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Parking or public spaces: We need to agree on Perth's changing face

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The great thing about cities is they can be whatever you want them to be. Want to live in a city where you can drive everywhere? Easy. Want to live in a city with great public space which puts people first? No problem. Man-made environments can be moulded to fit any agenda.

The difficult part is not designing a desirable city, but getting everyone to agree on priorities. Most people would like to see more public space, safe bikeways, more trees. But people also rely on cars to get around, and wouldn't mind if it was easier to find parking – even in the congested city centre.

Unless you're prepared to live in a suburban city that sprawls forever it just isn't possible to do both.

Australia adopted suburbanisation early, allowing us to access large, relatively affordable homes with backyards.

But the Australian dream came at a price; city priorities were set to cater for ever expanding suburbs with more roads, more driving and more parking taking up valuable space. Enabling the car degraded the city.

Today a new trend is underway as Australians move to well connected communities and urban centres. The residential population of the City of Perth grew 90 per cent in the ten years to 2015.

More value is being placed on well connected neighbourhoods where it is easier to walk, ride a bike or catch public transport. Meanwhile, early signs suggest investors are shivery about cheap and distant subdivisions.

City leaders around the world share this experience and are grappling with the same conversation. How is our city and the way we use it changing? What are our priorities now? What must we do to achieve them?

In New York mayor Michael Bloomberg pursued a program of building new public space by shaving metres off roads to create new parks and plazas.

London built bikeways through the city centre to meet public demands for greater transport options.

The Mayor of Adelaide, Martin Haese, is reinvigorating that city's laneways – formerly the home of dustbins and the destitute – in a bold bid to stop the CBD shutting down after 5:30pm.

Perth must also struggle with these issues to succeed. Everyone wants progress, but no one likes change. Change can mean disruption and inconvenience.

But as Perth evolves, we must agree on what is important for the future. The great cities of the world are renowned for their arts and culture, their opportunities for young people, their beautiful streets and thriving restaurant scenes; their liveability.

We can have all this, but it requires conviction to re-balance streets and public space. Projects like the Mary Street Piazza in Highgate are a good start and show what is possible. Failing to act will only bring Perth's growing pains to the fore.

'Business as usual' means more competition for congested road space, more dirt, noise and pollution and new city dwellers mistreated just to accommodate cars.

As we think about the Perth we'd like to have – the Perth we can have – it's worth remembering nobody ever rated a city on how easy it is to park.

Mark Ames is director of urban engagement agency Strategic Cities. He'll discuss how to grow community support for change at tow events on Thursday 24 August 2017. Both events are free and open to the public.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/parking-or-public-spaces-we-need-to-agree-on-perths-changing-face-20170821-gy010v.html>

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