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Thor Kerr

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FOR PLEASURE



Photograph by Prapti Widinugraheni

*'... on the islands the proponents were forced to qualify their claim
it would be one of the world's first carbon-free developments.'*¹

ABC Voiceover

Port Beach begins where the stone-locked, reclaimed land at Rous Head comes ashore. This broad white beach stretches a mile north until it is known as Leighton Beach, veering east then continuing north to the rocks before Perth's hip Cottesloe Beach.

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Port Beach is a place for sunbathing, swimming, dog walking and whatever between the big blue of the Indian Ocean and the colourful stacks of shipping containers lining Fremantle's Inner Harbour. Port Beach is not paradise fit for a Bounty Bar, but locals' desire for it sank a multi-billion-dollar property development and helped turn Labor's political heartland into the Greens' City of Fremantle. The thought of developers threatening this beach helped Greens members win local lower-house and upper-house seats in Western Australia's parliament, as well as the mayoral seat and other council positions. The Greens' wave that swept through Fremantle in 2009 built its momentum on the public reaction to the idea of a walled city threatening the beach and its community. This walled city was envisaged to withstand the rising waves of climate change, but it could not withstand the rising waves of public antagonism that eventually drowned it. North Port Quay was created for a global apocalyptic future, not the local democratic present. Supporting it was a big mistake.

'It was a perfect location because the area was degraded',² claimed Greg Poland, who inspired and headed the consortium behind North Port Quay. Poland planned to make a big investment in the project through his Strzelecki Group, which had developed large marina properties on Perth's metropolitan coast to the north and the south of Fremantle. The man was used to getting his way; although, occasionally, local publics got in the way of him. He needed a good reason for reclaiming land in the waters off Port Beach, and Poland thought he had found it. 'When you get older you start to change your opinion and you start to get smarter and you get more educated,' he said. 'When we started doing this project I wanted it to be environmentally friendly and carbon free.' Not sure how to go about it, Poland 'brought on

some good expertise and told them: my instructions are it's got to be right, it's got to be good'.³

Topped with oiled-back, silver hair, Poland was a formidable presence: the hyper-real image of a 1980s property developer. Within a dark jacket, Poland kept his shirt wide open for business. No tie, no jewellery, just authentic chest hair. Poland positioned himself as a champion of Western Australians. Perhaps he believed he really was. In Australian drawl, he emphasised words like 'the people' in an accent closer to that of former Labor leader Bob Hawke than any man of such substantial capital. Yet Poland knew what drove him to create North Port Quay: 'this is not a building that's going to be pulled down in 50 years. This is going to be around for decades, generations, hundreds of years, thousands of years hopefully.' This would be Poland's legacy: 'I don't want my children, definitely don't want my grandchildren, great grandchildren to look at me and say "he was a vandal". I want them to say "he was visionary".' Poland wanted to leave his mark – a heritage legacy for 'the people of Western Australia'. As part of this new-found wisdom, he pledged not to 'do anything wrong environmentally' under any circumstances: 'I don't think you can afford to do it emotionally, financially and historically. You have got to do the right thing, especially when it comes to your family.'⁴ But other people had other views, particularly about property development at the beach.

In the heart of Fremantle there are no longer any beaches, save the minor concave of Bathers Beach below the Round House fort, the first building of the Swan River colony. The beaches that once existed here have been converted through reclamation into parks and boat harbours so that sand is not encountered again until South Beach, at the southern end of the Fremantle Sailing Club. Unlike Port and Leighton beaches, which are exposed

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to the wind and waves of the Indian Ocean, South Beach is protected by Cockburn Sound. South Beach is tame and family functional: calm waters by a narrow beach, small dunes before grassed picnic areas containing a playground, barbeques, changing facilities and a decent cafe. The beaches around Fremantle evoke popular appeal because they mean different things to different people.⁵ Everyone can have a unique day at the beach. Diverse people with diverse experiences share the fact that these days may be remembered, and this memory collection can be used for imagining community.⁶ Urban beaches, although transformed by forgotten human action, form an important symbolic connection between an ideal of unadulterated nature and a collective ideal of Australia.⁷ Fremantle's beaches provide relief from the everyday pressures of urban life. On the beach, obligations diminish against an ocean horizon, against the smells and sounds of sea meeting shore. The beach is a place for seeing other possibilities; a place for recognising the imposition of common sense and resisting it.⁸ The beach seems natural to us because it appears outside human regulation, outside the realm of human property and beyond hegemony of commoditisation. Exposure to physical sensations of the beach, this experience of pleasure, opens up the way we think about ourselves. It helps loosen the binding conventions we have learned and adopted to govern ourselves.⁹ Both this pleasure of freedom and the continually changing forms of beaches contribute to them remaining commons rather than the property of individuals. The sense of beaches being beyond human regulation, being too dynamic for property surveying, makes it difficult to commoditise and trade them. Constructing borders within beaches is hugely problematic, but using beaches as symbolic borders around a community can appear natural.

News of North Port Quay broke in *The West Australian* newspaper on the morning of the project's official launch on Thursday, 29 May 2008. An image of the project occupied almost half of the front page of the state's only daily newspaper. A reader looked down on the interior of North Port Quay – an empty, hyper-modern city featuring a wide central canal surrounded by a vast, orderly assortment of low- and high-rise buildings. The only signs of life appeared to be constrained within two, or perhaps three, boats travelling up the canal. North Port Quay was a mechanical, futuristic city without people. Its flat landscape divided into erect, autonomous blocks by well-defined, untravelled roads. 'The \$10b plan for Freo island' seemed more like a circuit board than part of the City of Fremantle, known for its late-nineteenth-century retro streetscape. The signification of North Port Quay as a hyper-modern city, alien to Fremantle, was not lost on newspaper staff, who described it as 'a grand Dubai development, only this one's proposed for the Fremantle coast'. The newspaper announced that Fremantle's long-standing member of parliament Jim McGinty didn't like it. Instead of a public-relations coup, North Port Quay's occupation of *The West Australian's* front page suggested a looming transgression in Fremantle. However, editorial and imagery inside,¹⁰ on page 3, seemed to favour the project's fruition:

North Port Quay will sit north of Fremantle behind a 3.5km seawall designed to withstand global warming and storm surges and include homes for 20,000 people, 100,000sqm of office space, Venice-style canals and bridges, two new schools, 2200 boat pens, a performing-arts centre, a five-star hotel and convention centre.

North Port Quay was described from its proponents' perspectives without any overtly dissenting voices. The project director, Chris Carman, was given three paragraphs, sustainability expert Professor Peter Newman was 'enlisted' to support the project for four paragraphs, North Port Quay spokesman Mike Holtham was given two paragraphs and the project's master planner, Mike Day, had three paragraphs. Images supporting this page-3 article seemed less alien than the front-cover rendering. They showed people on a distant canal beach and North Port Quay fitting snugly alongside Fremantle's port. Readers were also informed that the project would 'face significant hurdles', which Chris Carman hoped to overcome by selling the idea to Fremantle community through months of public consultation: '10,000 promotional DVDs and pamphlets' would be sent 'to every residential address in Fremantle' to promote this 'carbon emission-free development' and its 'Fremantle-friendly sweeteners'. These sweeteners included boat pens, new beaches, a surf reef, a seawall for use as a fishing platform, renewable-energy production and rehabilitation of the seabed damaged by port activities.

The West Australian's coverage continued with an internet version of the article accompanied by a blog and poll headed: 'A shrewd plan to tackle the city's booming population woes or an environmental nightmare?' Readers were asked to see North Port Quay as a new technology to cope with Perth's rising population or an environmental nightmare that would damage Fremantle. The poll result suggested that 70 per cent of an undisclosed number of respondents considered North Port Quay a coping technology and 30 per cent considered it a nightmare. The blog attracted 134 responses – 99 on the project's launch day. The blog comments were less supportive than the poll. Many derided North Port Quay for being a playground for wealthy elites doomed by the

environmental blowback of consumerism. Parody was directed at the project, ‘Smithers Says’:

I say build it! As global warming takes its grip and a huge winter frontal system or remnants of a tropical cyclone drift down the coast, combined with a king tide and rising sea level – I’ll be keen to see what happens. During an event like this I can’t wait to see all of those precious mega-rich Perth tossers running out of their newly rendered McMansions, all of those born-to-rule small-business proprietors and, of course, WA’s local CUBs all running to their European cars and Toorak tractors trying to get out as the entire edifice gets hammered by a storm created by rampant Western consumerism. Bring it on.

‘SickofPessimism’ responded in all seriousness that seawall building experts would be capable of solving any rising seas threatening North Port Quay. Other comments favouring the project argued that an earlier Mandurah canal development had not ended in environmental crisis as predicted and that it was a model for other coastal developments around Perth. North Port Quay would be a sustainable development preventing urban sprawl, a model for other cities. It would help Perth to do better in a presumed global competition of post-industrial cities associated with sustainable development. ‘Jude’ argued:

It seems like a brilliant opportunity for the WA government to prove it’s not all about exploiting the country for resources as the development looks like it can set a global benchmark in sustainable development – something

which developers around the world can learn from.

Jude argued North Port Quay deserved a fair go: ‘it would be environmentally criminal not to consider it’ as a solution to the problems he articulated. These included a metropolitan land shortage due to native-title claims, environmental destruction through suburban development and the lack of an ‘international benchmark for high-quality carbon-free developments’. As the online argument shifted to carbon emissions, North Port Quay was challenged for ignoring ‘the many thousands of tonnes of diesel required to move that amount of earth’ and for needlessly threatening a marine environment when there was surplus land for development around Perth.

By the evening of 29 May, North Port Quay’s launch had been covered in news broadcasts for the Perth Metropolitan area by all major television stations.¹¹ These news broadcasts focused on the launch using video footage of the project’s 3D model and associated information supplied by the North Port Quay consortium. They also included footage of the launch press conference and interviews with opponents. Major news themes included the ambitious scale of the project over the sea, its sustainability credentials and the immediate controversy surrounding it. Public broadcaster the ABC¹² constructed public controversy around North Port Quay as a rationale for introducing this marketing initiative to viewers:

ANCHOR: A controversial plan to build a \$6 billion man-made island village off the coast of Fremantle is already drawing fierce opposition. Leading the criticism is the Premier Mr Alan Carpenter, who says the plan makes no sense and that he hopes it never happens.

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VLS High Angle. A digital 3D model of North Port Quay emerges as an island out of the sea: starting as a plan, then becoming grey concrete forms with zoom in. Subtitle: 'Corporate video'.

VOICEOVER: It is known as North Point Quay...

LS High Angle. Camera pans left as the grey concrete forms become a coloured built environment, a modern city of low- and high-rise buildings amid orderly streets and blue canals with the ocean and a blurred shoreline in background.

VOICEOVER: and it is being sold as an environmentally friendly development like nothing ever seen in Australia.

CS Chris Carmen in front of a blind-covered window and blue screen bearing project images and the text 'Mandurah Ocean Marina Entered by Benchmark Projects'. Subtitle: 'Chris Carman NORTH PORT QUAY'.

CHRIS CARMAN: We truly believe that this is going to be a world-class model of sustainable development.

VOICEOVER: The development would be powered with renewable energy...

VLS High Angle. Model of urban islands behind seawall. Camera pans left.

VOICEOVER: but with cars allowed on the islands the proponents were forced to qualify their claim...

MS High Angle. Model of seawall, with cars on it, a canal in middle ground and buildings, roads and trees in background. Camera pans right along seawall with cars travelling upon it.

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VOICEOVER: that it would be one of the world's first carbon-free developments.

CS. Peter Newman sitting in the same place as Chris Carmen was earlier. Subtitle: 'Peter Newman NORTH PORT QUAY'.

PETER NEWMAN: It's going to be carbon-free in terms of the way in which the people who are living there are powered.

LS High Angle. Model of a large low-rise structure, with several medium-rise buildings, a canal then the seawall, ocean and the coast behind it, a canal and several low-rise buildings on left. Camera pans left then cuts to a model of a large glass building in middle ground and Fremantle Port in background. Then a grand canal with several bridges over it leading to more buildings.

VOICEOVER: The project has the financial backing of forty of the state's most influential business people and property developers.

VLS High Angle. The port facility in middle ground, the Swan River mouth and Fremantle in background and sea in foreground, right and background. Camera pans right from the port out to sea.

VOICEOVER: But the premier says it would cause horrendous problems for the area.

ALAN CARPENTER: I don't like it.

CS. Alan Carpenter with tree and brick building in the background. Subtitle: 'Alan Carpenter PREMIER'.

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ALAN CARPENTER: I won't support it, I oppose it, and it doesn't make any sense to me whatsoever and as long as I am able to I will oppose it.

MS. Port Beach with Colin Barnett [future premier and standing Member of Parliament for Cottesloe] talking to reporter in foreground with the port facility and sea in background.

VOICEOVER: The local MP has accused the developers of arrogance...

CS. Back of Colin Barnett, facing reporter with an otherwise empty beach and uninterrupted ocean horizon in background.

VOICEOVER: for eyeing off an area owned by the state.

CS. Colin Barnett speaking with beach and the Fremantle Port's seawall in background. Subtitle: 'Colin Barnett COTTESLOE MP'.

COLIN BARNETT: I am totally opposed to reclaiming seabed for housing.

The report then cut to alfresco seating at Gino's cafe in Fremantle's popular South Terrace, then to a shot of the mayor, Peter Tagliaferri, appearing undecided: 'It is a big development but I think it's a conversation that we shouldn't just shut out'. The next shot was of an eroded sand dune with a seawall in the background, followed by one of ocean scientist Chari Pattiarachi of the University of Western Australia warning that the project would cause long-term erosion problems for nearby beaches. The news returned to North Port Quay's simulation, focusing on the extent of its seawall as the voiceover said the project would be protected from storm surges and rising sea levels. Peter

Newman assured that the project's inhabitants would be better off than people living in a suburb further up the Swan River. Finally, the reporter stood at Rous Head – sea and beach in the background – to say that despite growing opposition, the developers would seek environmental, leasing, planning and development approvals.

The beach was a major visual element in news reporting of opposition to North Port Quay. The media constructed the idea of 'growing opposition' as a response to the seabed being occupied by wealthy developers and nearby public beaches being eroded. The project was also problematised by television visuals cutting back and forth between simulated flights over a futuristic canal city and footage of coastal waters by Fremantle Port, footage of a beach and footage of an ocean horizon. The simulated images of the project from plan to sprouting grey blocks, rendered colourful, captured the attention of journalists, who compared it to current images of Fremantle coast while constructing controversy around North Port Quay.

The project simulations were made available on North Port Quay's website. Its homepage showed a video of the development magically transforming itself over water from plan, to concrete blocks, then to a colourful, futuristic island city. The simulation was accompanied by soothing background music and a voiceover introducing the development in terms of its coastal metropolitan location and its leadership in ecological modernisation:

VOICEOVER: Nestled between the Indian Ocean and Perth, North Port Quay will set a new standard in environmentally sustainable development. North Port Quay will set the standard by which all other developments will be judged. Homes and businesses will be powered

by wind, wave and solar energy. It will be a carbon-free development that actually creates a better environment.

During the video, background slides on the homepage changed so that a grand canal in the animated foreground corresponded to a photograph of leisure boats at harbour in the background, and a simulated aerial perspective of a beach at North Port Quay corresponded with a background picture of a lone surfer catching a wave. Photographs of past coastal leisure were combined with simulations of an urban coastal future. The voiceover described this as 'a place for people, with homes, schools, cafes, beaches, fishing platforms, cycle paths and walkways'. However, rather than showing happy people cycling, walking or fishing, the simulation showed cars travelling along bridges and the long seawall surrounding North Port Quay. This inconsistency was sensed by media workers covering the launch and it would repeatedly disrupt the consortium's 'carbon-free development' claim.

Articles on North Port Quay were published in Australia's main daily newspapers,¹³ but national coverage subsided quickly, as did the internet chatter around posted images and information about the project.¹⁴ North Port Quay was an important issue for Western Australian media audiences for several weeks, but it would remain a big issue for at least another year in Fremantle's press, and become a catalyst for the radical transformation of the area's electoral representation.

Notes

- 1 'WA Premier criticises Fremantle island plan', ABC News WA, Perth, 29 May 2008.
- 2 *Why are you focusing on environmental sustainability?*, North Port Quay, Perth, viewed 9 June 2011, <<http://www.northportquay.com.au/Home/the-vision.html>>.
- 3 Ibid.

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- 4 Ibid.
- 5 J. Fiske, B. Hodge & G. Turner, *Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1987, p. 72.
- 6 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1991.
- 7 Fiske, Hodge & Turner, *Myths of Oz*, pp. 54–5.
- 8 *The West Australian*, 22 September 2010, p. 1.
- 9 Fiske, Hodge & Turner, *Myths of Oz*, pp. 70–71.
- 10 *The West Australian*, 29 May 2008, p. 1.
- 11 T. Kerr, 'Representing ecological threats and negotiating green built environments', PhD thesis, Curtin University, 2012.
- 12 'WA Premier criticises Fremantle island plan', ABC News WA, Perth, 29 May 2008.
- 13 *The Australian Financial Review*, 30 May 2008, p. 1; *The Australian*, 30 May 2008, p. 2.
- 14 T. Kerr, 'Representing ecological threats and negotiating green built environments', PhD thesis, Curtin University, 2012.