



How strata and mixed use precincts can change the future of Perth

In today's rapidly evolving social landscape, it is difficult for people to keep up with where they actually fit; what are *their* true concerns, affecting *their* lifestyle and the place *they* live?

The CBD and surrounding transport nodes of Perth are maturing from a traditional suburban style, into a new downtown urbanity. We are seeing a number of new emerging precincts, featuring the small bar phenomena, popup food outlets, high density living and more progressive mixed use developments. The milieu which is evolving, if managed and nurtured carefully, has the potential to mature into a vibrant exciting place for us to live and work, although, I note that it comes with a degree of nervousness for those who fear change.

Richard Marshall in "Emerging Urban: Global Urban Projects in the Asia Pacific Rim" defines the new downtown urbanity as having four characteristics:

1. It can be planned
2. It is defined by designs which aim to stand out from the traditional geographic imagination
3. It intends to distinguish itself as a representative of a performative urbanity, and to move existing forms of urbanity in the old downtown forward
4. It is based on a new form of centralisation.

Perth cannot achieve positive outcomes with dated Town Planning Schemes, as in the case of Nedlands, which is over 30 years old. Nor can we create vibrant, expressive communities with a 'Strata Titles Act' written in 1985. This needs to be amended urgently, along with the introduction of the new 'Community Titles Act'.

Urban sprawl cannot continue; we need to be more centralised in our planning approaches. Perth's metropolitan area is now one of the largest cities in the world by land size. Unlike other cities of a similar physical size we are very sparsely populated. Perth's physical size is roughly the same size as Los Angeles and Tokyo, but has only one tenth and one twentieth of their populations respectively.

Richard Marshall argues that where the design visions are produced through complicated, contested, long, difficult and costly public participation, inferior outcomes are achieved. Where the architects and developers are free to design visions that are not “Interfered” with, more creative, diversified schemes are established, providing greater choice for residents.

I believe that if we wish to have a clear vision of a vibrant, expressive design that is sympathetic to public open spaces and featuring a broad range of uses then we need to take a step back and, based on our personal beliefs, try not to interfere with needed progress. In the end, if it does not work, the developer is left holding a white elephant that no one wants to buy into, we need to trust that they will get it right.

The problem is, everyone wants to be heard and can't bear to be overlooked, dismissed or belittled. Hugh MacKay 'What Makes Us Tick?' explains:

“When we know we are being taken seriously, we can relax into that assurance. When we fear we are not, our reactions can range from sadness, resignation or disappointment, through envy of those who receive the recognition we crave, to a burning fury of resentment”.

This is greatly relevant to strata managers and proves that it is essential that we are empathetic and listen to our clients.

Stepping beyond strata management, I believe by promoting community living within a scheme, there is the potential for residents to help themselves when it comes to a number of their perceived issues. This can be achieved through better communication with their neighbours.

What is a community? The closest definition I have found was presented by Charles Vogl in “The Art of Community”:

“Communities are created when at least two people begin to feel concern for each other's welfare. If others join this tiny caring flame, the community fire grows”

I do not believe that strata managers can create communities within the schemes they manage, we can plant the seed and nurture the ideas. However, we do not live and breathe the scheme on a daily basis, we are not woken up by the neighbour playing the loud music and the garbage truck emptying the rubbish. We do not stop to open the door for our neighbour coming home with their groceries. While we care for our clients wellbeing, strata managers should be treated as an external element who is there to provide guidance and connect residents.

How do we start planting the seed? I recently attend a conference in Queensland focusing on communities and the evolving population demographics globally. Australia is no different to New Zealand, Canada, USA or the UK, we all face the same aging population and challenging building defects. There were a number of discussion points, but one that impressed me was the idea that when a new Council of Owners is elected, they should walk around the scheme one night after work and introduce themselves to the residents. This suggestion was immediately knocked down, given the perceived need for our privacy. However, people living in a strata scheme, need to understand that they are living in close proximity to their neighbours and therefore, they should get to know them. To help encourage a positive uptake, the strata manager could accompany them and perhaps broadcast to the residents that the COO and strata manager will be knocking on doors with the aim of identify people's expectations on living within the scheme. If this does not get any traction, try and encourage a letter to all owners introducing the new COO after the AGM with a brief bio. Another idea is the creation of a 'Welcome' brochure for residents moving into a scheme, talking not just about what the scheme represents, but also what does the broader community offer.

There is no doubt that belonging to a strong community benefits our lives. Case studies have proved that people living in positive communities live longer, happy lives; we should be promoting this!! Vibrant community minded schemes are safer places to live and have higher capital values!! When residents enjoy the place they live in they talk about their schemes to friends and family (free advertising, which creates demand); they are less likely to move (lower vacancies); and, they know their neighbours (safer, friendlier environment).

Small communities can be informal gatherings with a simple clear directive to create a safer environment, or better communication, or perhaps with the goal of building a herb garden. Large communities can be formal gatherings, with minuted meetings and a diverse range of objectives. However, sometimes their original goals can be lost and big personalities can take over, with the original aim of creating a positive community lost. Community gatherings should always review their first key objective which should be to create a positive, enjoyable place to live and work.

As a strata manager, we need to take ownership of promoting a more harmonious environment in which our clients live and work. We cannot artificially create a community, we need to connect likeminded individuals living and working within the scheme's we manage. They need to form the necessary relationships and by doing this, the start of a new community is cultivated.

Written By

Scott Bellerby

Strata and Community Manager