



West Australian
Thursday 18/3/2010
Page: 21
Section: General News
Region: Perth Circulation: 188,211
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 516.39 sq.cms.
Frequency: MTWTFS-

Brief: CFP(P)
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A tale of two cities that need to be integrated

Perth residents must speak up about the future of their city, **Marion Fulker** writes

At first glance, life in Perth seems pretty straightforward — we work in the city, we live in the suburbs and we play in-between. However when you delve just a little deeper, it is quickly apparent that those of us who live in Perth seem to exist in a dichotomy.

The things that we value the most about our city not only contradict themselves but also, to some degree, contradict how we position ourselves on a global scale.

Back in 2008, the Committee for Perth hosted a lunch where US-based expert Fred Kent asked our members, along with State and local government leaders and heads of community groups, to identify Perth's five best places, its five worst and five with the most opportunity.

The results themselves were not surprising. The places that we like best include our natural assets — our sandy beaches, the Swan River and Kings Park. We recognise that we have fantastic open spaces that should be preserved and celebrated.

Yet, the other areas that we also value highly are our energetic urban spaces. Fremantle, Subiaco, South Perth, Leederville and Victoria Park were all identified. They are seen as having real character because they are diverse, vibrant and safe, with

people oriented, outdoor yet intimate spaces. They have a mix of commercial, residential, modern and historical elements and offer a personal and familiar environment that Perth residents find attractive and reassuring and visitors seek in droves.

Therein lies the contradiction. We value our wide open spaces — we appreciate the expansive blue sky, we want accessible and healthy waterways and to continue to enjoy free and easy access to parklands — yet we also are attracted to the precincts that are urbane, cosmopolitan and at a human friendly scale.

It is ironic that what we truly treasure, despite our suburban lifestyle, are those intimate nooks that give our city personality and vibrancy.

The Perth metropolis is a small, contained central business district set in direct contrast to our sprawling suburbs and has evolved from a plan developed in the 1950s. Hepburn and Stephenson designed a concept based on four suburban corridors and a central business district and this has been implemented to the letter. And now we must ensure that we have a plan for the next 50 years, one that will see Perth grow and mature into a

contemporary city that pays respect to its past. In essence, the elements we most value about Perth now need to be integrated in a sustainable way into the Perth of the future.

Such development requires care and I suggest that presumptions should not be made on the best and worst of Perth without maintaining a focus on what we most value.

For example, in our survey Northbridge rated as the second worst place in Perth just behind Perth Airport. Northbridge's reputation is well established and in some senses both undeniable and indefensible. Yet it was also identified as one of the places with the most potential. OK, we have a lot of work to do, but if you strip out the social problems, Northbridge has many of the same elements as the other urban environments we like and thus has enormous potential.

I believe there is huge potential for the salvation of Northbridge and by using the city centre as the key we may be able to create a link between the two currently opposing values of open spaces and intimate urbanity. The city centre is critical. It already has some great places — our survey identified King Street, Wolf Lane and Central Park as among the best spaces. Yet what is underdeveloped is the potential of



the waterfront and we are assured by the Premier recently putting his job on the line in terms of turning plans into reality.

The Northbridge Link project will finally bring the city centre and Northbridge together and we need to ensure that the human scale of Northbridge and its history are not subsumed into the city but rather a nice complement to it which marries with the current revitalisation of the Perth Cultural Centre.

Over the next decade or so these three projects will totally transform Perth city as we know it and create a more cohesive core that offers open as well as intimate spaces.

Yet what of the broader

development? Is the Government in touch with what the citizens of Perth value to ensure this integration is achieved through the metropolitan area or are the suburbs forever relegated to being non-competitive with the places we love?

While many politicians are confident that big city making projects will be enough to shake our dullsville tag, the truth is that there must be a long-term plan for Perth that sees more amenities dotted throughout our urban sprawl. This plan needs to be accompanied by changes to many of the laws that govern us. Until we can offer flexible shopping hours, a dynamic arts and cultural scene and approvals

processes that support and encourage these, we may not get a vibrant city by the time we are celebrating our bicentenary in 2029.

If we are to develop the future city that will be most prized by its citizens, should we not perhaps be asking them what they value most? Our survey already elicited some revealing trends. Perhaps if similar questions were asked more broadly, a clear picture would emerge about what the people of Perth value most about their city and this would help create a mandate for change.

Marion Fulker is chief executive of Committee for Perth, a member-funded think tank focused on the Perth of the future



Two sides: Kings Park, and Northbridge, below. Picture: Jithin Sankar Sankaran Kutty

