

IT'S NOT A CAR PARK – IT'S A PARK PARK

Fergus Neilson suggests to the Centennial Park Trustees that if they are going to make changes – they should make grand changes.

In every great city there is a great park. Parks define society. Manicured verges and trimmed trees speak of a society that prides itself on appearances (Stockholm). Cracked tarmac and broken statues reflect a society still clawing its way back to former glories (Madrid). A park full of frisbee-flingers, jugglers, fashion exhibitionists, swarming joggers, cyclists and in-line skaters reflects an optimistic society brimful of self-confidence (New York).

We have such a park in Sydney. Centennial Park. It is a park open to all, egalitarian, unpretentious, and exuberant. It is a park that is now subject to proposals for change. Changes that seem designed to regulate, discipline and confine. Almost un-Australian.

Proposed changes – cycles forced to travel against the flow of cars, pay parking around the outside of the Grand Parade, and formal pedestrian crossings – have raised the ire of many park users. I am heckling as a Sydney resident disturbed by the leg-irons that the Centennial Park Trust and its consultants are threatening to attach to all park users. I am heckling by asking the Centennial Park Trustees to apply four principles before making any final decisions. Principles that might also be usefully applied by any organisation contemplating change.

Firstly, drop the prejudicial language. The planning proposals refer to groups of cyclists as “packs”, a word that implies predatory behaviour. A “pack of wolves” threatening defenseless sheep. In reality, cyclists cycle together for protection in what they prefer to call a “bunch”. Almost every cyclist, at one time or another, has been hit by a beer can flung from a passing car or has suffered verbal abuse from chemically stimulated taxi passengers early on a Sunday morning. They know that it's safer to ride in a bunch for visibility and protection. They do it because they are the sheep. Not because they are the wolves.

Secondly, do the maths. Quantitative evidence is a powerful persuader. New plans propose that all cyclists, skaters, and wheelchair athletes roll around the park anti-clockwise, against the flow of cars. A cyclist travelling at 25 kph has a speed differential of 5 kph with a car passing at 30 kph in the same direction. New plans now propose that cyclists be forced to pedal in the opposite direction to cars, at an effective closing speed of 55 kph. Basic laws of physics apply. The force of any impact equals weight times speed squared. A head-on collision will be 121 times more impactful than a 5kph nudge from behind (55 times 55 divided by 5 times 5). That's the difference between a pair of shredded cycling knicks and a funeral.

Thirdly, think outside the box. Space is not the only way to separate use and users. Time can be a much cheaper and more effective way of maximising multiple use of common facilities. Schools don't double up on building space to accommodate incompatible user

groups. They sensibly use the same facility for different groups at different times. Teenagers between nine and four. Adult education between six and ten at night.

Why not apply the same principle to Centennial Park? Cycle bunch training happens between 5:45am and 7:15am every weekday, and at 4:00pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays. “Wheelies” tend to be there 7:00am through 9:00am. City Tatts runners meet at 8:00am on Sunday only. Family picnickers and recreational drivers peak at summer weekends. There is no need to pay for physical separation when time already does it for free.

Before we get to the final principle, let’s recognize a few practicalities. You want more parking? Then use peripheral and connecting roads more efficiently (try angle parking on the wider stretches). You don’t want to add extra tarmac? Then open up the grass Playing Fields (at the junction of Parkes and Dickens Drives) for temporary parking on half a dozen busy weekends each year. You want to charge park users? Then put “eTag” at each entry gate. Don’t create a forest of meters that will be stuffed with chewing gum and wipe out your revenue benefits with the costs of collection and maintenance. You don’t want to offend low mobility users? Then maintain angled parking on the Grand Parade only at the Centennial Park Cafe and add it on the outside perimetre at the Childrens Cycleway so that parents don’t have to herd their children across the flow of traffic. You want to encourage new users? Then introduce weekend shuttle bus services from Bondi Junction and Central Station.

Practicalities taken care of, Trustees, so please consider the final principle. If you are going to make changes – make grand changes.

Great parks are Park Parks. They are not Car Parks. Great parks allow car parking. Of course they do. But they don’t smother their greatest feature with cars. Central Park Drive in New York is closed to cars from 10am to 3pm and from 7pm to 10pm every weekday as well as all day both Saturday and Sunday. You won’t see cars parked along the Seawall around Vancouver’s Stanley Park, or along the Broad Walk and Rotten Row in London’s Hyde Park, or anywhere in the Boboli Gardens behind the Pitti Palace in Florence.

If you want to make real change, if you want to make Centennial Park really world-class, then make the Grand Parade a (mostly) no-parking zone. Make it a wide, sweeping, tree-lined treasure with uninterrupted views on both sides. Accept that parks are about recreation, not transportation, and in a modest way follow the example of Central Park by closing all of Centennial Park to cars one weekday afternoon each week - every week of the year.

Now, THAT’s a park.

Fergus Neilson is currently on sabbatical and is enjoying Centennial Park a lot more frequently than he was a year ago. Hecklers can be sent to sbaldwin@mail.fairfax.com.au or fergusneilson@attglobal.net