



THE HECKLER

It's not a car park, it's a park for people, picnics and fun

Fergus Neilson suggests to the Centennial Park trustees that if they are going to make changes, they should be grand ones.

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 suggest 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 - forcing cyclists to travel against the flow of cars and introducing pay parking around the outside of Grand Parade - have raised the ire of many park users. I am heckling as a Sydney resident disturbed by the leg-irons the trustees are threatening to attach to all park users. I ask the trustees to apply four principles before they make any final decisions - principles that might also be usefully applied by any organisation contemplating change.

First, drop the prejudicial language. Planning proposals refer to groups of cyclists as "packs", a word that implies predatory behaviour. A "pack of wolves" threatening defenceless 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. Cyclists know that it is safer to ride in a bunch. They do it for visibility. They do it because they are the sheep, not because they are the wolves.

Second, do the maths. Quantitative evidence is a powerful persuader. It is proposed that all cyclists, skaters, and wheelchair athletes roll around the park anti-clockwise, against the flow of cars. With the present same-way flow, a cyclist travelling at 25 km/h has a speed differential of 5 km/h with a car passing at 30 km/h in the same direction. The new plan will result in an effective head-on closing speed of 55 km/h. 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 5 km/h nudge from behind. That's the difference between a pair of shredded cycling knicks and a funeral.

Third, 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 10 at night.

Why not maintain the same principle in Centennial Park?

Cycle bunch training only happens on Tuesdays and Thursdays between 5.45 am and 7.15 am, and from 4 pm. "Wheelies" tend to be there 7 am through 9 am. City Tatts runners meet at 8 am on Sunday only. Family picnickers and recreational drivers peak on summer weekends. There is no need to pay for full-time physical separation when time already does it free.

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 10 am to 3 pm and from 7 pm to 10 pm every weekday and 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.

This leads to the fourth and most important principle. If the trustees want to make change, then they should only make meaningful change. No fiddling at the margins. If they want to make Centennial Park a world-class park, then make Grand Parade a no-parking zone (except near the kiosk and the children's cycleway). Make it a wide, sweeping, tree-lined treasure with uninterrupted views on both sides. Bolder still, why not make a start down the route already taken by Central Park? Close Centennial Park to cars one weekday afternoon - every week of the year.

Now, THAT's a park.

Fergus Neilson is on sabbatical and is enjoying Centennial Park - early in the morning. Readers are invited to send Hecklers to sbaldwin@mail.fairfax.com.au