The Next City

Issue 1
looks towards the future of urbanism, taking Perth and Western Australia as its reference point. Are there clues to be found in the west that can inform better city-making around the world?
Future West is a publishing platform for collaborative urban research.

Future West promotes innovation in Western Australia.

Future West investigates policy and power in city-making.

Future West explores The Next City.

Future West advocates for social and economic impact through design.

Future West inspires people who co-create cities, towns and regions.
If the current city is not working well enough to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, what do we do to change the city?

We may not be able to predict exactly what The Next City is, but we can recognise some trends that are emerging. *Future West* touches upon some of these – building innovation, social entrepreneurialism, distributed infrastructure, urban densification. These forces can produce challenges – but challenges can be liberating. They can provoke invention. They can force systemic change.

*Future West* begins by looking for clues to The Next City found around us today. The Next City is very near.
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Future West (Australian Urbanism) is a biannual publication that looks towards the future of urbanism, taking Perth and Western Australia as its reference point.

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If Perth is to be a model for other locations, harnessing biodiversity is fundamental. Julian Bolleter
This inaugural issue of Future West (Australian Urbanism) poses the question: Can Western Australia, and its isolated, somewhat prosaic capital, Perth, inform better city-making around the world? Perth is not known as a model for suburbia: its suburban condition is similar to that of developed cities the world over. However, it does stand out in one respect: it sits in an exceptionally biodiverse natural setting. A strong, informed vision for this setting’s relationship with the city could help Perth become an exemplar for similarly positioned metropolises everywhere.

The greater Perth region has been designated the Southwest Australia Ecoregion (SWAE), one of only thirty-five so-called ‘biodiversity hotspots’ in the world. Reconciling future growth with biodiversity is one of the key issues facing urban design and planning this century. Indeed, if current trends continue, by 2030 global urban land cover will increase by 1.2 million square kilometres (about half the area of Western Australia), and much of it will happen in biodiversity hotspots. This is important because, if we continue to fail to protect the hotspots, it is estimated that we will lose nearly half of all terrestrial species, as well as the ecosystem services upon which human populations ultimately depend. ‘Ecosystem services’ may sound like abstract jargon; however, it’s actually a term used to describe ‘services’ provided by nature – such as clean air, water and food, and heatwave and flood mitigation – without which human life would be extremely unpleasant, if not unviable. Perth has a reputedly strong planning system and is comparatively wealthy. If it can’t control city form to protect biodiversity – compact cities generally being recognised as the best model for protecting land for conservation – then elsewhere, particularly in the developing world, city administrators are likely to struggle.

The current treatment of the Australian environment has its roots in the European annexation of Australia, which has been characterised by catastrophic misreadings of the land. Governor Stirling, who was singularly responsible for the European annexation of Perth, was the kind of man who saw what he wanted to see rather than what was there. In her book *The Origins of Australia’s Capital Cities*, Pamela Statham writes:‘arriving at the end of … an uncommonly cool, moist summer, [Stirling was] misled by the tallness of the northern jarrah forest and the quality of the alluvial soils close to the river into believing that the coastal plain would offer fertile farming and grazing. It was, Stirling wrote, equal to the plains of Lombardy;
and he persuaded himself that the cool easterly land breeze of these early autumn nights must originate from a range of snowy mountains.

The results of such misinterpretations of the land were generally less poetic. Stirling sited the settlement of Perth on a narrow, constrained strip of land between swamps to the north and marshy river edges to the south – low-lying areas that fuelled plagues of mosquitos and, once polluted, deadly typhoid outbreaks.

Due to a lingering discomfort with Perth’s ‘unsanitary’ wetlands, in time, more than 200,000 hectares of them – the equivalent area of 500 Kings Parks – were drained on the Swan coastal plain. These biologically productive areas directly or indirectly support most of the coastal plain’s wildlife, and as such the effects on biodiversity have been catastrophic. Furthermore, a perception of the Banksia woodland and coastal heath on Perth’s fringes as unattractive and useless has seen much of it cleared for the outward expansion of the city. Indeed, between 2001 and 2009 an annual average of 851 hectares of highly biodiverse land on the urban fringe was consumed by suburban growth.

The lesson to be learnt from this experience is that any future growth in a biodiversity hotspot, or indeed elsewhere, has to be founded on the understanding that we cannot continue to bend nature to our will, but that we must learn how to work with it. Within this humbling process, however, there should be a recognition that working with the land is not an entirely pure or noble act; rather, it is imperative for humanity’s survival. As species and ecosystems become threatened and vanish, so too do the ecosystem services that support human wellbeing.

The release of the state government’s long-anticipated Perth and Peel Green Growth Plan for 3.5 million may herald a shift in the relationship between the city and the biodiversity hotspot. The plan encapsulates two broad goals: firstly, to protect fringe bushland, rivers, wetlands and wildlife in an impressive 170,000 hectares of new and expanded reserves on Perth’s fringe, and secondly, to cut red tape by securing upfront Commonwealth environmental approvals for outer suburban development.

While ostensibly positive achievements, questions remain as to how ecology is interwoven through the city itself, and whether the plan is legible enough for the public to be able to conceptualise the city’s fringes (since being able to conceptualise the edge, such as with London’s iconic greenbelt, leads to people ‘caring’ about it). There is also the question of how a plan that places restrictions on outer suburban development will accommodate the powerful local land development industry over time, and finally how, in broader terms, the lingering estrangement of European Australian culture from the land can be eroded.

These perplexing questions are being explored through research and teaching at the Australian Urban Design Research Centre (AUDRC). The ultimate goal of this ongoing project will be a plan for Perth that synthesises the provision of ecosystem services and urban density. The entwining of ecosystem services and urban density is significant in that they are often considered separately in planning, and as such positive synergies between them are not maximised.

In 2003, the ABC asked revered Western Australian landscape architect, Marion Blackwell, “Are we at home now in the land we live in?” She replied, “No, we’re not. We don’t know enough about it, and not enough people know anything about it.” We still have much work to do on our engagement with biodiversity in Western Australia, and Perth specifically, before we can become a model for future cities.