

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

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Story by: Helen Hayward

Images by: Julien Scheffer & Bret Salinger



NEED HIGH RESOLUTION IMAGE

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So why have the City Councils of Hobart and Launceston called this privilege into question by asking a Professor from the Copenhagen School of Architecture, an Urban Design Consultant, to fly in, give a few inspirational talks, persuade a team of UTAS students to count cars and park benches, and then proceed to tell us how to make our cities nicer places to live in in the 21st century?

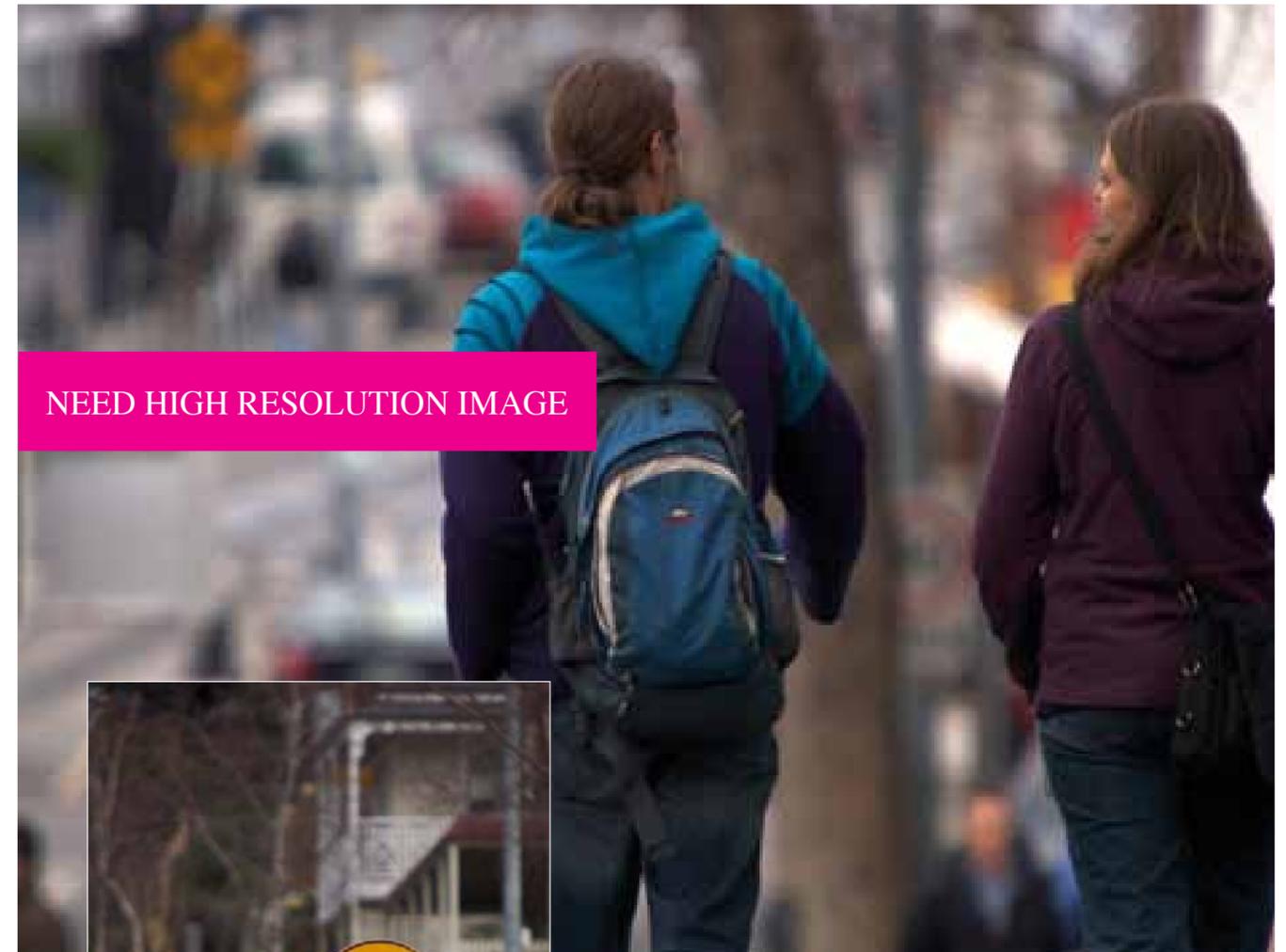
As we're often reminded, most Tasmanians struggle to get from the end of one financial year to the next, and so don't think too much about the next decade, or the one after that. Of course we care about Tasmania's future, and don't want our children and grandchildren to up and leave in pursuit of better things. But making our cities nicer places to live? More productive, perhaps. More socially cohesive, definitely. But nicer?



Hands up if you suffer from plan fatigue. Does the prospect of a cable car up Mt Wellington, a bridge over Bass Strait, or a tunnel under Davey Street lead you to rant or to yawn? Many Tasmanians, especially those with a degree of power, feel that they've heard it all before when it comes to asking Gehl's opening question, 'Are Hobart and Launceston good cities for living in in the 21st century?' Given how many plans have passed over the drawing board during the last 20 years, subject to endless debates and cost analyses, this is hardly surprising. While there isn't a person in either city that thinks our cities couldn't be more liveable, when faced with the task of enacting it we're inclined to fold our arms and look at the ground.

'Do we make cities to make sure that cars have a good time, or should we find a better balance so that the people who use the city could also have a good time?' Of course in the final scheme of things we all agree that people are more important than cars. And yet, on a daily basis, the convenience of parking our cars nearby seems to outweigh any potential benefit of living in a more attractive city. Over the years we've grown accustomed to using our cities as car parks. No matter that there are enough parking spaces for all the cars currently parked along Hobart's waterfront in hard structures within a five-minute walk, and free parking at Inveresk within a ten-minute walk of Launceston's CBD. And no matter that our Health Department is reeling from the impact of chronic lifestyle diseases that respond well to regular exercise.

To come



NEED HIGH RESOLUTION IMAGE



To come

No matter any of this. As Australians, like Americans and unlike the British, it's our unspoken democratic right to park near wherever we need to get to. We're just too busy, we're too indispensable, we're too disorganised, and in any case our time is too precious to factor in those extra minutes it takes to walk the last bit of our journey.

Besides change is scary. And probably expensive. And often it's put in the hands of Councils we're genetically disposed to distrust, who offer the project of revamping our cities to the applicant with the most glamorous credentials, in this case Jan Gehl and his Associates.

But then sometimes, just sometimes, cities need someone from the outside to state the obvious. 'This is a fabulous city', Gehl writes in his report, 'with a fabulous setting and a fabulous waterfront; what you are waiting for?' And then, using the word fabulous once more, 'I do think Hobart is a fabulous city which needs a broom, and if you can apply that broom and sort of wash out the wonderful things you actually have here it would be the nicest city in Australia'. Fabulous or not, Gehl's point is clear. Hobart, like Launceston, has genuine promise, but it's a promise that in Gehl's mind we're yet to live up to.

Launceston's Mayor Albert van Zetten is all for having someone from the outside come in and lay the cards on the table for everyone to see. 'It's fantastic to have an expert in his field come in and describe our strengths and weaknesses as a city, and tell us how we can become a better city for getting about, for living more centrally, and for reducing traffic flow. I don't think it's a problem that Gehl's models have been "rolled out" in different cities. I think it's wonderful to learn from others how similar problems have been tackled'.

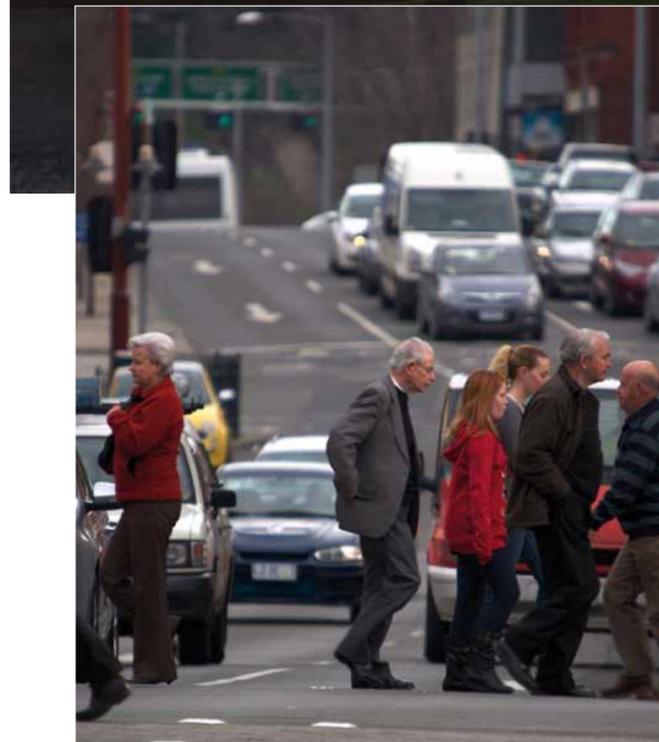
Hobart and Launceston have always been rivals, in much the same way that Sydney and Melbourne are. Hobart, like Sydney, has its dramatic physical setting. In nearly every postcard of Hobart 50% is given over to water views, with bits of the city framing the edges. In contrast Launceston, less visually gripping and its dramatic gorge out of sight, has always understood the need for the city's buildings to work together to carry the symbolic weight. Gehl's ideas lend themselves well to Launceston, where the layout of the city, less undulating than Hobart, is already well understood. Nor does Launceston share the obsession with the waterfront that prevents Hobartians from perceiving their city as a whole. Besides, Launceston's Council has a considerably larger footprint, controlling a bigger section of the city and surrounds, than it does in Hobart where four municipal councils jockey for a fair share of everything.

The biggest hurdle for both van Zetten and Rob Valentine has been convincing their communities of the need to make the inner city a better place to spend time in. 'A place where people want to be rather than need to be', as Rob puts it. For him it's about ambience - the feel of a place, and not just about hard structures and traffic flow. How can they, as Mayors, help to develop a sense of imaginative ownership that encourages Tasmanians to invest more in their urban spaces - a city with a beating pulse and not just a low crime rate?

Both Mayors face different problems to those faced by Mayors in the past. Like School Principals, who now assume a larger pastoral role due to less social cohesion and more family breakdown, our Mayors are expected to do a lot more than pacify warring Aldermen and ensure the rubbish trucks run on time. We expect them to address broader social issues that, in days gone by, the Church and wider society played a more active role in. The fact that people over the age of 35, and under the age of 16, currently feel unsafe in our cities after dark is a social problem that City Councils have been forced to tackle, even though the issues underlying it - unemployment, aimlessness, substance abuse, shrunken civic values - lie outside their control. Tackling traffic bottlenecks, however arduous and frustrating, is simple compared with getting young drunks, many of them female, home without mishap.

Neither Mayor sees himself as magisterial. Both of them see their role in terms of reading the public's temperature and responding appropriately, not of sitting on high and giving a final verdict. 'Let's do things in a timely manner', says Rob Valentine, 'and proceed by trial and error'. In response to Gehl's findings they've done their utmost to corral community groups, to send out surveys, and to push the level of public debate beyond that of knee-jerk reaction. This exercise has proved harder than it sounds, perhaps because it has involved getting communities to care about urban spaces that have so few residents living in them.

A few years ago Rob Valentine visited Napier in New Zealand wearing a neck brace following a back injury. Feeling more precarious than usual he was struck by how relaxed he felt doing the simple things like crossing the road and walking the city's pavements. Napier is an Art Deco city, a style Rob particularly likes.



NEED HIGH RESOLUTION IMAGE

Macquarie Street

To come

But it wasn't just this that attracted him. It was that the traffic in the inner city had been slowed to 10km/h, which meant there was little contest between people and cars. The streets were genuinely shared. People still drove their cars, they still got to their destinations on time, but the pedestrians were able to wander the streets in a relaxed way, knowing that the cars weren't going fast enough to worry about. Feeling fragile in his neck-brace, Rob wasn't perpetually on the look out for 'someone who happens to have a steel box around them'.

'If', says Albert van Zetten, 'we make it our goal to have no cars in the CBD, we'll lose everyone in the process. "We don't want any of it" will be the community response'. Both Mayors appreciate the futility of all-or-nothing approaches. Van Zetten's motto is 'Progress with Prudence', with lots of due process and community engagement - provided of course they can get the community to engage with the proposals in the first place. He also accepts that because meaningful change takes people out of their comfort zone, it's never easy. Ideally both Mayors would like to take their communities with them towards the change they seek to bring about. 'Because unless you're in the change yourself', says van Zetten, it's much harder to describe it to others'.



If our inner cities are ever going to be about people, more than about cars, we're going to have to ask a basic question. We're going to have to ask whether, within the CBD, pedestrians should always be obliged to give way to motorists. The idea that motorists have more rights than pedestrians is now so entrenched that it's quite hard to think about it being otherwise – so deeply pragmatic and utilitarian is our urban thinking. Getting from A to B as efficiently as possible is strongly imprinted on our brains. We look to our Councils for help in getting to our destination, not for improving the quality of our journey.

Neither Mayor in either city is a pie in the sky idealist. Instead they're of the 'one step at a time' school of urban change. Rob Valentine, who admits to feeling vaguely threatened by the waves of traffic rushing past his Macquarie Street office, is keen on gradual change. First he'd like to reduce the traffic speed on Macquarie and Davey Streets. Next, as an effect of a lower speed, to reduce the alienation that pedestrians feel as they walk up and down these streets, less in the eddy of cars. And then, once pedestrians are feeling more comfortable on the pavement, and are able to stop for a chat, they might then have the thought of 'how nice it would be if there were more cafes/trees/entertainment on the street'. Like Albert van Zetten, Rob Valentine sees his role as a facilitator of change, and not its agent.

But of course enhancing our cities, making them more liveable, isn't just about reducing the volume of cars on our roads. This in itself won't inject vitality into our city squares and alleyways. Encouraging more people, especially students, to live in the CBD would by contrast have an immediate impact on the atmosphere and vibe of our urban spaces. In Jan Gehl's report he notes how many vacant and often heritage buildings lie vacant in each city. 'We have this problem all over the world, where old functions of a city go away and a lot of the buildings left become non-functioning and the spaces are used as car parks'. This is particularly the case in Launceston where property owners tend to be asset rich but cash poor - and so reluctant to invest in fire doors and ceiling sprinklers and all the paraphernalia required to appease current building regulations, incurring costs that lead to higher rents. It doesn't matter how 'walkable' your home is from your work or place of study, if other people can't afford to live nearby, to help create a viable street culture, there won't be enough energy to make urban spaces come alive.

The Gehl Report is just that, a report not a plan. However acute Gehl's observations, however telling his outsider point of view ('using the waterfront for parking, no other city in their right mind would think about it'), it's not a plan of action. 'If you aim at nothing you'll hit it', says Rob Valentine with a wry grin. Plans can only follow once each city, each community, arrives at an agreed vision. And even if, in the absence of a binding agreement, the Councils start the ball rolling by enacting recommendations that don't involve huge sums or make the public nervous. Then, as Albert van Zetten remarks, people 'will get the gist of the rest of it'.

It was at this moment that I had an unruly thought, not dissimilar to the one I'd had in Rob Valentine's office a few weeks earlier. Sitting with Albert van Zetten at his large oval table, his office a balmy 22 degrees on a cold winter's day, I couldn't help wishing that the Council had commissioned someone to revamp the Town Hall, and the Mayor's staid and cumbersome office, while they were at it. Surely, my unruly thought continued, if rethinking a whole city is on the agenda then redecorating the Mayor's office would be a good place to start?

But of course I suppressed my tactless thought. Instead, as I closed, I asked them each a question. What would they choose to bring about, out of all Gehl's recommendations, were there no constraints? Rob Valentine didn't hesitate. 'I'd like to see Liverpool St and Collins St become a shared zone. Not to ban cars completely but to give pedestrians priority'. Warming to the prospect, he continued. 'I'd like to reduce the traffic down Murray Street, to make walking down from North Hobart to Salamanca a more relaxed affair. And I'd also like to see a playground in the city centre. And wouldn't it be great if the whole city centre became a niche shopping experience?'

Albert van Zetten, more cautious by nature, measured his reply. 'I think I'd like to see more people living in the city, and for there to be a lively atmosphere outside of working hours'. But of course neither Mayor is an egoist, keen to lord it over their municipalities. Besides, financially speaking they have no wand to wave. Their mission is of another kind. The more people they can inspire to work towards the change they'd like to see, the better they'll feel about their role in helping create a more liveable city.

GEHL REPORT: LAUNCESTON PUBLIC SPACES AND PUBLIC LIFE.

Story by: Jennifer Smit

Jennifer Smit is pursuing post-graduate study in Architecture at UTAS. She is also a partner with Malloway Studio Architects, Adelaide. She manages to do both from Launceston. Here she asks the obvious question begged by any big report: WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Perhaps it's a little like that polite pause after a lecture where the audience wonders whether it's over yet—if its best to clap, raise a hand and ask a question, or just shuffle out the door? Its been nearly six months since the Gehl team completed their report "Launceston Public Spaces and Public Life", and while the Council has been active in attempting to rouse community commentary in their on-line forums and advertised opportunities to comment on the report, public life in Launceston has been largely un-aroused by the recommendations contained therein.

As noted in the Examiner newspaper recently, there were only a handful of written submissions during the community consultation period. Surely the future public department of the city of Launceston should stir more than a flicker of interest among its citizens? Is it perhaps as the report relies heavily on analyses and recommendations based on cities quite dissimilar to Launceston, so it appears to miss some of the specific qualities of this city while proposing strategies that are, in the main, applicable anywhere?

The task of re-designing a city like Launceston around a human scale is a terrific aspiration, but involves a radical shift in thinking when we are so used to the car being the centre of town-planning exercises.

Back in February, I attended a public information session held on the day of the release of the report and was surprised by the vitriol leveled at the Gehl team regarding the recommendation to remove some parking from the city. Traders clearly felt that this would threaten their businesses, yet the Gehl team are quite correct when they suggest that a better shopping environment designed for pedestrians will have long term benefits for commercial operations in the city. And while it irked many in the audience to hear of Danish, British and American comparisons, I couldn't help thinking wouldn't it be great if Charles Street, George Street or longer sections of Brisbane Street had wider footpaths, bike-lanes and fewer cars? The idea of pedestrianising cities does work and can foster better civility in the city as well as commercial activity.

The section of the report that most clearly reveals its European roots is the section that announces that the city should capitalise on its "Blue Character". While the principle of reinforcing positive connections between the Tamar and Esk Rivers and the city is worthy, and concurs with good urban design practice, the qualities of the rivers need to be understood for what they are: tidal, silt-edged and liable to flood. In fact it is the levee walls that strongly disconnect the river from the city that I would argue give Launceston much of its character and uniqueness. How the levee system might be integrated into a better network of urban infrastructure and landscaped 'event' spaces is a design exercise that has great potential, but may be missed if we imagine the water's edge as blue and stable.

I do think the Gehl Report is worth supporting, but would argue that we need to examine more deeply what are the particularities of place—the qualities of landscape and the way we use our public spaces that make Launceston special—that are worth preserving and enhancing as we reconfigure the highways, streets and footpaths of this town, rather than rely on European exemplars. Also, while it appears that radical changes might be required to make Launceston work better as a 'people-friendly' town, often its smaller cities that can effect change faster. In a city the size of Launceston its easy to feel the difference minor urban design changes can make on-the-ground as a greater proportion of the population get to participate in and reflect on how these changes can improve the daily machinations of city life. The key is to contribute to the discussion.