

Making Adelaide a city of choice

DARREN STARR | 23 DECEMBER 2013



Diversity of housing choice is a key planning element. Photo: Nat Rogers / InDaily

OPINION | When I think about planning and building Adelaide, I have one prevailing vision in my mind: the city in which I want my children and grandchildren to grow up.

If I sit overlooking Adelaide with my grandchildren, what will it feel, sound and look like?

Like people, cities have personality, quirks, strengths and foibles, and Adelaide is no different. The features of a city are influenced by its communities and in turn those features influence us. Some are historical and deep-seated; others are the result of recent events. But they all impact on the way our city functions and the way we live our lives.

We need to plan to make Adelaide a city of choice.

A city of housing choice, where we can choose between higher-density living in the CBD, medium-density living in activity corridors or centres, and lower-density living in our existing neighbourhoods and suburban areas. A city of employment choice, where no matter what your area of specialisation, there is a career path for you, and a city where expats will return for career opportunities. A city of lifestyle choice, where residents can immerse themselves in the many benefits of living in one of the most liveable cities in the world.

In planning to create a city of choice, we should recognise that the increased lifespan we can all expect will be a key driver in the population growth of Adelaide. While our internal migration is currently low, Adelaide's physical footprint continues to grow due to an ageing population and steady rates of growth in "natural increase" – that is, the difference between births and deaths. Coupled with trends of family breakdown, this ageing demographic will drive demand for smaller houses and lead to the creation of more single-person households. But our current housing stock is ill-suited to accommodating these changes.

Irrespective of the rate of, or reason for, population growth, we should all play a part in planning a future Adelaide that can accommodate a changing population in an equitable manner. Affordability of housing and diversity of housing choice are key elements of the planning for Adelaide, and without them our children may be priced out of living in the areas where they grew up. Affordability and choice are not just essential for future generations of homeowners: on current trends, our parents will not be able to find suitable housing near the communities they have known and loved, risking a wave of social isolation.

Planning to provide choices for people will benefit all South Australians. Using this approach, we will plan and build places where people want to live, work and spend time with their friends and family. We will also cater to people's changing needs as they move through their lives.

Planning Adelaide as a city of greater choice will require us all to accept modest changes in its built form and function. These changes might manifest in taller buildings on our major transport corridors and in the CBD, or motor vehicles and public transport modes sharing the existing road corridors, or a greater mix of land uses in our neighbourhoods.

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Good planning is the best way to manage urban growth (or decline), secure infrastructure investment, determine appropriate settlement patterns, and generate economic development that contributes positively to the wellbeing of individuals, communities and the natural environment. These considerations are so fundamental to our way of life that good planning requires community input at the strategic planning level.

Done well, long-term strategic planning facilitates human-scale built form and streetscapes that encourage social interaction. These incidental relationships can positively affect our working and social lives by creating an environment that nurtures a creative spirit. This shouldn't be the preserve only of trendy inner-city or gentrifying hotspots, but also of mixed-use office and retail areas and in suburban communities. This, in turn, will create a city where innovators and entrepreneurs establish the contacts to see their ideas into projects, businesses or industries, leading to greater diversity in employment and a driver of economic growth.

The "vibrant Adelaide" push of recent years is starting to show us the potential benefits of this approach. The policy changes that have facilitated development and the activation of the CBD, together with significant infrastructure spending by government, have seen positive messages begin to emerge about Adelaide. At the same time, we seem to have moved beyond historical comparisons with the eastern states, recognising that our efforts should be directed at making Adelaide the best city it can be.

For Adelaide to reinforce its place as one of the world's best small cities, we must recognise that we are competing not just with the eastern seaboard of Australia, but with a global network of cities - and bigger is not always better when it comes to attracting financial and human capital. Again, planning is critical in helping communities identify the aspects of their city that they want preserved, but also those aspects which can and should change in order to boost our competitiveness and employment choice.

If Adelaide can continue to harness and build upon its competitive advantages it will become a city of choice. We should aspire to planning and creating a truly great small global city with the many benefits this would bring to the city and its inhabitants - now and into the future.

To paraphrase a proverb, a society grows great when old men and women plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit under. Planning Adelaide as a city of choice is much like planting trees for the future: we may not all be around to see the benefits of our efforts, but they will create the shade for our future generations.

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