

Pedestrian Crossing

THE GELH REPORT WHAT'S THAT?

What is the fate of the report by the Danish urban planner who was brought in by Hobart's City Council to revamp Hobart? Helen Hayward investigates.

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MACQUARIE ST

5 Min



TOWN HALL





Cycling Lane

Over the last few months I've asked countless people in and around Hobart, 'Have you read The Gehl Report?' Generally I draw a blank. 'The Gehl Report - what's that?' is the most common response. Or if I strike lucky, 'Is that the report about taking all the cars off Hobart's waterfront?' Others shrug and then, 'That must be the report about channeling the city's through traffic into a tunnel?' Or pausing and frowning, 'Is that that Danish architect who wants to put a chairlift up Mt Wellington?' Or most damning, 'Is that one of those Council reports that causes a big stir and then sinks without a trace?' 'Well no,' I reply, 'not exactly. It's a 150-page report initiated by the City Council with a view to giving Hobart, and particularly the CBD, a facelift.' 'Oh *that*', they return.

Public response to the first stage of the inner city development plan - 'Hobart 2010, Public Spaces and Public Life: A city with people in mind' - has been a bit of a fizzer. The public at whom The Gehl Report is directed has remained unmoved. The usual suspects, mainly traders, have made a predictable noise against pulling cars off the waterfront - 'How dare the Council even consider it during a retail downturn?' However in response to Jan Gehl's larger themes, and more radical proposals, there's been hardly a murmur. 'A city with people in mind' has been quiet, even mute. The people of Hobart don't seem to have had it, the city, in mind much at all.

The Council Survey, wishfully called 'a community engagement', was designed to measure the public temperature on Gehl's ideas on revamping the city. And yet by its mid-year cut-off it had been filled in by all of 1300 people - despite 45,000 surveys being sent out in the Hobart City News, and made available on the Council's website and in the Elizabeth Street Mall. Pretty lukewarm, wouldn't you say? Especially when you realise that of these 1300 a significant number are biased towards those overwhelmingly in favour of the city's complete facelift and, on the other hand, those who are dead against extending just one footpath.

Why this flat response? Why are we so lukewarm about a series of changes that promise to transform Hobart for the better? Clearly there must be a whole raft of reasons why people have been slack in responding to The Gehl Report. Are we simply not ready for strong visionary change, especially from an outsider? ('Why should a Danish architect come in here and tell us where to plant boulevards?') Could it be that change in the current economic climate makes us nervous? ('How can we possibly afford this, with so many cuts looming?') Or could it be that we're past enthusiasm, that we're too cynical? ('Nothing ever changes in Slowbart - except perhaps the Mayor.') Or are we simply too divided as a society, lacking a sense of community on which any real community engagement must rest? ('When you think about it, why should people up in Glenorchy care about what happens on the waterfront?')

Clearly The Gehl Report has struck a public nerve - if a numb public nerve. This may be because change is in the air anyway - although it's the kind of change that we instinctively turn away from rather than

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Franklin Square

There's also a confusion about the nature of the problem that Jan Gehl's Report might be a solution to. Does the underlying problem, as Gehl suggests, stem from a lack of vitality in our inner city? Or is this absence of life, that he so diplomatically yet expressly identifies, a sign of something bigger?

embrace. Jan Gehl's report has got caught in this economic cross-wind and, in response, the people of Hobart have tuned out. We just don't want to know about it. 'Change, what change?', barked Winston Churchill in response to his Cabinet's suggestion that they change an existing piece of legislation. 'Aren't things bad enough already?'

But there's something else going on, too. It's not just a reflection of our weariness for the 'same old', nor our perennial fear of wasting public money. There's also a confusion about the nature of the problem that Jan Gehl's Report might be a solution to. Does the underlying problem, as Gehl suggests, stem from a lack of vitality in our inner city? Or is this absence of life, that he so diplomatically yet expressly identifies, a sign of something bigger?

The current economic downturn has had the effect of forcing us to look at Tasmania, and ourselves, in a new light. It has forced us to look at the bigger picture. Are we, as a society, keen to be 'green, clean, and creative' as our government would have us be? Or are we more inclined to stick our heads in the sand while Tasmania slips, as Jonathan West bluntly put it, 'into genteel Third World poverty'? Is the problem, as he observed, that as a society we're disproportionately dependent on the Government for our livelihood and therefore less eager to embrace changes that might put these livelihoods in jeopardy? Or is it simply that the brave new world of budget cuts has put too much pressure on our collective imagination, such that we shrink from reports of any kind? (If it's optional, let's shelve it.)

The academics at UTAS have their own opinions on Tasmania's future. Bruce Felmingham reckons that the biggest challenge facing us is the

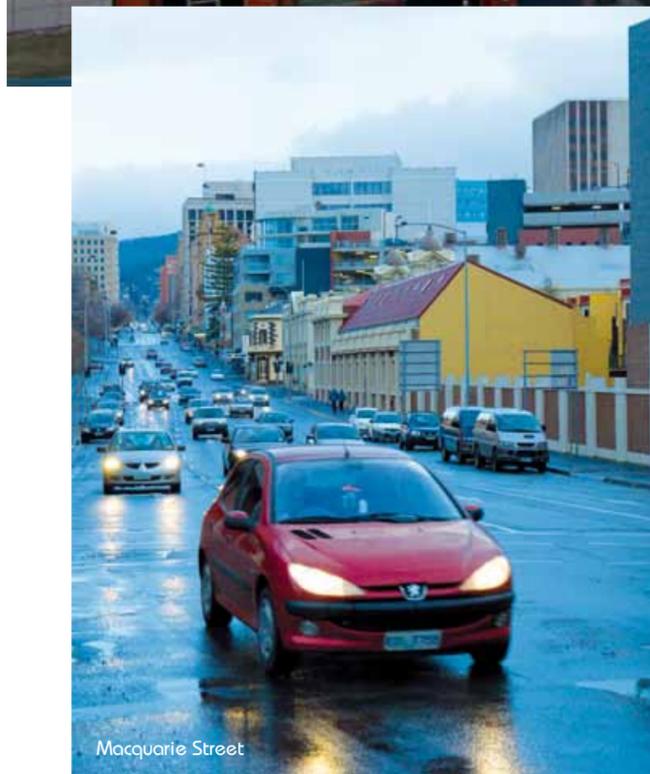
loss of our young people who, disappearing to the mainland often never to return, are pushed out by the dearth of job opportunities and lack-lustre zeitgeist. What we need, in his view, is a collective approach that, in the face of financial constraints, overcomes our pessimism. Far better to promote a small but prosperous economy through ventures like salmon farms, and to drop more divisive bigger ticket items like the Tamar Pulp Mill. Phillip Pullinger, the leader of a major environmental group, believes that the forestry conflict is our biggest problem, and that until we solve this no amount of prettying up Hobart will make our State a good place to live.

Heading up the Opposition Will Hodgman thinks that it's our high rate of functional illiteracy, combined with our demographic time bomb, that the government needs to tackle first. Nick McKim, more cautious, backs the 'not all development is good' horse, and urges us to be 'brave, clever, and strategic' in driving the economy forward - growing saffron and hormone-free beef rather than mincing old logs into woodchips. Saul Eslake, the affable economist, believes that we have to accept that 'God in his wisdom hasn't endowed this State with the resources enjoyed by other mainland States'. Nor, in his opinion, is it anyone's fault that we have 'an above average share of businesses adversely affected by the strong Australian dollar'. It does however perplex him that, as a society, we spend more per head in delivering basic services to our dispersed population than other States, even while paying those who deliver them (nurses, bus drivers) less.

And what about Lara Giddings? How does she imagine our way forward? Surely her opinion on the capital's future is vital to the reception of The Gehl Report? Or could it be that the State Government is more concerned with the overall direction of the Greater Hobart Area, and with developing a Capital City Plan that complies with the directives of the Commonwealth Government under COAG?

In the Premier's view what we need to do is to build up Tasmania's image as unique and unspoiled, and to diversify our economy by supporting emerging smaller industries and new approaches to agriculture. Were she to have her way Tasmania would be more beautiful, more innovative, more open to healing old rifts, and so able to embrace a sense of its diverse possibility.

And the upshot of all these views? Rather sobering, really. The upshot is that nobody owes us, as Tasmanians, a living. If our society is to succeed it will be on our own terms - it's up to us to make our own future and to generate our own income.



Essentially Gehl would like Hobart to live up to its promise, and not to let financial and social woes colour its self-conception. He wants Hobart to be proud of itself and to show-off its assets - not in a showy but in a direct, grateful and unashamed way.

This, I think, is where The Gehl Report comes in. In the opening pages of his long report Jan Gehl congratulates us on our luck - on our relatively undeveloped CBD with unspoiled heritage buildings, our deep and scenic working harbour, our stunning natural landscapes, our modest physical size, and our relatively benign climate. He gently reminds us how lucky we are to be free of much that blights modern cities - overpopulation, pollution and degraded resources. And yet he isn't wearing rose-tinted glasses. Much as he'd like Hobart to become a world-class destination, he's aware that we're a small regional economy with all the financial constraints that go with that.

Despite what critics say Jan Gehl is not, in this report, trying to remake Hobart in his own image - as a rolled-out Barcelona/Oslo/Melbourne urban idyll. His ideas are more like incisive prods. Essentially Gehl would like Hobart to live up to its promise, and not to let financial and social woes colour its self-conception. He wants Hobart to be proud of itself and to show-off its assets - not in a showy but in a direct, grateful and unashamed way.

As recent months have made abundantly clear the way forward for Tasmania needn't involve choosing between keeping jobs or protecting the natural environment. (And it's definitely not a matter of red awnings, or not, on listed buildings.) Our challenge, now our



Rush hour in Macquarie Street

necessity, is to align them both. Could The Gehl Report - a version of which is also being applied to Launceston - help us achieve this? Or are its 150 pages just one more well-meaning yet financially-draining distraction, a reflection of the chronic tension between State, Federal and HCC coffers - the urban design equivalent of moving the Titanic's deckchairs?

A week before the community engagement cut-off date I dropped into the Council Chambers to read Gehl's report. After three and a half hours on a high stool in the Council's sky-lighted atrium I had only reached the final recommendations. The report is huge and not easily summarised. Above all it's a report about quality of life as experienced at street level. It's about reinvigorating the CBD, and of remarrying it to the waterfront - currently divorced by the State-controlled Macquarie and Davey Streets.

But ultimately it's a report about bigger things than infrastructure. It's about bringing people into the CBD for reasons other than shopping, working and loitering. It's about creating a city with its own pulse, that we can be proud of living in. It's about bringing Hobart into line with other world-class cities (as a function of quality not size), and of integrating tourism into society in a meaningful way - rather than treating our 600,000 visitors a year as a band-aid for our teetering economy. And it's about inviting young and old back into the city, of giving them reasons to make the trip over and above dropping in to the odd shop and changing buses.

Above all it's a report without blinkers which uses refreshingly unreport-like language - 'fantastic', 'visual delights' and 'high quality streetscapes' - along with lots of statistics and photos. It talks about walking for pleasure as a basic civic right, and describes in detail the

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current obstacles to it (14% of the time it takes to walk down Murray Street from the CBD to Salamanca is spent waiting at traffic lights - 26% during peak hours; besides which the 80 decibels of traffic noise reached in Macquarie and Davey Streets is well above internationally agreed levels for easy conversation).

The story you're now reading is the first of three stories that Tasmanian Style is bringing you on The Gehl Report. Future stories will contain, will contain its application to Launceston, interviews with the Hobart Mayor Rob Valentine, town planners Brian Risby and Leigh Woolley, and various other key figures.

Assuming that you don't have three and a half hours spare, here are the main points made by Gehl and his associates in their report. First off Gehl would like us to strengthen the connections between our 'fantastic' natural features, particularly the harbour and the mountain, and the CBD. He'd like to see a network of 'green routes' that actively encourage walking and cycling, rather than our current road system which is 'unsafe and hazardous' for 'only for the brave' cyclists, and frequently 'unpleasant' for pedestrians. To see a more diverse city centre with 'invitations for all', which links the city and the surrounding parklands. To give cars and pedestrians equal weight inside proposed 'gateways' to the CBD. To make more of our heritage buildings and active working harbour (and yes, he does suggest taking the cars off the waterfront). To make the 3.3kms of waterfront from the Regatta grounds to Battery Point into a distinctive walkway. To encourage university and college students into the CBD to live. To improve the No 2 'backside of the harbour' arrival shed at Sullivan's Cove into which a significant proportion of tourists from cruise ships alight. To transfer the road system away from the 'big traffic machine' of Macquarie and Davey Streets and instead to create visually pleasing walkways shared by pedestrians and slower-moving cars. To renovate the city's laneways to give them separate identities, on par with the idiosyncratic laneways in Melbourne and London. And not least, to strengthen the city's streetscapes 'in a way that indicates that we're actually in Hobart'.

In Gehl's view Hobart is blessed with all the natural assets a city could want - landscape, harbour, scale, terrain, listed buildings. What it lacks is imaginative vision - even more perhaps than money. Before I sat down to read his report from cover to cover (well nearly) I too, like many Hobartians I've spoken to,

believed that it would be wrong to take the cars off the waterfront, that a cable car up Mt Wellington would be a blot on the landscape, and that enticing students away from the suburbs and into the inner city to live would compound the social conflict that already requires a continuous police presence in our busiest street.

Tasmanians have always been nervous of visionaries. Up until now all the important decisions about Hobart's future have been made by sensible people in sensible occupations - a group still well represented on the Board of the Hobart City Council. Wary of making big decisions on behalf of the public they represent, the Aldermen and women have gone about, in their sensible way, gathering the views of the people of Greater Hobart from the proper channels. This is as it should be, except for one thing. The people of Greater Hobart have stopped responding to its Council. Over the years we've grown inured to the Council's pleas to improve the physical and social fabric of our city. It's as if our experience of the city's problems has become so entrenched that we've stopped believing there might be solutions to the problems that dog Hobart's streets.

Critics of the report gloomily warn that in the absence of popular support for the report Gehl's proposals will be chopped up, whittled down and be done, if at all, piecemeal - thus losing the strong vision which underpins it. Does this matter? Well I think so. But do you?

The staggering thing about The Gehl Report isn't, finally, how few Council Surveys have been filled in. The truly staggering thing about it is how few of Hobart's residents and business people have found time to read it. Even more, how many people have based their strident opinions about it on so very little. Hearsay even. It's all too easy to complain of a foreigner being brought in to get UTAS students to count cars coming down Davey Street (37,000 a day), and to be paid a lot of Council money to design streetscapes more reminiscent of Europe than Australia. Much easier than sitting down at one of our 1,500 outdoor café seats, or 1,100 street benches, to nut out what this city really needs. And to do so before The Gehl Report sinks without a trace in that deep harbour of ours.