graf said.

“If you go to most other suburbs going through rapid development, very few would have the open space and infrastructure of Rhodes.”



Canada Bay Mayor Michael Megna. Picture: Sam Ruttyn



Bennelong Bridge when it opened in 2016. Picture: John Appleyard

However, question marks hang over big-ticket services the government has pledged but not delivered.

That includes a ferry wharf that was due to be completed in 2019, Rhodes East Public School, an upgrade to the train station, the northern line and improvements to the intersection of Concord Rd and Homebush Bay Drive.

“With Rhodes continuing to grow, it is essential that the state government fulfils these commitments,” Canada Bay Mayor Michael Megna said.

“Lifting the current dwelling cap – designed to limit development until infrastructure is in place – without addressing these needs would place further strain on the suburb.

“As one of Sydney’s highest-density communities, Rhodes must be supported by effective infrastructure delivery to remain a liveable, sustainable and well-connected place to call home.”

Billbergia understands plans for the wharf have been dumped permanently but the council is still lobbying for the government to deliver the facility.

The government did not respond to queries about the wharf and school.

‘A fatality waiting to happen’: Residents riled up over hoons, pedestrian safety

Rhodes residents and business owners love the convenience of their suburb with shops, parks and public transport at their fingertips but overwhelmingly name pedestrian safety as its main vice.

The foreshore turns into a speedway on Friday and Saturday nights when hoons with parade their motorbikes on the footpath Foreshore Park and gather around The Connection so they can clock up more views on TikTok.

“This is like a racetrack,” Cisca Sibbald said of Shoreline Drive.

“We’ve never seen any police cars here, which is really disappointing because it’s dangerous. It’s crazy.”

Her and partner Nick Mulveny constantly see “idiots that go flying” past the street while others have endured sleepless nights from the loud engines and exhausts.



Nick Mulveny and Cisca Sibbald at the notorious Shoreline Drive.



The Connection is a common hang out point at Rhodes but residents are furious over the noise.

“The cars and bikes are specifically designed to make the most noise as possible,” Mr Mulveny said.

“We’re on the 10th floor and we’ll have the windows closed and sometimes someone goes past and you can’t hear the TV.”

Pedestrian crossings are another hazard thanks to the soaring population and increased traffic.

One of the most dangerous crossings is at Walker St at the foot of the train station where it copes with heavy volumes of commuters, buses and trucks making their way to Rhodes Central.



The dangerous pedestrian crossing at Walker St Rhodes.

Billbergia vowed to build a pedestrian overpass connecting Rhodes Central to the train station a decade ago in a measure that would have averted gridlock.

However, residents are still waiting and witnessing “near misses”.

They not only blame Billbergia but Canada Bay Council which they say would refuse to pay for the maintenance of the walkway, to be called the Rhodes Pedestrian Bridge, if it did open.

While Billbergia has designed and won development approval for the bridge, no agreement between the council and Transport for NSW to fund the structure has been reached.

“Billbergia remains confident that an agreement will be reached between the parties that will allow the funding to be provided for the delivery of the pedestrian bridge in the foreseeable future,” a Billbergia spokeswoman said.



A sign to the train station points to where the overpass was expected to be built to connect Rhodes Central shopping centre to the train station.

But the public is sceptical and has “heard it all before”.

“It’s just got to the point where the residents are really upset and frustrated,” one resident, who wished to remain anonymous said.

“There’s just things that are simmering away.

“The traffic over the last year has increased significantly. If you come here on the weekend or peak time the traffic is atrocious. There’s hotspots around the suburb that are a fatality waiting to happen.”

The resident, who has lived at Rhodes with her husband for eight years, said the council had let them down.

Part of the problem is no councillor lives in the suburb, she said.

At Rhodes Waterside, Lilly’s Espresso & Cucina owner Michael Collister constantly witnesses illegal U-turns outside his busy cafe on Rider Blvd – the suburb’s “only” exit and entry point near another dicey pedestrian crossing.



Lilly's Espresso & Cucina owner Michael Collister outside his Rhodes cafe at Rider Blvd, which is a traffic black spot.

“I feel at that particular pedestrian crossing, somebody’s going to get hurt,” he said.

“I’ve seen the cars going across the pedestrian crossing. If someone gets injured that affects the credibility of the suburb.

“I want my customers to be safe because a lot of my customers are in these units – a lot of them walk to Lilly’s.



He wants his customers to feel safe.

Mr Collister was pleased after a recent community meeting with Burwood Police commander Christine McDonald was held at his cafe to address concerns over hoons and pedestrian safety.

More police will be sent to Rhodes particularly at night to crack down on hoons.

Residents have also suggested speed cameras and speed bumps.

Mr Collister says there needs to be more access points and wider access points to cater for the population influx.

“We just want to get safety done, we just want to see things happen. Talk is talk, action is action,” he said.

“It’s about the infrastructure, it’s also about the safety.

“It’s OK when there’s 10,000 people, now there’s 15,000 people, soon to be 20,000.”



Residents say the Marquet St pedestrian crossing can also be problematic.

Susmita Tamrakar loves the convenience and community feel of the suburb where she has lived with her husband for a year but one thing irks her.

“I’ll be honest, I’m sick of the noise,” she said.

“I think some people are revving in the street and singing in the middle of the night. That really gets on my nerves.”



Susmita Tamrakar.

Single mum Jessie Zhu is wary of the population influx.

“There’s too many apartments and construction, and the station is a bit overloaded, but it’s quite convenient, there’s a lot of shops and shopping centres around here,” she said.

She would also welcome the promised primary school for her son Lucas, 8, who attends Concord West Public School.



Rhodes stalwart Amba Bhai.

Amba Bhai, 80, has lived in her apartment for more than 20 years after she downsized from Putney when her husband died.

She declined her sons' offer to live in Vaucluse or the Gold Coast.

"I said 'no, I want to be independent' so he found me that place," she said.

"I love Rhodes. Everything is central like shopping, transport."

But she called for a pedestrian crossing at Shoreline Drive to protect children's safety.