From July to August 2013, CEO of the Committee for Perth, Marion Fulker, undertook an international study tour to examine how other cities were addressing a number of urban issues, including development around transport infrastructure and the important issue of affordable housing. She also took the opportunity to visit cultural centres and experiences and found a few gems along the way.

She met with civic and corporate leaders, planners and academics in nine cities to get ‘on the ground’ experiencing of each city and its responses to population growth.

The lessons that Perth can learn from this research are many. While a full findings report is being prepared what follows is a summary of one insight from each city that has lingered longer and stronger than the rest.
Los Angeles

Los Angeles can present somewhat of an enchanting perspective of its zest for life and ‘can do’ attitude.

However its urban sprawl and car dominance gives Perth the most stark awakening of what sort of city we could become as our population grows. If Perth continues to house most of our population out in the suburbs with the car as the primary mode of transport we could have LA type congestion which prevails regardless of time or day of the week.

San Francisco

The lack of affordable housing in San Francisco is on everyone’s minds given that it has some of the most expensive housing in the country. According to website Numbeo, the median value of owner occupied housing in San Fran is $854,546 and the median rental of a 3 bedroom apartment costs $4,733 per month in the inner city and $3,022 in the suburbs. The cost of housing is very high when the median house-hold income is reported to be $4,543 per month after tax. As a comparison, Perth’s figures are $500,000; $3,200; $2,185; and $4,500 respectively. The lack of affordable product affects all but a few including professionals with tertiary qualifications so it is a lesson for us in terms of looking after our community and our competitiveness internationally.

Seattle

Seattle, like most major cities in the Pacific North West, is committed to being green. The investment by the city, state and private sector in expanding its bus and rail networks is extensive. They have an alignment between transport investment and changes to land-use zonings that promotes density and affordable housing around the infrastructure which is sound. However there is a time lag between the investment and development and Perth needs to be mindful of finding our own solutions to ensure that density is achieved in a timely manner both for market and rental products across all price points.

Vancouver

I have been fortunate enough to visit Vancouver a few times in the past decade and have watched it transform into one of the world’s most liveable cities. The density downtown has been achieved through a focus on mixed use developments with active ground planes and podium style towers which has become known as the ‘Vancouver style’. However instead of rolling out more of the same the Olympic Village project across the creek has been designed to offer urban living at medium height and scale with density and amenity that is very family, dog and aged friendly. Two very different urban living options.

Boston

The role that Boston played in gaining independence from Britain is steeped in the city’s culture and psyche yet it is the universities with their large student populations that keep it feeling fresh and young. Richard Weller told me that 55 million people live in between the geographic area between Washington, DC, NY, Boston and Philadelphia and that ideas are constantly swimming around. Boston, with Harvard and MIT, is a centrifugal force in that ideas generate and flow. With a billion people in our time zone, we should make more of the intellect in our region.
As Chair of the Heritage Council of Western Australia I have seen a lot of fine architecture but in Chicago there is so much of it that just about every historic building is exquisite. Daniel Burnham, Charles Atwood and other architects have left such a legacy of design elegance which keeps on getting new life through adaptation. The Chicago Architects Foundation, through their many daily walking tours, bring life to the history of the city that shows off not only the great building exteriors but also the highly crafted interiors by Louis Comfort Tiffany of Tiffany Co and the many other artisans who have made Chicago such a visually stunning city.

Chicago

New York is a city with a reputation that has waxed and waned over the decades and this time around it wasn’t as good as my previous visits. Admittedly August isn’t the best time of year to visit because of the heat and humidity but I have been there at that time of year before. This time I found the ‘big apple’ to be dirty and smelly and a little bit too seedy for my liking. Yes it is still that exciting big city that is an attractor of people like few others but a city’s brand and reputation should be something that can be delivered upon each and every visit not just on its good days. Thankfully the Highline ‘the garden in the sky’ offered a welcome respite.

New York

Out of my entire trip Philadelphia is the place that has stolen a little bit of my heart. Penn’s original grid plan continues to serve the city well. The quality of living in the inner urban core is high with schools, restaurants, parks and shops never more than a few blocks from home. Most of the housing is terrace style with courtyards at the back and the streetscapes are so well designed that they form part of your living environment. Planning when it is done well can become a legacy for centuries, when done poorly it is a pain for future generations to bear. Here is City Hall at the centre of the city and the only interruption to the grid for miles.

Philadelphia

London was the surprise package this time around. Given that I am married to a ‘pom’ I have been to London many times over the past 20+ years. Each time London has felt like a favourite dress – comfortable and familiar. This time however it is experiencing a construction and infrastructure boom that is a force to be reckoned with. Not only are there many new skyscrapers but also underground the Crossrail project, a high speed connection from Maidenhead in the west of London to Abbey Wood and Shenfield to the east, is well underway and is affecting many centres across the city. Despite the upheaval, Londoners are pretty positive about the projects and the longer term benefits. Perth too is experiencing some pain points around project sites and it is a matter of communication, information and a positive attitude that will get us through the next decade of change.

London