Fremantle: 'reminders of a working port.'

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Abstract: Recently, the West Australian state government placed a ban on live animal export out of the port of Fremantle. This was perhaps one of the last phenomenological markers, aside from the echo of containers being stacked, that reminded citizens of the functioning port at Fremantle - the smell of sheep inviting the populace to consider if only briefly, the "forgotten space"[1] of the global maritime trade that once psychologically and physically defined everyday life in the city. Yet, the uniqueness of Fremantle as an urban entity is a theme that underlines much of the city's identity and is largely derived from its role as the state's predominant port. Approaching a stage of obsolescence in its lifecycle, the port at Fremantle is forecast to be at capacity by 2020 and a number of 'transformational moves' have been devised by government to reinvigorate the city and waterfront.[2] In this regard, the relatively short European history of the port compresses the usual narratives of city-port evolution into under 200 years. Starting out with the 'FREO 2029 - transformational moves' strategic plan, this paper works through several historical 'slices' representative of urban transformations in the port/city relationship. These slices reveal how, as maritime historian Frank Broeze stated, "the ultimate rationale of the port,"[3] that is the transfer of goods and labour from ship to shore, has shaped the unique urban and architectural morphology of Fremantle across this short 200-year period. The aim of this methodology is to illustrate how future urban opportunities may be understood in relation to historical maritime activities.

Keywords: architecture; port cities; colonialism; re-use; privatisation; heritage; urbanisation;

INTRODUCTION

In the context of global port cities Fremantle in Western Australia is an interesting case as it quite precisely spans the 'modern' period of port development globally. Fremantle was born of the industrial age and planted as the anchor of a new British colony. The colonisers arrived in 1829 on the western shores of the island continent of Australia, and first set down in an area at the mouth of the Derbarl Yerrigan, named the Swan River by the British, belonging to the local Whadjuk Noongar people. This sandy inlet was a productive hunting and fishing ground for the local Aboriginal population. For the British the site was considered a strategic point in developing profitable commercial trade connections in the Indian Ocean, and since its inception it has served key gateway functions of both general and particular kinds: it was the primary landing point for settler-colonists and migrants for many decades and continues to be a major stop for tourists; and it formed a major part of the east-west trade routes on the Indian Ocean rim motivated by the trade of goods critical to the burgeoning Empire, like sugar and tea, to which Imperial era Britons had developed an addiction.[4] On both counts Fremantle has operated as a magnet for and disseminator of flows of material, cultural and living traffic; trading goods, produce, flora and fauna and, accompanying people from across the globe, a diverse array of values, ideas and practices.

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[1] We borrow this term from photographer and theorist Allan Sekula. Australian maritime historian, Frank Broeze also explicitly talks about the tendency in Australian historiography to consider the continent merely a land mass, rather than an island defined by the sea as a space of trade. See Frank Broeze, "From the Periphery to the Mainstream," *The Great Circle* 11, no. 1 (1989), 3. And Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1995)

[2] The idea of obsolescence is taken from Jacques Charlier's lifecycle model which is adapted from the well regarded 'Anyport' morphological summary developed by James Bird. See Jacques Charlier, "Dockland regeneration for new port uses," in *European Port Cities in Transition*, eds. Brian Hoyle and David Pinder, (London: Belhaven Press, 1992), 139.

[3] Frank Broeze, "Port Cities: The Search for an Identity," *Journal of Urban History* 11, no. 2 (February 1985): 213.

[4] Deborah Gare, "In the Beginning: Empire, faith and conflict in Fremantle," *Studies in Western Australian History*, no. 31(2016): 8.

It is the premise of this paper that fundamental to this modern settler-colonial experience is the imperative of enterprise, and it has particular resonance with the speculative economy associated with the establishment of Western Australia's Swan River Colony. Insofar as enterprise engages with notions of innovation and development it is equally a driver of the activity and morphology of the port city of Fremantle. Enterprise is a useful lens through which to examine continuity and change in Fremantle's urban form and fabric – its tangible heritage – and we have deployed it as a conceptual framework that informs our simultaneous backward and forward glance at the port city's past and future. In our previous work[5] we have interpreted enterprise as a form of agency, which explains the human urge to develop (and especially 'improve') their environment, particularly in valuable urban contexts, to benefit or better themselves. Each of the temporal slices that we use to illustrate Fremantle's evolution as a port city, foregrounding the current period of 'revitalisation,' and then exploring a number of moments from settlement, feature enterprise as a defining motivation for urban change.

PRELUDE - 2029

After decades facing a declining economy, population stagnation and employment shrinkage, the local government of the City of Fremantle has set out to reassert its position in the success of the broader Western Australian economy that has expanded on the back of the most recent mineral boom. The government's newest strategic plan, 'FREO 2029,' outlines several 'transformational moves' to 'revitalise' parts of the city's urban core identified as stimuli of growth, and to preserve 'those special features that make Fremantle unique amongst Australian cities.'[6] The planning document is accompanied by generic illustrations typical of many such urban regeneration projects, straddling the line between evocative impressions and a legitimate proposal to avoid any superficial backlash from the community. Multitudes of arrows are superimposed onto the city plan, accompanied by perspective views of streetscapes in which proposed buildings are transparent so as to be inoffensive. Key words include 'diversify,' 'networks,' 'liveable,' and 'integration', and precedents cited include the Highline in New York and work by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, whilst the more significant questions of the city's identity in relation to port function are relegated to 'views,' an 'ever-changing backdrop,' providing 'a distinctive commercial offering.' The most prominent feature of Fremantle is the working port and its associated infrastructure that has historically defined the urban form of the city and its hinterland. Part of the new strategy is a proposed rezoning of land and uses around the inner harbour, where the precinct plan follows the global and national waterfront revitalisation trend to attract commercial, residential and leisure-based development as the driver of symbolic and economic rejuvenation.

COLONIAL PORT: 1829 – 1850

A number of factors emerged in the first years of British settlement that laid the foundation for the autonomous urban identity Fremantle is attempting to maintain today. Unlike other Imperial settlements on the eastern seaboard of Australia of Sydney and Melbourne, a logic based on the

[5] See www.excursionswa.org and Hislop, Kate "Sketches in the sand: speculative thought and the aesthetic foundations of the Swan River Colony 1826-1839." PhD thesis, University of Western Australia, 2011.
[6] The 'FREO 2029 - transformational moves document,' can be understood as the more publicly accessible face of the Westport Strategy which sets out in more detail the logistics, governance, infrastructural and economic details for the development of the inner and outer harbours at Fremantle, Kwinana and Bunbury. See https://www.transport.wa.gov.au/projects/westport-port-and-environs-strategy.asp

"facility of communication,"[7] saw the first Governor, James Stirling, separate the port from the administrative centre and capital city of Perth located 18 kilometres up stream. The reasons for this decision are multiple, the most commonly held being Stirling's belief that the site at Perth would be the centre of a chain of communication from the agricultural hinterlands to the east and the receiving centre of Fremantle to the west that was out of range of naval bombardment. There are also undoubtedly aesthetic reasons that influenced his choice of locality, including a desire to establish a "picturesque setting,"[8] influenced by pictorial conventions of the time and the urgency of projecting an appealing landscape for land speculation. This urge is the outcome of the Swan River Colony's anomalous status as the first 'free' Imperial settlement since the colonisation of the America's to not initially exploit convict labour. Success was reliant on the financial input of speculators, merchants, gentry and their indentured labourers, of whom were promised, and shown, an agricultural wonderland depicted in paintings received by a receptive audience in England. Stirling's decision established a distinction between port and city influenced by the pictorial superiority of one site according to the romantic visual conventions of the period. The political implications of this early decision are long lasting and is an interesting topic in its own right - since its official inception as a town in 1929, Fremantle has been held by the left side of politics consistently.

Unlike Sydney's natural and celebrated deepwater harbour, unfavourable geomorphology meant that Fremantle's river mouth was blocked by a shallow limestone bar obstructing the passage of larger ships upstream. However, the demand to transport material upstream to Perth confirmed the site as the necessary coastal depot. Narratives of settlement at the Swan River Colony tell of the site's inadequacies as a harbour - little shelter from the south westerly sea breeze, shallow waters and sandy foreshores were all impediments on the unloading and dispatching of goods and persons. These impediments meant that goods and passengers were to be lightered from ships anchored in the outer harbour of Gage Roads, into the bay south of the river mouth, and then carted 220m across the peninsula to be reloaded for the river journey to Perth.[9] The urban implications of this movement of goods and people established a clear north south axis across the peninsula, which terminated at the North and South bays with short jetties. Resultantly, the first streets in the West End comprised of merchant warehouses and goods stores, many of which are still extant today.

These structures were built right to the street line to maximise floor space, and also as Shaw points out, the first planning codes stipulated a requirement to build a wall to the boundary, even on empty lots in order to impede drifting sand from entering the street.[10] This defined an urban character distinctive from Perth where Stirling had imposed a 9m setback to satisfy a preference for the British Edenic garden and suburban sensibility.[11] Alternatively, Fremantle was perceived by settlers and ship captains alike as awash with wind, water and "nothing but sand, sand in every direction as far as the eye could reach."[12] The difficult conditions contributed to a psyche in the

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[7] James Stirling to R.W. Hay, Permanent Under-Secretary for the Colonies, 7 January 1832, cited in M. Tull, Research in Maritime History no.12: A Community Enterprise: The History of the Port of Fremantle 1897 - 1997 (International Maritime Economic History Association: Newfoundland, 1997), 9.
[8] Tom Stannage, *The People of Perth: a Social History of Western Australia's Capital City.* (Perth: Carroll's for Perth City Council: 1979) 1.
[9] B.J. Shaw, "Evolution of Fremantle," in *Western Landscapes*, ed. J. Gentilli (The University of Western Australia Press: Nedlands, 1979), 331.
[10] Shaw, "Evolution of Fremantle," 333.
[11] Kate Hislop, "Sketches in the sand: speculative thought and the aesthetic foundations of the Swan River Colony 1826-1839," (PhD thesis, University of Western Australia, 2011): 150.
[12] Quoted in Hislop, "Sketches in the sand," 152.

local populace that revolved around the necessity of overcoming physical constraints to allow for the enterprising activities of the port.

The north/south grid of streets set up by the crossing of the peninsula, was intersected by a High Street which, owing to the east west linearity of the strip of land began at Arthur Head, a limestone outcrop elevated above the township, where the site of the colonies first permanent public structure, the panopticon gaol known as the Round House was built in 1831. At the western end, High St terminated at St John's Church in King's Square built in 1843, and together these two buildings symbolically inscribed the dual role of Christian morality and social order into a built fabric funded by the wealthy class of merchants and government officials.[13] Arthur Head blocked access to the jetties set up by the Fremantle Whaling Company jointly owned by the Postmaster John Bateman and the Harbourmaster Daniel Scott. Together the two facilitated the carving of a tunnel under the Roundhouse to allow for the easier movement of equipment from beach to warehouses in the West End. The relationships of material flow and city plan reflect a highly compact spatial association, and one that depends directly on what Hoyle and Pinder describe as "maximum functional interdependence"[14] of maritime space and city space, but also highlights the significance of enterprising individual actors in shaping the earliest urban forms of the colonial port. These figures played a dual role as government representatives and entrepreneurial agents whose commercial interests were also those shared by the success of the colony as a whole.

The conditions of the sea and maritime trade and the essential relationship it had to the development of the urban fabric was present in the consciousness not only of those who worked within the space, but also for the elite classes who relied on their labour. Concerning for the wealthier citizens like Bateman and Scott, was the fact that Fremantle was an expensive, slow and a difficult port to negotiate, and was failing to be competitive in terms of global trade.[15] The poor reputation of Fremantle's facilities in the context of Imperial trade saw large steam powered international postal services such as the Peninsular and Oriental (P&O) preferring Albany 400km south of Perth because of its more appropriate natural harbour. A requirement to significantly reshape the terrestrial landscape around the water's edge started to become paramount for the success of the colony.

INSTITUTIONAL PORT: 1850 – 1880

The labour force to initiate the reshaping did not exist prior to the introduction of convicts in 1850, who set about establishing many of Fremantle's most predominant public buildings. The first being the convict depot and gaol, situated east of the main settlement upon a hill which looks back toward the West End. The elevated location served strategic importance, assisting in the movement of quarried stone from the site, via tram, downhill to the South Bay where the first acts of official land reclamation was carried out.[17] Along the augmented shoreline were erected a number of important public buildings including the water police barracks and the Commissariat buildings on either side of Cliff St to process and protect the movement of goods across the peninsula. At this time, the north and south jetties that terminated the peninsula axis,

[13] R. Reece and R. Pascoe, *A Place of Consequence: A pictorial History of Fremantle* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press: Fremantle, 1983), 6.
[14] Brian Hoyle and David Pinder, *European Port Cities in Transition* (London: Belhaven Press, 1992), 8.
[15] Malcolm Tull, *Research in Maritime History no. 12: A community enterprise: The history of the Port of Fremantle, 1897 to 1997* (International Maritime Economic History Association: Newfoundland, 1997), 11.
[17] Margaret Pitt Morrison, "Settlement and Development," in *Western Towns and Buildings*, ed. Margaret Pitt Morrison and John White (The University of Western Australia Press: Nedlands, 1979), 28.

were joined by a new jetty in the south bay, which by 1880 had reached almost 1.2km south west into the Indian Ocean.[18] The area of alighting around the South jetty became densely populated with warehouses and storage yards that were served by a tramway squeezed between the cliff face Commissariat and commercial properties.

The condensed urban layout was also altered with the scattering of public buildings outside of the West End, extending the town's grid further south and east. Significant infrastructural works opened up the town via the Fremantle Traffic Bridge which finally connected the Swan River's north and south banks 1866. This event saw the bottlenecking of passengers and cargo in Fremantle reduce, and with the arrival of a railway station in 1881, set up the large infrastructural shifts of the modern harbour in the following decade. This is best illustrated by the construction of the new rail terminus on the site of the recreation 'Green,' - land reclaimed by citizens in the 1850s as a cricket pitch and parkland. Displacing this leisure space with the rail terminus and workshops initiated the industrialisation the northern eastern margins of the West End, replacing rival matches of cricket between Perth and Fremantle with the dispatch and reception of people and materials.

INDUSTRIAL PORT: 1880 – 1950

Colonial port development is distinctive in the urgency upon which major engineering works took place because of the convergence of steam powered trade and the requirement for associated infrastructure upon a relatively, to European examples, underdeveloped palimpsest. Compounding this immediacy for an innovative response at Fremantle was the difficulty of the natural conditions.[26] Competition between Fremantle and Albany as the primary port had spurred on local merchants who advocated for improved facilities, which by 1889 had reached a critical point given the opening of the Great Southern Railway from Albany to Perth.[27] It was also around this time the establishment of the West Australian Shipping Association, started by Bateman's son emerged in an attempt to compete with British shipowners who had monopolised freight prices between London and Fremantle.[28] This entrepreneurial sector of Fremantle merchants, whose names adorn the friezes of many buildings in West End, were actively asserting the port as economically viable in the global market. The proceeding infrastructural changes required to modernise the facilities in order to encourage this investment were carried out by engineer, C.Y. O'Connor who was responsible for many of the state's most significant early infrastructural projects. Completed in 1901, O'Connor's plan was progressive because it adopted marginal wharfs, meaning ships would berth parallel to the shoreline as opposed to the typical and problematic finger piers, or jetties, which dominated port design in Australia at the time. O'Connor's plan premeditated the spatial requirements for containerisation, and remains largely unchanged, with the large scale land reclamation works straightening the original outline of the peninsula in the creation of Victoria Quay.[29]

As a result of O'Connor's plan, the North and South Jetties were made obsolete and the focus of merchant activities moved north east along Phillimore St, parallel to the new wharf. This slide stretched not only the working port fabric along the city's edge, but pulled with it the active

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[18] John Ewers, *The Western Gateway: A History of Fremantle* (Perth: The University of Western Australia Press, 1971), 92.

[26] Frank Broeze, Peter Reeves and Kenneth McPherson, "Imperial ports and the modern world economy: The case of the Indian Ocean," *The Journal of Transport History* 7, no.2 (September 1986): 3.

[27] Tull, *Research in Maritime History,* 17.

[28] Frank Broeze, "A Great Frankenstein: The West Australian Shipping Association 1884-1906,"*Studies in Western Australian History*, no. 13 (1992): 50.

[29] Tull, *Research in Maritime History,* 22.

centre of port activity, now not isolated to West End but centred around the East End where large Wool store warehouses introduced a new urban scale. Crucial to this shift was the relocation of the passenger railway terminal to a position perpendicular to Market Street, thereby redirecting the flow of people along the streets which were beginning to be opulently lined with Victorian hotels and offices built at the height of the gold boom of the 1890s - including the P&O Office who had finally commenced a regular mail service in 1900.[30] O'Connor's figure ground plan from 1901 demonstrates the building boom and consolidation of the West End's remaining sites, forcing development eastward along High St. The parallel nature of the new quay and the mercantile strip also represents a shift of perspective from within the townscape. Previous port activities were integrated mainly around Arthur Head, the new industrial landscape became largely visible down all perpendicular streets. Simultaneously more visible, but less physically integrated, this 'backdrop' has become a point of significant contention, with conservative local groups opposing any obscuring of this view in relation to redevelopment schemes emerging today, and is largely symptomatic of the gentrification processes that began during the 1960s whereby the port was backgrounded as visual asset.[31]

STAGNATION and PRESERVATION: 1950 – 1987

Fremantle hasn't seen an injection of investment on the scale proposed today since the 1987 America's Cup Defence yachting race was staged in the port city. The event, which attracted the attention of the nation, has since been mythologised in Fremantle's history and continues to be a contentious topic in local debates surrounding urban regeneration – on one hand it is seen as a defining moment of urban and economic resuscitation, and on the other, it marks the symbolic terminus of Fremantle as a port-city. This is a position consistent with global trends, whereby tourism and leisure, often enabled by a hallmark event, come to replace a city's original identity.[45] In the case of Fremantle, the Cup's legacy lies in the enduring rebranding, switching the regularity of maritime industry and labour to the leisurely heroics of yachting supremacy that was conveyed and consumed in the prevailing media at the time. This switch was brought about by various factors, most notably the advent of containerisation and the parallel expansion and suburbanisation of the greater metropolitan region in the 1960s.[46] As car ownership began to dictate the extent of Perth's metropolis, so too did the container and the logistics of truck related freight, which meshed coherently with the hinterland territory of the big-box, shopping centre and homogenous housing subdivision. The irony is that while the rest of Perth was growing by the end of the 1970s, 75% of dockworkers previously working on the inner harbour at Fremantle were left unemployed, and the historic West End of Fremantle fell into relative dereliction.[47] Out of this milieu of simultaneous outward growth, and inward decline, emerges a form of urban enterprise in Fremantle that can be described as opportunist.

A number of speculative agents comprising developers and a local population began to realise the investment potential in the largely abandoned West End. This can be seen in the co-opting of heritage buildings and their transformations, guided by local heritage advocacy groups and the

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[30] Tull, *Research in Maritime History,* 21.

[31] Shapan Leon Cox, "Whose City/Whose Fremantle: Reconceptualising Space for an Open Politics of Place," (PhD thesis, Curtin University, 2012) 157.

[45] Jim Macbeth, John Selwood and Sarah Veitch, "Paradigm Shift or a Drop in the Ocean? The America's Cup Impact on Fremantle," *Tourism Geographies* 14, no. 1 (2011): 179.

[46] Sarah Veitch, "Mythology as hallmark event legacy: the endurance of America's Cup mythology in the city of Fremantle," *Journal of Sport and Tourism,* 18, no.2 (2013): 70.

[47] D. Drummond, "Home of the America's Cup: The 1987 America's Cup Defence and its Impact on Fremantle," (Honours thesis, University of Western Australia, 2002) 17.

local council, who spent millions restoring the Victorian era pubs, hotels and office buildings in the precinct building up to the event. Crucial to this investment was the British-born investor developer, Alan Bond, who financed Australia's 1973 America's Cup win on the back of his lucrative housing ventures and land openings that underwrote the northward extension of Perth's coastal suburban blanket.[48] Bond embodied the prevailing "pioneer spirit," in a "land of entrepreneurs and risk-takers," that Catholic businessmen seeking to establish Australia's first private Catholic University were attracted.[49] The large goods warehouses and hotel buildings were seen to hold potential for educational purposes, as vice Chancellor Peter Tannock explains "although many of the old buildings were derelict or in poor repair, they held the promise of development as large-space educational facilities. Many were also relatively cheap to purchase, because there were few other obvious alternative uses for them in the then depressed post-America's Cup Fremantle real estate market."[50] Tannock's claim forgets the reality that occupying many of the abandoned buildings were the Rajneesh Sannyasins or 'Orange People,' – as well as many less affluent who were subsequently pushed out over the course of the revitalisation efforts. The Sannyasin headquarters was the Trade Union Hall, built in 1901 and abandoned by dock workers in the 1960s. Spatially, the port's infrastructure remained unchanged, and Fremantle's waterfront morphology was altered by the addition of Challenger Harbour – a docking facility used for private boats.

CONCLUSION

The America's Cup shifted the focus to the sailing ship in Fremantle harbour once again - not since prior to the advent of steam had sail been given such a predominant position in the ethos of the city. Paradoxically, the two periods contrast the connectedness of the city's urban fabric to the maritime functions of its port. Today, the rejuvenation of the city's economy and identity is a priority for the local government who seek to establish the connections it has lost. However, the default position towards waterfront revisitation described in this paper's prelude may not be the best means of drawing out the distinctive qualities that Fremantle aims to project to the world. The marketable aesthetic of obsolescence, the 'gritty character,' which FREO 2029 describes as 'reminders of a past working life', deny not only the true conditions of the working port across the inner harbour but also as Susan Oakley has explored, reinscribe colonial acts of land dispossession from the Indigenous occupants.[51] Given the questionable urban outcomes of waterfront redevelopments in other post-colonial ports around Australia, like Melbourne's Docklands, and Port Adelaide - where the creation of expensive housing enclaves and low quality public space have taken precedence, Fremantle has the opportunity now to consider how this waterfront edge could develop in other ways. The slices in the paper have set out to demonstrate how the functions of Fremantle's port have resulted in particular spatial and urban patterns that follow global trends of mercantilism, industrialisation, stagnation and revitalisation. These patterns also reflect an enterprising mentality unique to colonial ports derived from the particular conditions of that period.

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[48] Hislop, Kate and Felix Joensson, Daniel Martin and Jason Macarlino, "Land for Sail: How a yacht race turned Perth's coastal landscape green," *Future West Australian Urbanism*, no. 3 (2017): 27.

[49] A Malloy, *An Australian Catholic University: The Dream Renewed, the First Three Years (1988-1991)* (2014), 13.

[50] Peter Tannock, *The Founding and Establishment of the University of Notre Dame Australia: 1986-2014* (2014), 5.

[51] Susan Oakley and Louise Johnson, "Place-taking and Place-making in Waterfront Renewal, Australia," *Urban Studies*, 50, no. 2 (2012): 342.

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