For the first time in history, over half the world’s population live in cities and that proportion is growing. By 2050, it’s estimated that it will rise to about 70 per cent.

Here in Australia, we are already highly urbanised, with two-thirds of our population living in capital cities.

Shamefully our current Federal Government, while collecting 82 per cent of our taxes, does not have a cities’ policy and instead is funding roads that increase congestion, rather than investing in public transport.

Just today, we learnt that the State Government is planning a huge road interchange around two sides of beautiful Sydney Park, as part of the WestConnex motorway. A plan that will bring tens of thousands of cars into already congested local streets, and further separate surrounding residential areas from their parklands. It's back to the 1950s!

In Asia and Europe, all levels of government work together to ensure significant urban developments have public transport, services and facilities provided prior to development. And in this era of climate change, there would be infrastructure for renewable power, water reuse, and conservation of other resources. But unfortunately not in NSW!

This is why I treat grand announcements like the Bays Precinct with reservation.

In NSW, we're enticed with great hopes and grand schemes, experts are called in, the community might be given a preliminary say but then years pass and we're left with developments that are most often much denser than what was promised, that aren't supported with appropriate infrastructure and that aren't sympathetic with surrounding areas.

Sydney deserves better.
NSW needs a new approach to planning and urban development - especially when you consider what we’ve experienced in recent times on significant renewal sites.

**Barangaroo**

In 2003, the State Government announced that the stevedoring wharves at East Darling Harbour would be transformed into a new urban precinct called Barangaroo.

The community welcomed with optimism the concept plan, developed after an international design competition, but fast forward to 2014 and numerous incremental changes will have increased floor space in the development by 70 per cent, if the latest proposals are approved. While a casino, which has not gone out to tender, is proposed for harbour foreshore land set aside for public parkland.

**Green Square**

The City’s largest renewal precinct—and one of Australia’s largest urban renewal projects—is the 278 hectare Green Square redevelopment area.

Green Square was first earmarked for redevelopment in the mid-1990s and—despite the airport train line opening in 2000 on the western fringe of the area and development on sites such as Landcom’s Victoria Park and Meriton’s ACI site—the project was virtually moribund when I was elected Lord Mayor in 2004.

The obstacles to development seemed insurmountable, land for the Town Centre was in multiple ownerships, including land required for essential infrastructure.

The costs to deal with flooding and contamination were high, there was no commitment to publicly fund infrastructure to stimulate private sector investment and state agencies lacked any direction or impetus to get solutions to site drainage and inadequate public transport.

The City began a comprehensive review of the financing, zoning, land use, urban design, retail, traffic, transport, street layouts, stormwater management, social planning, open space, community facilities and overall infrastructure of the site.

Critical milestones were reached when the Green Square Consortium was established and when the Consortium argued that the Town Centre wasn’t viable without increased density, we agreed to consider a new planning proposal, put it to the community and then endorsed it.

We developed a fully costed, comprehensive infrastructure plan and are now investing $440 million over the next ten years to provide the services and facilities a growing community needs like new roads and footpaths, flood drainage works, a state-of-the-art library, a new community centre, child care, new parks and playgrounds, affordable housing and a beautiful new aquatic centre - a design for which I announced early this week. We are not a transport authority but because the State Government failed to act, the city had to purchase land for a new transport corridor for light rail.

We are still waiting, along with the growing community, for the State to finally reveal its transport plans as well as for State schools and other facilities needed for the ultimate population of 54,000 residents and 22,000 workers.
Nordhavn

In contrast to the approach by our state and federal governments, a development in Copenhagen called Nordhavn (Northern Harbour), which I have visited, shows how urban development should be managed with involvement by all levels of government.

Nordhavn is a large 200-hectare urban development that is transforming an industrial harbour site into a sustainable residential and employment centre.

It’s being undertaken by the Danish Government in collaboration with the City of Copenhagen, which is the planning authority. The project is managed by a company run on a commercial basis and owned by the City of Copenhagen (55 per cent) and the State (45 per cent).

The completed project will house around 40,000 people with a corresponding number of jobs, in a dense town structure. It will include mixed ownership to encourage social diversity, with mixed-use residential buildings, business areas, cultural buildings, waterfront activities, a harbour park and beaches.

Essential new infrastructure and sustainability are key components. A new metro system is being developed, linked to the broader metro system, and the intention is to provide a maximum five minutes walk to every part of the district.

And it will be energy efficient, with district heating and cooling. Buildings will be designed for low energy demand, with efficient installations for low temperature heating and high temperature cooling. Opportunities are also being considered for a range of renewable energy sources.

It’s a tale of two cities…

Conclusion

Bays Precinct is an incredibly significant harbour foreshore area. Its renewal provides tremendous opportunities for Sydney, but to reach its full potential, and to contribute to Sydney’s future growth and liveability, it must be seen as more than just a building site.

It should not be treated as a quarry for potential high-rise commercial and residential development to deliver stamp duty to State Government coffers.

The community needs to be involved in developing a long-term vision for the site. This vision has to be backed by a long-term plan that goes beyond electoral cycles, as well as importantly a plan for a staged financial commitment outlining how infrastructure and other facilities will be provided. And then it needs to be implemented with purpose!

At the forefront of planning for the Bays Precinct must be the concept that this is publicly owned land and its development must bring clear public benefits.

Decisions need to be open and transparent with proper planning processes and design excellence as key elements. And no more unsolicited proposals…

In this day and age, sustainability should be a fundamental part of any plan to redevelop the precinct, and it is not acceptable to redevelop large parts of our city based on power from the coal-fired grid.

The area, with its deep-water port, maritime fleet, fish markets and power station,
represents an important remnant of Sydney’s fast-disappearing maritime and industrial history. Its renewal must recognise this, by conserving and adapting significant buildings and structures and providing creative interpretations of that history.

An integrated public transport strategy including ferries, is essential and should prioritise maximising access and sustainable operation. The City of Sydney has the second-highest residential densities in Australia, and Leichhardt Council, which adjoins the precinct, has the fourth highest, so a range of transport options is vital.

A diverse range of housing, including affordable housing and accommodation for students, should be part of the mix – though carefully located so as not to preclude maritime and working harbour uses in the precinct. And new development should respect the heritage and character of existing neighbourhoods.

Public access to the foreshore must be maximised and new open space provided for the local community. Just two weeks ago we were proud to declare open to the public 300 more metres of Glebe’s harbour front walkway adding to the 2.17 kilometres already completed.

The City and the local community have argued strongly for the retention of the old Glebe Island Bridge. Apart from its intrinsic heritage value, the bridge also provides protection for small recreational craft like kayaks and dragon boats in Blackwattle and Rozelle Bays.

This new precinct could substantially boost the economic life of the city and the State. It could provide new space for our universities, become a hub for sustainable research and development, and allow for the expansion of start-ups and creative industries.

Most importantly, its redevelopment must serve a larger vision for Sydney - one that will meet important broader needs for housing and jobs while integrating with surrounding areas and benefiting local communities.

**Keynote Speaker: Professor Stephen Cairns**

Professor Cairns is an Architect, urban planner and Scientific Director of the Future Cities Laboratory in Singapore. He presented an overview of the redevelopment of an area of Hamburg to create a new precinct, Hafencity. He used this redevelopment as an example of the use of “Open city” principles.

The redevelopment includes its own underground station, and is now home to a university precinct as well as commercial development, including what Stephen described as an “inviting and identifiable headquarters building”. The university has developed a study centre strongly linked to the redevelopment and it is a significant source of learning and support for the project. Stephen said “we have to learn as we go.”

The creation of Hafencity is a “long and complex project” and Stephen has found that public engagement has been absolutely essential.

Stephen also described how he has used an innovative planning tool called “MATsim” to do 4-D modelling for the project. MATsim is a large-scale, agent-and activity based transport demand model originally developed for Singapore.
Rod Simpson’s speech is reproduced below:

I would like to reflect briefly on why we are here.

We are here because we are all interested in how we make the city and who decides what sort of city we want. We are in a situation where we feel we have lost our democratic right to determine the shape and quality of the city.

But we never really had a direct say- we entrusted government.

We have gone from a time when we looked to government to provide infrastructure to now when infrastructure and urban renewal needs to be bundled up and turned into a business opportunity, because to be fair, we don’t want to pay higher taxes.

Just before we get carried away and paint too rosy a picture of the past, it is hard to be nostalgic about freeways that carved though the city, improving access to the city centre but destroying and cutting off vast areas in the process.

It is fair to say that we accepted freeways, and other urban vandalism because we had a shared view of the city as a machine for wealth creation for all citizens. This view has faded if not collapsed.

We now see the city more as a machine for the accumulation of wealth by the few, and we see what we thought were public functions being handed to the private sector, and these privatised public functions are some of the most efficient parts of that wealth concentrating machine.

Actually they can’t avoid it because these privatised functions have to be profitable, and so they build on strengths - they reinforce the patterns of the city that we have just recognised as being problematic.

In the process of privatisation we feel we have lost even a modicum of accountability and transparency that we expect in a democracy.

And this disquiet and discomfort is felt not just in those places really feeling the effects, but also in better–off places like Balmain, Rozelle and Glebe, as we shall hear from Jane. So something smells not right.

What is the problem and what can we do about it?

We are not here to bash government - we want to fix it.

In my opinion the problem is that the institutional arrangements for how citizens’ voices are heard have not kept pace with our more sophisticated and complex view of the city and our ever higher expectations on the one hand, and the corporatisation and commercialisation of government functions on the other.

That sounds like gobbledygook. To bring it down to ground a bit: one of the reasons we invited Stephen here was to hear about the different governance arrangements at HafenCity. A corporation at arm’s length from government, not just about profits or revenue and fully engaged with the citizens of Hamburg and the residents of the place itself and the results I think, speak for themselves.

To see governance as a dry topic with little relationship to quality or character of places is
wrong. How you ‘design’ the governance, will fundamentally affect how you design ‘the deal’, and how you design and structure the deal is like designing the DNA of a project. And having genetically engineered the project embryo, you stand back and watch it grow into … Barangaroo.

So in my opinion, this is where we really need innovation: in the development of new forms of localised, place-specific entities that include local and wider community representation, at arm’s length from government.

How often do we hear the refrain that ‘the private sector knows how to do ‘it’ better, faster, cheaper’? The problem is, what is ‘it’? We don’t necessarily want or need ‘IT’, because ‘it’ is business as usual. Business as usual will always aim for the highest profits with lowest risk, or in the case of infrastructure, perform a narrow function and do nothing else.

Instead the first thing we should be asking when we approach an individual place is ‘what does the city need?’

To illustrate my point: In the case of the Bays Precinct, do we need more expensive housing near the water and more cars? Or do we need more affordable housing, perhaps without any car parking given the proximity to the city.

Secondly, when we think of major infrastructure we should be getting as much out of it as we can. For example, surely if we are going to build WestConnex then we should be putting in a metro subway at the same time.

So in conclusion, designing the governance, working out how citizens can be actively engaged and empowered in decision making, the potential of entities that sit somewhere between government and the private sector, has not been given nearly enough thought, and there is no amount of ‘design excellence’ or ‘starchitecture’ that can overcome a badly structured deal.

Professor Jane Marceau

Focused on the Bays Precinct and set out the history of community involvement She said the community is “deeply wedded to sensible planning”, and has over time developed a set of principles for the precinct. The principles call for the Bays Precinct planning process to ensure:

a) Precedence is given to the public good as a driving overarching principle for the renewal of these publicly owned foreshores and bays;

b) That the community of Sydney is able to fully engage in all stages of the planning process;

c) Excellence in planning and design for all development proposals by designating clear, publicly endorsed planning principles developed by the Bays Precinct Community Reference Group and actively seeking local and international ideas for renewal;

d) That all unsolicited development proposals relating to any Bays Precinct public land or waters be subject to open competitive tenders and proper public scrutiny;

e) That there be no alienation of the Bays Precinct foreshores from public ownership by sale or long term lease;
f) That high priority be given to the inclusion of social and affordable housing as a significant element of any residential uses;

g) That continuous public access to the harbour foreshore be a core principle for all development in the Bays Precinct;

h) That a significant proportion of the 80 plus hectares of publicly owned lands be retained for public uses including open space

i) The creative adaption and re-use of key heritage items such as the White Bay Power Station and the Glebe Island Bridge.

Lucy Cole-Edelstein, Straight Talk

Spoke about engagement. She said that consultation is not enough. Lucy said that in her experience engagement is quite straightforward; there is frustration because we don’t approach it in a straightforward way. She said there can be no shrinking away from engagement.

Lucy’s view is that engagement has to be impactful, and meaningful. For example, she said, if the city is to work we need public transport and that will come at a cost. We need to have a real conversation about density decisions, to make public transport affordable.

Some power needs to be shifted. People have been saying they want to be involved in decisions about their lives. Lucy advised attention to the question: Who is in the room and who isn’t?

Engagement needs to be engaging in her view; the subject matter is interesting, and engagement can be fun. It should also be educative, and deliberative. Her approach is to put a group of people in a room with a range of information; the process then requires thinking, contemplation, and dialogue. Lucy noted that the idea of a citizens’ jury involving random selection (New Democracy Foundation) is popular at the moment.

Lucy is of the view that everyday people, given information, do come up with sensible ideas. She said we need to examine the role of “stakeholders” and the level of voice and attention we given them. The only voices heard may be the extreme ones. We need to be confident we’re hearing all the views.

In moving towards participation, people need information to make informed decisions. And she recommended that the Department of Planning and UrbanGrowth both need to be in the room.

Discussion Points

Rod Simpson talked about the importance of fine grain, which has served humans well for thousands of years. It allows a city to grow incrementally.
Stephen Cairns expanded on the governance of Hafencity. The Corporation responsible for it is wholly owned by the municipality of Hamburg. It has good membership and has made good decisions; built up momentum which delivered good results.

Its KPIs are “world’s best quality in sustainable urban practice”. There was a massive advantage because while the land is polluted and flood-prone, it can be left to lie fallow and the job is to manage its decrepit state – not so in a “boom” scenario.

Lucy Cole-Edelstein responded to concern that there are many voices missed, like young people and working parents. She said that constantly demonstrating that you have heard and responded builds trust.

Jane Marceau responded to a question about whether the community wants certainty and whether it will be happy with principles. She said that these are not alternatives, the community wants to be asked what kinds of things will be good here; she thinks trust comes from a recognition that you share a number of critical values.

In relation to design quality, Rod Simpson commented that in HafenCity very talented architects were able to produce exquisite responses within an agreed framework; and Jane Marceau commented that in the Bays Precinct we are nowhere near thinking about design excellence and buildings yet.