

Opinion Piece

Five of Perth's best and worst

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 somewhat of 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 placemaking expert, Fred Kent asked representatives from our membership along with state and local government leaders and heads of community groups to identify Perth's five best places, its five worst and the 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. People value the large imprint that our natural landscape makes on our metropolitan area and appreciate the sense of space that it creates.

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 as some of the best places in greater Perth. 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 the citizens of Perth find attractive and reassuring and visitors seek out in droves.

Therein lies the contradiction. On one hand we value our wide open spaces - we appreciate the expansive blue sky, we want more accessible and healthy waterways and to continue to enjoy free and easy access to our parklands yet we also are immediately attracted to the few precincts that are urbane, cosmopolitan and at a human friendly scale. It is ironic that what we truly treasure, despite our suburban-based lifestyle, are those intimate nooks that give our city personality, vibrancy, a sense of place.

The current setting of the Perth metropolis is a small, contained CBD set in direct contrast to our sprawling suburbs and has evolved from a plan developed back 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 fifty years, one that will see Perth grow and mature into a modern day contemporary city that pays respect to its past. In essence the elements that 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 areas 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. Similar to the five best places, these results came as no surprise. Northbridge's current reputation is well established and in some senses both undeniable and undefendable. 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 that cause us concern, Northbridge has many of the same elements as the other urban environments we like and therefore it is fair to say that it has enormous potential. This is good news for the future and bodes well for a raft of other inner city locations – Highgate, Burswood, and parts of East Perth to name a few.

I believe that 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 currently 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 layers of history are not subsumed into the city but rather a nice complement to it which marries perfectly with the current revitalisation of the Perth Cultural Centre. Over the next decade or so these three projects alone will totally transform Perth city as we know it and create a more cohesive core that offers plenty of open as well as intimate spaces.

Yes the Government is committed to the development of the waterfront and it seems that the low rise, community focused style that the Premier is intent on may just reinforce the two major elements that those who live in Perth value the most – space and a sense of the urbane. Yet what of the broader development? Is the government in touch with what the citizens of Perth value so as to ensure this integration is achieved through the broader 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's future that sees more amenity 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 citizens and visitors alike 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 bi-centenary 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, though small in scale, 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 capital city and this would assist in creating a mandate that would guide future metropolitan expansion because we will have a shared view about what is not up for change whilst understanding what is.

Word count: 1121

Marion Fulker

CEO

Committee for Perth, a member funded think tank focused on the Perth of the future.

March 2010