

Six of our best thinkers and opinion-makers discuss what they most admire about Sydney, and suggest some timely improvements.

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focus

Allan Snyder

Born in Philadelphia, Professor Snyder is director of the Centre for the Mind at the University of Sydney and the ANU. He is a world-renowned science professor who has worked on human creativity, insect vision and fibre optics. He has been in Sydney for more than a decade.

"My concept is that great cities of the future will be the cities of creative minds. Creative minds are attracted to a particular kind of city, cities that are rich in everything that you would imagine: entertainment, coffee shops, bookshops, open city life, and especially great universities. How does Sydney stack up? Take the University of Sydney, the oldest university in Australia, which is in close proximity to one of the newer universities, UTS. You would think that would be a corridor that should be rich, beautiful, explosive, dynamic. But I don't think it is. Glebe Point Road, I think, is a beautiful example of something that has it all. It has fabulous bookshops, it has fabulous coffee shops. It has a kind of offbeat life, and that is very much what I think creative minds are attracted to.

"But – and here's the tragedy, and I don't know how to say this in a positive way – it's becoming a dangerous place. Bag-snatchers, homes being broken into, and things like that. It's utterly crucial that the city devises creative ways to make these places safe, because when they crumble, the whole edifice crumbles. I feel very strongly that areas around universities have got to be protected, because they are the lifeblood of this nation. That's how Route 128 in Boston works, that's how Silicon Valley works. We're talking not about little businesses, we're talking about trillion-dollar businesses that have fed off universities and the beautiful environments around them.

"So my message to the mayor of this city is that all effort should go into ensuring a vibrant, safe environment around universities. The great nations of the future will be those that export the products of the mind, so if Australia is to be something, Sydney has got to be a driving force in attracting those minds. Otherwise they'll go elsewhere.

"What would I change about Sydney? I would empower some visionary think tank to invent ways to drop cars by 50 per cent. I think the car problem is one of the biggest issues facing the city. This business about safety is important too: are we going in the direction of New York City?

"The stereotype is that it's non-intellectual. I wouldn't call Sydney anti-intellectual, ever. It is non-intellectual, but it's very much more intellectual than it was 20 years ago. First of all, 30 years ago, no one went to university so there's a big change to begin with. I lived at Harvard Square for years. I don't feel it's as intellectual here, that's for sure. But I think it's growing."



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