

Perth: A City on the Edge

By Brigid Delaney

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PERCHED ON THE EDGE of a desert, on the other side of a continent, with its face to Africa, Perth is one of the world's most isolated cities. But that may change as the city prepares for a huge population growth, upgraded infrastructure and competition with Melbourne and Sydney for the nation's smartest workers..

The city of 1.4 million is expected to grow by 43 per cent by 2031, a report released by the Property Council of Australia says. This puts Perth second behind Brisbane (58 per cent) on the nation's growth chart - with Sydney's and Melbourne's populations expected to grow by 26 per cent and 29 per cent respectively, and Adelaide's and Hobart's trailing at 8 and 5 per cent.

The huge population growth in Brisbane has been well documented, with many retirees, sea-changers and young families supporting the population boom. House prices have rocketed as a result. But what about Perth? On the face of it it's an unlikely place for a boom.

It's a long way from anywhere, it faces water shortages and although the economy is rolling along, it is largely dependant on industries such as mining and construction.

The reasons for Perth's popularity, particularly with interstate migrants, are largely twofold: housing affordability and lifestyle. The state's Minister for Transport, Planning and Infrastructure, Alannah MacTiernan, says: "People can see there's growth here. You aren't looking at a stagnant market. You get more for your money here."

Ask Perth residents about their city and they will rhapsodise about the pristine beaches of Cottesloe and Scarborough, the Margaret River wineries and the charm of Rottnest Island. The promise of paradise on a penny-pinching budget is a potent lure for east coast Australians.

And the State Government is ready for the influx. The Gallop Government continued a strong tradition of policy focus on planning with an ambitious project called Network City. Eight thousand Perth residents were interviewed about their vision for the city and, in 2003, 1100 residents participated in forums. The results, released last year, predict an extra 750,000 people will be housed in Perth and surrounds by 2030, with 500,000 of these being interstate and overseas migrants.

Using the report as a blueprint, the Labor Government is on a spending binge. A planned \$1.5 billion rail project will double the size of the rail network and expand into areas where housing is planned. "We want to redesign the city around these transport corridors," MacTiernan says.

The city's redesign will involve a re-creation of clusters of villages similar to the older suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney, such as Carlton and Balmain. "We need an interactive city where you have a whole heap of small nodes developing with linkages between each other, " MacTiernan says. "This delivers small centres of activities all over the city. It's a village concept."

The city is aggressively pushing outside its boundaries, with one region, Mandurah, having the nation's highest predicted growth rate with 223 per cent more dwellings from 2001 to 2031, says the Property Council report. But underneath this expansionism, the pioneer spirit of the west, there exists a palpable lack of confidence.

Perth wants to attract knowledge workers, the "creative class" as coined by the American academic Richard Florida. These workers in software, media, law, film and creative arts are good for cities, Florida argues. They provide a "buzz", support the arts - establishing and frequenting art galleries, the theatre, book stores and trendy cafes. But Perth has long been derided as soulless and there is doubt as to whether there exists enough "creative class" industries to support a significant demographic change.

Perth's identity crisis is hardly helped by articles such as the one that appeared in *wallpaper** in 2002. Tagging Perth the "not so wild west", it said the city was a victim of its own enviable lifestyle. Too many sunny days and sunsets over sea leaches the city of any edge or creativity. The result? "Perth is now an English middle class paradise ... a huge suburb built on a golf course with loads of lakes, sandy nooks and a whole lot of rules."

The academic Charles Landry was hired by the West Australian Planning Commission to assess the soul of Perth. In a 2002 discussion paper, *Can Perth Be more Creative*, efforts were made to try to tap into the creative energy of the city, in an attempt to revitalise the central business district. Fremantle, the port city down the road, was seen as getting it right with a strong, vibrant creative scene with its publishing house and a host of museums, art galleries, restaurants and heritage buildings.

Ray Coffey, publisher of Fremantle Arts Centre Press, says low rents in Fremantle helped attract the creative crowd which in turn acted as a magnet for other creative types. "To me cultural vitality comes out of a cultural community and it exists where there are groups of artists, and there's enough of them to create a sense of dialogue," he says.

But a recognisable creative community seems restricted to Fremantle, according to the discussion paper. Ennui was largely to blame. "The danger for Perth is that it is a far too pleasant place for people to feel the urgency to act," it says.

MacTiernan acknowledges Perth has long been regarded as good from "the neck down" but says this image will be laid to rest with the Government's new plans - in particular revitalising nightlife in the inner city. "If you are wanting to attract those [knowledge workers] sort of people you've got to have that sort of diversity, be part of a global economy. They want to be able to go out at night, see interesting bands, go out to the nightclubs."

A "complete upgrade" of Perth's cultural precincts is planned, MacTiernan says, as the area "is very tired. It's failed to attract people after hours so it's becoming a dark, threatening place after hours."

But Bob Birrell, the director of Monash University's Centre for Population and Urban Research, is sceptical that Perth can compete with Melbourne and Sydney for creative industries. "In the case of Western Australia, underlying the economy is a commodity boom. Perth facilitates the flows of money and commodities but whether it can establish a separate set of industries around software, the media or film is another matter. It's a big ask to get people over to Perth because it's an isolated city and the more dynamic centres on the east coast are dominant. Perth is more a service city for the commodities industry and for them to compete in the knowledge markets will be difficult." Growth that occurs in Perth depends on "the mineral boom lasting," says Birrell.

Peter Gleeson, 31, moved from Melbourne to Perth to study film and is trying to establish a career as a filmmaker in the city. He is on a 10-week contract on a children's television program but is unsure what will happen after that. He'd love to stay but concedes steady work in film happens largely in Sydney. "In terms of advertising work there's only a few clients so there's a real conservatism. You can't make edgy ads here - the pool is so small here you've got to play it safe."

He says that far from a lack of creative people in the city, there's an abundance of filmmakers, musicians and writers. "In Fremantle I've never hung out with so many creative people in my life. Every second person you meet in the pub is a filmmaker or muso."

But those who do make it tend to pack up and move east - particularly musicians, says Gleeson. This causes a creative drain, the opposite of what the Government wants.

The great West Australian lifestyle also distracts from cultural matters, Gleeson says. "In Mandurah the average tradesman gets to live on a marina with their Jet-ski for \$100,000. That's a tradesman, not the elite.

"Here people are too busy enjoying life. If you have an exhibition on you are just not going to get a crowd - here your average mine worker would rather be on their boat than go to a gallery."

West's lure prompts a swan song

Kirsti Melville, 33, a radio journalist, and her husband James Nelson, 39, a sound engineer, are moving on after their youthful love affair with Sydney failed to translate into anything substantial. With three children under 12, the family's rented house in Annandale is too small, and a mortgage (let alone a down payment) is out of their reach. Even a daytrip to the beach is a logistical and financial nightmare.

By the end of the year the family will be in Perth, where rented accommodation is spacious and cheaper, many districts are 15 minutes from a beach, and the stress of living in Australia's biggest city is left behind. They may even be able to afford to buy a house one day.

The price of housing was the crucial factor in their decision to move. "We came to the realisation that we were never going to afford to buy a house in Sydney," Melville says.

"We're renting in Annandale and literally we are just getting into debt. Child care, rent, the expense of living in Sydney ... even going to the beach with the kids is a drama; getting across town, finding and paying for parking and buying lunch. It costs \$30 just to take the kids to the beach.

"Unless your parents have money to help you out, unless you bought a house a long time ago, it's impossible. At the time I started thinking about buying a house it was out of our reach. Even if we could manage to pay a deposit, there was no way we could pay a mortgage and have a life.

"I saw an ad for a flat that was \$480,000, and that was a one-bedroom flat. I looked at it and thought, 'That's ridiculous'."

Moving is not an easy decision. Melville, originally from Dubbo, says that like many young people from the country or interstate she saw Sydney's promise of success, adventure and a glorious social life. "I'll miss it deeply but I can't do it anymore. We've got no family here but a really rich social network."

She says many friends with young families are moving to Western Australia, or back to their home towns.

"There's a whole section of Sydney's population that is locked out of the city due to housing costs."

— *Brigid Delaney*