

travel wa perth

The bells are ringin'

STEPHEN SCOURFIELD

The UK National Trust's Neptune project was its longest-running and most successful campaign ever, and led to the acquisition of 1100km of coastline to protect it from development.

And Richard Offen says it was one of the most exciting things he's ever been involved with.

But on a National Trust exchange visit in 2001, Mr Offen fell in love with Perth, and is now here as executive director of Heritage Perth, which was set up by Perth City Council and the National Trust of WA.

In the intervening years, a lot has changed in Perth. The resources boom has brought with it a dichotomy.

"In theory it should make things easier because there is more money about," says Mr Offen. "And there is undoubtedly an increased interest in our natural and built heritage.

"But with this huge boom on, the imperative is to build, build, build and there is still a disrespect for heritage, and anything that stops things is seen as an infringement of our liberties."

Mr Offen says there is a

perception that a lot of our heritage buildings were knocked down in the 60s, 70s and 80s, and that WA doesn't have anything as old as Europe. But he quickly points to the Aboriginal petroglyphs of the Burrup peninsula, which are tens of thousands of years old.

He says that, some years ago, Perth City Council, which has 800 items on the heritage register, started to look at what it was doing about heritage in the city. It had done good work in the field, despite having only delegated powers from the State government and always running the risk of being ridden over roughshod.

"Perth City Council has done very well," he says, through heritage awards and by using rate relief and plot ratio transfer for listed buildings. This means that, for example, if a building is limited in height, the height that can't be built can be transferred to a plot where it can, or can be sold.

This reimbursement is currently around \$2000 per square metre.

"But they wanted to do more and decided to set up Heritage

Perth as an independent body to champion heritage in the State."

Its mandate is to actively support the conservation and interpretation of Perth's heritage, encouraging a culture that values and celebrates it.

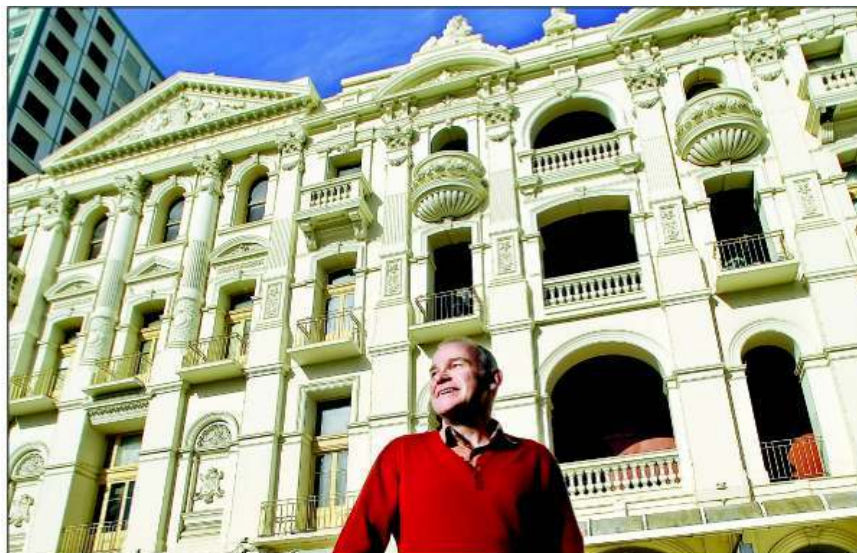
"Our way forward was very clear," says Mr Offen, who was originally an engineer, then a teacher and then fundraiser for the Children's Society in the UK, but has always had a passion for heritage.

Heritage Perth decided to be project-based, and has had a raging success with its first, Look Up Perth.

"I am trying desperately to show that heritage isn't dry as dust and dull as ditchwater," Mr Offen says. "It's interesting and it's relative and it's exciting."

The campaign, with accompanying walk notes and a treasure hunt, encouraged people to look up when they were in the city.

The project pointed out the likes of McNess Royal Arcade, built in 1897 by scrap metal dealer, ironmonger and local philanthropist Charles McNess on



Worth keeping: Richard Offen, executive director of Heritage Perth, in front of His Majesty's Theatre

the site of McNess' Rusty Nail shop on the corner of Barrack Street and Hay Street Mall. It was designed by William Wolf, who later designed His Majesty's Theatre.

The second big project is set to be a world first, the Heritage Perth Hi-Tech Heritage Trail with partner iiNet.

This will be a free wi-fi hotspot service for all visitors, delivering audiovisual information to their mobile phones when they enter the hotspot around a building.

Visitors will get the audiovisual information at each location and the trail can be started at any point.

The trail will be available to anyone with a suitable mobile phone, laptop or similar device and it is planned to have a number of PDA (personal digital assistant) devices available for loan.

"As the Hi-Tech Heritage Trail grows in size and demand, there are opportunities for the content to be translated into other languages for even greater accessibility and tourism appeal."

The third project is Light up the City.

"Everyone says we call ourselves the City of Light but all we do is leave the city lights on at night," says Mr Offen.

The plan was to light building facades but Heritage Perth was concerned about the energy this

would use and the greenhouse gases it would produce.

"Then I started to hear about LED lights and that they could light buildings with them."

So, energy levels will be set for lighting projects, using LEDs, which are versatile and which can be coupled with solar panels to use only sustainable energy. Heritage Perth is talking to solar panel manufacturers and Mr Offen says the challenge is to come up with panels suitable for heritage buildings.

"The savings with LEDs are 500 per cent over conventional floodlighting," says Mr Offen. "We will set parameters to specify how much energy can be used and the level of 'light splash' into the sky."

Light splash is what lights the sky in a dome over cities . . . "but we still want to be able to see the stars".

Mr Offen says the first building to be lit will be Wesley Church, later this year.

"This will all start to bring people back into the city in the evenings," he says, citing Liverpool, in the UK, which has had a project to light buildings, and has now measured millions of dollars of economic benefit.

Mr Offen says "heritage" is anything that is important enough today to keep for future generations.

And he would doubtless put the Swan Bell Tower in that category.

Mr Offen is captain of bells and admits that the bells were one of the big reasons he wanted to move to Perth.

"It is the best bell ringing facility in the world."

He had been master of ringers for five years and, incidentally, had even rung at the little church in Clifton-on-Teme, Worcestershire, where my brother-in-law does. It's a small campanological world.

He says that between 200 and 300 ringers a year, from as far afield as the UK and US, come to the Swan Bells.

The Swan Bells include the 12 bells of St Martin-in-the-Fields which rang out over London's Trafalgar Square for centuries.

They are recorded to have been in existence from before the 14th century and were recast in the 16th century by Queen Elizabeth 1 and, with five specially cast bells, gifted to Perth to commemorate Australia's bicentenary in 1988.

"The bells are such a draw and have such a reputation," Mr Offen says. "Change ringing as a performing art has come on in leaps and bounds."

Something to keep for future generations? "For sure."

See www.heritageperth.com.au and www.swanbells.com.au.