

Talking point



REFRESHING: The Makers Workshop at Burnie is part museum and part arts centre.

Picture: CHRIS KIDD

A little bit of town planning goes a long way



Greg Barns

IF you tell anyone from Hobart you are going to Burnie, they often assume you are going there only because you have to.

That is a pity because this city is undergoing a fascinating transition, and it is one that sets an excellent example for other small-sized cities and communities that have felt the ravages of economic change over the past two decades.

The Burnie of a decade ago was dull, dirty and down at heel. But when you drive around the city now, you are struck by architectural excellence, a turning of the city back to the stunning coastline which it abuts, and downtown streets that are benefiting from considered tree planting. Burnie is also fortunate, in contrast to say Hobart, in having a "can do" culture among its elected officials and senior council management.

During the past few years, the Burnie waterfront has benefited from a reworking by leading Tasmanian architectural firm JAWS of the surf club, which now includes a gym, restaurants and bars.

From the deck of a fine restaurant serving quality local produce above the surf club, you can see an intriguing building designed by the national profile architects, Terroir. It is called the Makers Workshop and is part museum and part arts centre, with artists working inside the building in areas that look



UNFLATTERING IMAGE: Burnie has long been seen as an industrial town.

remarkably like shipping containers.

Away from the waterfront and down some suburban streets is the Cradle Coast Campus of the University of Tasmania and a stunning new extension designed by Hobart firm Designhaus. It is a building that is probably the most eye-catching of all that the university owns or occupies.

But Burnie still faces many challenges. It has been hollowed out by the closure or scaling back of the town's big employers — the paper mill, the Tioxide plant and manufacturing facilities. And the city suffers from a grim industrial image in the minds of those who do not come from there. The levels of poverty and illness are still far too high too.

But it is most definitely changing. Burnie City Council general manager Paul Arnold is a genuinely enthusiastic and clever visionary and he leads a team that has signed up to that "can do" turnaround

vision. Steve Kons, one of the brightest of the Labor ministers in recent years, has just returned to the council, and the mayor of the city, Alwyn Boyd, has done an excellent job in ensuring that vision is becoming reality.

So what's the formula? What can other towns learn?

One of the keys to Burnie refusing to be flattened by the global financial crisis — and it was devastated by the closure of nearby mines and forestry operations — is business leadership. Dale Elphinstone and Royce Fairbrother, both highly successful entrepreneurs who have built major enterprises, are visible to the community. That encourages other businesses to roll their sleeves up, and it signals that the town is open for investment.

Stylish architecture and cranes in the sky have a similar impact and the Burnie waterfront redevelopment is an important work in progress. All of this injects a sense of

energy into a town that would otherwise be like so many industrial graveyards that smell of decay and long-gone days of prosperity.

The other key to the new Burnie story has been the capacity to attract service industries such as education. The University of Tasmania has established rural medicine facilities there, which look set to grow into an international centre of excellence.

This in turn will bring new ideas and people to the area.

Sensibly, Burnie is not putting all its eggs in the tourism basket, which has been the flawed economic panacea favoured by some in response to job losses in manufacturing, mining and forestry.

That said, it is focusing efforts on attracting traffic and cruise ships.

Burnie is not the only city in Australia to turn its fortunes around when the world had pronounced it dead.

Newcastle, for so long the "BHP town", now has a diverse economy and its port is home to tugs and coal haulers, as well as restaurants and cruise boats.

The Hobart City Council last week announced that Jan Gehl would be looking at ways to spruce up the city. This is a sorely needed initiative on the part of a council which has, unlike its counterparts in Burnie, sat on its hands and allowed its downtown to become drab and choked. It's hoped that the council understands that cities are in competition with each other, and that people will leave towns that become unlivable. Perhaps Gehl and his team could visit Burnie on their next sojourn here.