

Raising the west to new heights

Perth is looking to encourage a new design culture to stop its suburban sprawl

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In the panoply of visionary city buildings and distinctive urban design, Perth has barely rated as a capital city. The boom-bust cycle of Western Australia's economy has produced uneven, even mediocre standards in a capital city where 80 per cent of the state's population chooses to live.

Critics have long argued that Perth's sprawling suburbs, while offering solid and affordable mass housing, have rarely risen to anything approaching design excellence.

As the state's government architect since 2013, Geoff Warn has thought deeply about this mixed legacy. With 33 years of architectural practice and academic teaching roles behind him, Warn thinks the time is ripe for Perth to transform its built landscape and the way West Australians live in it.

"The key purpose of my role as government architect is to ensure that good design benefits all West Australians," he says. Design WA is a blueprint to raise design and construction standards that Warn has been working on with the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage, with the imminent roll-out of the first target for better apartment design.

It's a deliberate strategy to overcome Perthites' disdain for high-rise living and halt the creep of low-density suburbs far to the north and south of Perth.

"We have the lowest uptake of apartment living in Australia," says Warn. "We don't live in the city like Melbourne or Sydney or Singapore, and we don't have many examples of high-density living in high-rise estates."

Planning authorities set a previous target of 47 per cent of all new housing to be infill or high-

rise housing but Perth residents have remained stubbornly attached to their home in the burbs.

"We're well below achieving that target, below 20 per cent, and we're well below the national targets," says Warn. "If you look at the history of WA settlement, we were a rural agricultural society with a small city of residential suburban dwellers primarily. But if we raise the standard of design and those values are supported, we should get better apartments and a greater variety of housing in more varied settings."

A suite of documents will lay out 10 principles of good design for apartments, medium-density housing, townhouses and neighbourhood precincts.

"Design WA is not aimed at wealthy apartments in South Perth or Cottesloe Beach. We're aimed at lifting the standard of the bottom of the market."

Warn says the NSW government has led the way with State Environmental Planning Policy 65, a successful bid in 2015 to improve apartment design and their take-up in the state.

Warn says roadblocks to higher-density living precincts are being cleared in WA. For example, plans for living precincts around each train station are part of the multi-billion-dollar Metronet network of integrated public transport being rolled out by the McGowan Labor government. "Rather than running a train line out, wrapping a big carpark around the station and putting cheap housing some distance away, you will have a train station-cum-housing precinct around the new Metronet stations."

In addition, two large housing precincts proposed for sites north



Geoff Warn, seen here on the Matagarup Bridge over the Swan River in Perth, says his role is to ensure that good design benefits all Western Australians

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and south, in Bentley and Joondalup, "have the potential to be the large estates that we see in other parts of the world".

"These two sites are excellent opportunities to demonstrate good precinct and housing design, and house a full spectrum of people from families to old people."

Warn identifies a bigger problem that has beset the city — a culture of indifference towards creative design and architectural

expertise in a mining-reliant state. "Perth has the highest proportion of engineers outside Texas but we suffer the great brain drain on the artistic or design side. We need an equal respect for our artistic creative cultural industry on a par with Sydney and Melbourne."

In the frenzy of building that has gone with successive booms, "we failed to build a really substantial local design culture: architects, graphic designers and artists. Prior to that, building was so utilitarian and cost-driven that when the boom arrived we didn't have a well-established design profile ... While we had architects who could put buildings together in the local context, having been constrained over several decades they weren't able to get interesting new and different approaches. So

we looked to Melbourne and Sydney and overseas."

He cites the example of Yagan Square, Perth CBD's newest public precinct ceded to Lyons Architecture and Iredale Pedersen Hook, not local designers.

"Yagan Square came out of a Melbourne culture — we should have been able to create an equally exciting piece of architecture out of our own ability. But we don't give ourselves a chance.

We need to nurture a culture of design of our own," he says, citing the new Perth Stadium designed by HASSELL, Cox and HKS as a fine example of locally led collaboration.

"I'm not against bringing in international influence — all cities do that — but it should run parallel with building a good local design culture. If you look at all the cities with a good urban culture — Barcelona and London and Melbourne and Los Angeles — they build up a local culture of architects who can contribute back to their own city."

In the state's domestic housing, architects have been outnumbered by project developers who often "aim for the lowest common denominator — if someone down the road can build a cheaper version, all the others follow".

Warn attributes Perth's insecurities in controlling its built landscape to a history of isolationism. "We've been an isolated, frightened community that battled against the scratchy, hard natural landscape. It's taken many years to settle with the landscape and appreciate it. For example, rivers weren't places of riverside picnics — even into the 1950s they were a stinking, mosquito-ridden swampland."

As a result, he says it took "a 50-year conversation" to create Elizabeth Quay, the Barnett Liberal government's massive makeover of the Swan River foreshore into a public square, a boat inlet and the site of several high-rise towers.

"That conversation has lasted my entire career: it started when

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Warn says the conversation about Perth's unchecked sprawl has also dragged on since the 1990s. "But it's been hard to make changes because we've had a project home-building industry that employs a lot of people and uses a lot of material. We can't just trash that. But in the process, we haven't developed a high-rise residential tower mentality. And our planning scheme and our residential code have been developed around a suburban model."

He hopes Design WA will help to halt Perth's urban sprawl. "If we can backfill suburbs, get denser, we can build less housing ... We're in a unique period where we can set better standards so when the next boom comes we'll get better housing options."

Suzie Hunt, WA president of the Architecture Institute of Australia, endorses Design WA as a significant reform.

"This is particularly important as Perth faces unprecedented population growth over the next three decades," she wrote recently. "The city is expected to double in size by 2050, making it the same size as Melbourne is now."

"Rather than enshrining an elitist view of design, this policy aims to effect improvements across the entire delivery chain, from architects and building designers to developers and their clients, and most importantly, the people who live in our suburbs."

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GEOFF WARN
WA GOVERNMENT ARCHITECT