

MEDIA PIECE

Transforming the Perth waterfront into a destination

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By Marion Fulker

The Perth skyline is changing. As new buildings go up we are seeing an increased depth to our CBD that challenges the traditional east/west ridge.

The number of cranes and level of building activity is the envy of many of our east coast cities and sends a strong signal that we are on the move. This transformation is fitting given that we have the third highest number of listed companies of any Australian capital – finally we are taking our rightful place as the western gateway.

But what is happening on the ground?

Streetscapes are being enhanced, high-end retailers have moved in, foyers are busy with a new cafe culture and all of this will make Perth a more dynamic city. These are all the usual signs of a renaissance and many cities have already been down this path to varying levels of success.

However, there isn't a city that I have visited which has a pristine lawn as its front door mat. Reorienting ourselves to the river with an active and accessible waterfront will herald a new era for Perth.

Over the years there have been many plans, some with real merit and others, sheer folly. How to appropriately reactivate what was once a special place for our Noongar people and then a bustling inner city port area has occupied the minds of architects and designers locally and internationally and has been the subject of much debate in the community as we flip and flop between keeping it as it is and wanting something spectacular.

The previous Labor government announced an ambitious plan to create 'Dubai by Swan' and unsurprisingly the older you were the less enthused you were about those plans. That said the younger you were the more excited you were that at last Perth was going to do something bold and totally out of character.

This government is toiling away on plans to develop a waterfront by cutting in to the reclaimed earth, to create a place on a similar scale to Sydney's Circular Quay.

Think of a rectangular inlet with places to bring in ferries and pleasure craft. New buildings, perhaps even a hotel, skirted by a promenade with foyers offering places to eat and drink – sounds good. But what is Circular Quay without the Opera House?

Like any good project the Perth Waterfront won't be without its challenges. There is a potential oversupply of land by government within the city limits on which to build, plus what type of

development is going to go there?

We are a city that has previously had a separation of land uses ie retail, commercial, and residential typically away from both. When we have tried to develop mixed-use environments, complaining residents usually win the day. And how we are going to deal with the prevailing winds remains unclear to me and I imagine one of the site's greatest challenges.

But what will create a great place? According to placemaker Fred Kent, you need destinations which offer multiple things to do.

I have travelled extensively to examine waterfronts in other cities – some of which were so good I am sure that they have stood the test of time and others so bad I bet they'll be tweaking them for years to try to make them 'workable' and, importantly, viable.

What I found were that those that had cultural anchors are the most successful.

In Liverpool, they have the Beatles Museum located in the transformed docklands; in Newcastle/Gateshead waterfront they have the stunning Norman Foster designed Sage Gateshead, a multipurpose music venue of international acclaim. In Brisbane and Melbourne, the south bank areas have been transformed and benefit enormously from co-location with many cultural facilities. And London's Southbank creates a cohesive story for the city that is compelling and incredibly rich in history and heritage.

We have to ask ourselves what will make the Perth waterfront a destination?

By offering a place where the oldest living culture can be experienced will act as a catalyst to connect with Aboriginal people and to reconnect them with their culture. A visible generational marker for all – young, old, rich, poor, black, white or brindle. A place that stands the test of time that will deliver an intergenerational legacy that is bold, just and unique. A place that is the visible heart of reconciliation.

The development of Perth waterfront could be a city-making and city-defining project and the Premier has put his job on the line in order to get the project underway. I hope he has a vision that will stand the test of time, as he will be judged on its success by future generations.

Marion Fulker is the CEO of think-tank the Committee for Perth which is part of a growing movement – Committees for Cities. As a former head of the Urban Development Institute in WA and current Chair of the Heritage Council of WA, she is a keen observer of cities and city defining projects.