Sydney is a city that has “lost its soul”, “ruined” by over-development, expensive real estate, and pokies. That’s according to Sydneysiders responding to academic Rohan Miller’s description of the city as “dreary” in last week’s Sun-Herald. Dr Miller, a senior lecturer at the University of Sydney Business School, blamed heavy-handed government policies for killing Sydney’s nightlife. The story struck a nerve with readers, with 179 comments in 24 hours, mostly agreeing with Dr Miller. There was a common feeling that over-regulation and relentless pursuit of profit had destroyed the city’s creative spirit and sense of fun. “We’ve been riding on that climate, natural beauty and the general decency of Sydney people since I was a little kid, many decades ago,” said a reader. “It’s a pity we allowed the overlords to steal and destroy everything else.”

Dr Miller this week said urban planners had failed to provide nightlife for Sydney’s growing population, with “no consideration for our need to play”. Policymakers don’t seem to be thinking about the needs of adults to be entertained away from their homes or local restaurants,” Dr Miller said.

A parliamentary report into the music and arts economy in NSW, released last week, found the sector was crushed by onerous regulations banning disco balls, DJs and dancing. The inquiry, chaired by the Christian Democrats MLC Paul Green, suggested the appointment of a minister for music among 60 recommendations to revive the ailing music industry.

Mr Green said the permanent closure of live music venues across the state, particularly in Sydney, was having a “devastating effect” on young musicians, Sydney’s cultural reputation and the overall experience of visitors to the city.

The City of Sydney, meanwhile, has a proposal to allow 24-hour trading in the CBD and encourage more nightlife venues on the city fringe.

Readers argued Sydneysiders are too financially squeezed to enjoy a good night out – and if they do head out, they find pokies instead of music, and no public transport. “After the vast majority of Sydney residents have paid the rent or mortgage, paid the bills and put some food on the table there is very little disposable income or energy left to head over into the city after dark,” one commenter said. In a common refrain, another said: “Sydney has been ruined over 30 years by poker machines and the consolidation of liquor licences to ever growing venues so they can have more and more of them. This has closed all the local pubs where communities gathered to socialise.”

Another said: “Sydney was a great place to grow up in but it lost its soul. Overcrowded roads, highrise after highrise, lack of infrastructure, huge burden of toll roads, and lack of foresight in building a sustainable and family/people-friendly environment.” But some disagreed: “Yeah the lockout laws need to be scrapped, but dreary is taking it a little too far. There’s still plenty to do in Sydney,” one commenter said.

Kat Dopper, Heaps Gay producer and Mardi Gras board member, said Sydney’s nightlife was changing and shifting away from areas such as Kings Cross and Darlington but “still very much alive”. “Venues are working harder to get people out earlier and are offering cultural events of a higher standard,” she said. “We’re also seeing more creativity in the structure of events, including the activation of non-traditional event spaces.”
City without a soul?
George St at night.
Photo: Brook
Mitchell