FREMANTLE’S TWO SQUARES

George Seddon

The history and current status of public open space in Fremantle merit attention for two reasons. The first is functional: because of the strong demand for housing in Fremantle today, the Australia-wide trend towards increasing urban density is exacerbated. New houses are going up on subdivisions that are often 350 square metres, usually at the expense of private open space. A steady increase in traffic also puts pressure on public open space.

The second reason is that of heritage: Fremantle has a fairly good record in the conservation of historic buildings, but there has not been adequate recognition that the street patterns, the street names, and the public open spaces are the most enduring record of early Fremantle. They too need to be conserved.

Most of the public open space dates from the early years of an enlightened Town Council, which ran from 1871 to 1883, when Fremantle became a municipality. In 1872, after repeated requests to the government, the crown lands in South Terrace were vested in Council. Much of the land to the west of the Terrace, including all of the Esplanade, is filled land - some reclaimed from South Bay, some from marsh and swamp; the fill came from the construction of the convict depot from which it was transported down-hill by a tramway. The site is now a handsome and heavily used park; use will increase even further when a major residential development on an adjoining site at Challenger Harbour is completed.

In 1873, the Town was successful in a request for the land adjoining the Lunatic Asylum, now the Fremantle Arts Centre: it is shown on the 1877 map as lot 222A, ‘Reserve for a Public Park’. It was extended in 1879 by a further 45 acres, making a generous open space, worthy of the future city. In 1954, however, the Council gave half the land away for a project to build John Curtin High School; in 1966, the Council sanctioned the continuation of Ord Street to Finnerty Street, cutting through the high limestone walls of the asylum enclosure, which had an orchard to the west. The four lane road and its heavy traffic now run immediately below the west facade of the building, isolating the remains of Fremantle Park to the west. The through street as originally planned, shown on the 1877 map, was Stirling Street, one block to the west, in several respects a more logical route with easier grades.

Another major early public open space in Fremantle has disappeared without a trace: Fremantle Green, which was
granted in 1875 along the river front. It was not green for long - it was resumed by the government in 1878 for the new railway. It is shown as Lot 165A on the 1877 map, marked as 'Recreation Gd'. The last of the major public open spaces to be acquired in central Fremantle was the Fremantle Oval, when the Forrest government relinquished Barrack Field below the prison in 1894 for public recreation. A current proposal to build an Administration and Training Centre for the new Fremantle AFL Club north of the old grandstand has made this another site of controversy.

Of all the public open space, perhaps the most precious today is the central city space, the main subject of this note. Fremantle townsite was a narrow, roughly triangular peninsula defined by the Swan River to the north and South Beach on the ocean side to the south, with the limestone hill of Arthur Head as the apex of the triangle. The town was laid out with High Street bisecting the triangle, and short cross streets at right angles to it, from sea to river. Cliff Street was the main link from the sea jetty to the river jetty: all goods had to be transported to the river jetty, prior to O'Connor blasting the limestone bar from the river mouth at the end of the century. Cliff Street was followed by Mouat, Henry and Pakenham Streets, all named for officers of H.M.S. Challenger, and then Market Street. The original Kings Square consisted of four acres centred on High Street, between Market and Pakenham Streets.

By 1832, the town had already begun to expand east, and since the triangle also began to broaden its base, the angles of the cross-streets changed to meet High Street at 45°, rather than at right angles. To define this change clearly, Kings Square was moved east - to lie diagonally across High Street, its present site. This principal street was closed visually by a building at each end: the jail atop Arthur Head in the west (now known as the Round House, presumably because it is twelve-sided), and the Anglican Church of St John at the other, the nave centred on High Street. The church was a Georgian building, facing south-west. This is all shown clearly on the 'Arrowsmith map' of 1833 (also see Pitt Morison, 1979).

The diagonal street system, however, devised to fit the rapidly diverging shorelines of river and sea, could not continue indefinitely. High Street continued to extend east, and direct cross streets at right angles to it again became desirable, to link north and south (roughly a few points to the west of north by compass, as Cliff Street had been in the beginning). Thus began a third change in street direction. Once again this was articulated and defined by an intelligent planning device - the imposition of a second substantial public square, Queens Square, at right angles to High Street. Both in name and design intention, this formed a pair with Kings Square, set on the diagonal to High Street. Between them, they had a significant role in articulating the street pattern in a practical and intelligible way. Although perhaps only 'a simple colonial example', the maps of 1844 and 1852 show that Fremantle was in the direct line of inheritance from Regency planning in London and Edinburgh, still some of the best urban design the world has seen.
Motorists and pedestrians today find the Fremantle street pattern bewildering. It is no wonder: the early planning was forgotten and obscured successively from 1882 to the present. The first change was the demolition of St John’s Church, and its replacement with a Gothic building, more to the Victorian tastes of 1882. This second church was no longer on the centre line. Then High Street was driven straight through the middle of the square, instead of decorously following its four sides, as in Belgravia and Edinburgh Newtown. This sacrifice to expediency was compounded in our own day when the square was again closed, and Market Street to the Square became High Street Mall. Thus a simple ‘traffic-calming’ device, the square with circulation around its perimeter, was replaced by one that excludes and thus displaces motorised traffic. The second event was the building of Fremantle Town Hall in 1887, on the square to the south of the extended High Street, thus encroaching on vital public open space - of which there is little in central Fremantle. This was spectacularly compounded in 1966 by the building of the municipal chambers as an extension to the Town Hall, further eroding the square; an additional storey was added later. There was yet another encroachment in 1993, when the Library was extended. These buildings should have helped define the southern edge of the square, now occupied by a Council carpark, inappropriately named Queensgate.

Queens Square, the complementary square to the east has had an even sadder history. The square never seems to have been realised, except on paper. Parry Street and High Street have bisected it for many years, and the planning proposals shown so clearly on the 1852 maps still await implementation. At present there is an ugly intersection with traffic lights, nondescript pockets of gardens on three sides, and a kindergarten usurping the south-west corner. We need kindergartens, but not on public squares.

It would be fairly simple to reinstate Queens Square: find another site for the kindergarten, preferably less subject to traffic noise and fumes; remove the traffic lights, and carry the road around the four sides with a clockwise circulation. There are two handsome Victorian facades on the north side, and other defining two storey buildings might be encouraged in time. Plant the square with grass and a few large trees typical of colonial Fremantle, say Moreton Bay figs or Norfolk Island pines.

The salvage of Kings Square is more difficult, but there should at least be a long-term plan for its reinstatement. There now seems a good prospect of demolishing the R & I Bank in central Perth to recreate the historic precinct around the Perth Town Hall. The Victorian Government has long recognised that Melbourne’s Gas & Fuel Building on the Yarra, blocking the view of the Anglican Cathedral, was a mistake, and it is to be demolished. Buildings wear out, and thinking ahead, we should plan a new and more appropriate site for Council Chambers in Fremantle, leaving the 1887 Town Hall and St Johns as an historic precinct in the open square. It would then also be possible to consider restoring traffic circulation around the perimeter.

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