An Interview with: **Stephen Yarwood**

By Idil Gaziulusoy

Stephen Yarwood is the founder of city2050; a consultancy specialising in long term strategic plans that recognise the social, environmental, economic and technological issues that are redefining the operating system of cities. From 2010 to 2014 Stephen was the Lord Mayor of Adelaide; the youngest person to ever hold this title. He has lectured at several universities in Australia and Asia and has spoken at numerous conferences around the world about innovation in cities and their management. Stephen has a background in regional and urban planning, environmental studies and business administration.

Stephen Yarwood was interviewed as part of the "Visions & Pathways 2040" project, about the future of Australian cities.

Stephen, you are the previous mayor of Adelaide, but currently you have a business, and you define yourself as an urban futurist. How does your work relate to the future of Australian cities?

Stephen Yarwood (SY): I've had a long term pursuit of dedicating myself to understanding where cities are going, and having started my urban planning qualifications at the time that the Multifunction Polis was announced, which was at the time a visionary project to build a new city within metropolitan Adelaide, I have committed to understanding the transformation of cities. I believe that through government's leadership, strategic planning, a good vision and ability to implement you can actually achieve quite significant change in cities. I am a big believer that change is not linear; feedback loops in systems may result in quite significant changes in short amounts of time, but change can happen very slowly too. It's important to understand change processes keeping in mind that there are probable futures, there are potential futures, but also, there is a preferred future. You're more likely to achieve better outcomes more successfully and more quickly if those differences are articulated, a preferred future vision is created and then management structures are built around that. Cities, in themselves are highly complex systems, and I would openly acknowledge my work is not about having the answers; it is ultimately about asking the right questions and helping people work it out for themselves.

Great. It sounds like your work is helping people develop visions and strategies for city futures. As you know in our project we're focusing on futures of Australian cities in 2040. Now, I'd like you to imagine that it is 2040 and we're living in a radically low carbon and resilient city in Australia. Can you please explain what does it look and feel like?

(SY): Very difficult to really conceptualise that, because there are so many possible things that could or could not happen. From the biggest perspective, I think society will be completely different, with completely different values, and they'll live, think, act, behave and interact differently to today. Many Australians will have had the good fortune of seeing the entire continent in one glance. The opportunity for space colonisation, whether it's time on the moon, whether it's actually just a day trip to zero gravity and an opportunity to glimpse the Earth from out of space, and I think that in itself will change the psyche of people. It's only when you see the planet that you truly understand the enormity of your context and the role that you play in a better future. And I'm convinced that, you know, my son, who's now 6, will see the Earth. He will see Australia in a single glance. In terms of cities, by 2040, Australia's population will be pretty much double what it is today, maybe a little bit more. My understanding is that, there will be significant conurbation, significant corridors of urban growth. I think one of the real challenges in terms of Australian population distribution is, a long term conversation around population of Northern Australia, both for defence purposes, mining and resource purposes, and also just even strategic movement of assets and resources, not only through our continent, but throughout the world. I would predict that there may well be one, maybe even two, cities, that may reach the million mark by 2040 in those environments. I start to go down to just how individual people start to interact in cities, and there's a whole range of things, from demographics, environment, technology, transport, infrastructure, economy, and ultimately governance, which to a certain extent, defines many of the others – the leadership, the culture, how we actually act and interact in terms of our leadership and how it infuses into the government. Obviously technology is a no brainer. By 2040, our phones will be emerging as smart as, if not smarter than human beings. Artificial intelligence will sort of pop in around 2038 to 2045 period. But even if they're not true artificial intelligence, our phones will know us better than we, to a certain extent, know each other and our friends and family know ourselves, and will be running sort of complex algorithms based on our movement, our behaviour patterns, to actually help guide us through our lives, get us from one point to another, maintain and monitor our health, our weight, carry burn, heartbeat, and actually just help us get from A to B in much more efficient ways, and provide the resources, knowledge, information and entertainment that we need to actually live more sustainable lives. And so we'll actually just behave differently, because we'll have, you know, almost little voices in our head, watching over us, and telling us where to go, what to do, and how to do things. Only in the sense of adding value, not actually being Big Brother. But that, in itself, is a question.

I'd like to hear about how you see those technologies play a role in realising a low carbon resilience vision.

(SY): By 2040, low cost technology will be embedded in everything that will be seamlessly connected through ubiquitous networks, helping us move and operate through cities in more efficient ways. And so just in terms of low carbon, it's about transforming how we'd move through cities.

We won't ever sit in a traffic jam; our phones or our personal digital service provider, will be able to run an algorithm that will identify that you've got to go from A to B, and you'll just be able to say, "I need to get here by this time," and it will tell you what's the easiest and most efficient way to get from A to B. I'm fascinated by the sharing economy; it will actually realise a huge amount of potential in terms of low carbon. Currently we're witnessing the early stages of everyone being able to share their lawn mower in their street, share their bicycle, share their electric scooter and share all their resources to the point where ownership of property will actually almost be irrelevant. We will be able to use resources more efficiently. We'll make less things.

You said at the very beginning that there will be their different values, and people will be interacting completely differently. Can you also elaborate on that a little bit?

(SY): We will be living in an increasingly globalised context, and so there will be a whole range of different values that Australians aren't exposed to now. The connectivity of people is going to make the world a smaller place and change our values. The globe itself is going to be mostly younger, with still huge inequalities in terms of income. Within an Australian context, we'll be providing a set of values that hopefully will make a positive contribution to some of the challenges that the world will be facing at the time. A younger global population leads to, a fully digitally literate population itself. It has different values and thinks differently and behaves differently, and those values are yet to be defined. People will see themselves within a global context. They will have far greater environmental values. By then, global warming will be so profoundly obvious that people will actually want to improve their carbon emission performance and their sustainability scorecard, and that will all be measured. But Australia itself, can be a global leader in terms of, being able to make a contribution to the world, having the modern values, the technologies and the education systems to be a contemporary country with contemporary urban environments that are not doing cultural imperialism, but helping other cities around the world actually be more sustainable. I think society will be a much more positive, proactive and collaborative environment.

Earlier in our conversation, you mentioned the importance of governance for a preferable future to unfold. Could you talk a little bit about how you see the governance side of, low carbon, resilient futures in 2040, looking at the emergent practices in government at the moment.

(SY): I genuinely see a role for city governance to increasingly become more dominant. I would like to see better global governance. I'd like to think by 2040, there will be good quality global governance, and that in itself will drive some of the governance of our cities, our states and our nations, and redefine the responsibilities of each of those levels of governance. Increasingly, in Australia right now, we have more elected members per head of population than any country in the world. I do see profound change in local government. I see existing local governments as almost neighbourhood governance where, you know, your local mayor is your local leader. But I still think that we can't make cities work effectively unless there's a single governance body around an urban conurbation like the mayor of London, that actually probably really drives the show when it comes to urban management, and that local governance is actually really more about community development and supporting communities and grassroots, social and environmental implementation, as compared to sort of a metropolitan wide governance system that's actually much more about the big picture. Maybe a global parliament of mayors will run the world in terms of that top tier of global governance, because 70% of people will live in cities around the time of 2040. Cities will have a predominance; today, we don't say we come from the US or Australia. You come from Melbourne, I come from Adelaide, people come from New York or Los Angeles or San Francisco, and increasingly, that's where the resources are going to be consumed, that's where the productivity is going to be created, that's where the people are going to live. It doesn't discount rural environments. It just says that the rural environments are going to play a key role in serving in a regional context the urban critical mass of people. We will only be a more sustainable planet if we can actually gather our people into places where they can use resources in highly efficient way. I hate to connect the whole idea of running a city to a computer game, but in the future, urban management will be seen in real time. Data will be real. It will be available, instantaneously. City leaders will be able to sit in front of a screen or multiple screens and actually watch lines move and be able to make real time management decisions to actually vary and adjust and tweak like a music deck, like a keyboard of knobs they'll be able to twiddle and adjust those knobs to improve the efficiencies of their cities and make them more productive, more liveable and more sustainable.

You've elaborated your vision of 2040. What about the barriers between where we are now and that vision? What is in the way? What needs to change?

(SY): One, I guess, is the market system that we've created around us, and, our dependency on a system that is quite an old system of democracy and market forces that is driving a consumer culture, that is driving an ownership culture, that idealises wealth, independence over collaboration and working together. Another one is our governance systems. They're slow, bureaucratic, manually intensive, and that in itself is a huge barrier to actually implementing change. The people running our city states and our nations are in their 50s and 60s, and once again, are extrapolating the past to create the future. So, they don't have the digital literacy. They don't have the understanding or tolerance of change to actually accelerate these processes and actually grapple with this. We've still got federal leaders who are sceptical about climate change or actually just don't want to do anything about it, even though that they acknowledge it exists. So, there's a whole pile of things that ultimately say that, the past drags us more than the future pulls us.

Thank you, Stephen, for your time.