

Light rail's online, but more to come for Sydney

In a rare instance of a political leader surviving to see a project through from start to finish, NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian is celebrating the first leap in creating Sydney's future.

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It is Gladys Berejiklian's smiling face you see on the opening page of the 2012 document Sydney's Light Rail Future, which announced that one of her first major projects as transport minister was to put trams back into the CBD.

"The project will transform our city," she enthused. Seven years on, billions of dollars later and after more than four years of construction, she has finally seen it completed.

"I love walking down to George Street and seeing everyone taking selfies," says the now Premier of NSW. "It has become the nation's best boulevard. It's a modernisation of our city. It is creating a future. You have the beauty of boulevards

that Europe has and how the cities are really places people come to enjoy, and you also have the ability to move a lot of people in mass transit.”

In an age of short attention spans, social media and a 24-hour news cycle that has seen six prime ministers in a decade, it is notable that Berejiklian has survived to see the light rail project from beginning to end. The project has not been without controversy, however, with cost blowouts from \$1.6 billion to \$2.9 billion, lawsuits from the consortium that built it, and another one pending from businesses who suffered while the city was turned into a building site for more than four years.

But Sydney is emerging from behind the construction barriers and streets dominated by noisy machinery and workmen clad in orange vests. With the light rail and the pedestrianisation of George Street from Hunter Street to Bathurst Street, as well as billions of dollars in retail and commercial development and the lifting of the long-maligned lock-out laws, it is a city that is on the verge of a transformation. Twenty years after the high of the Olympic Games, Sydney is making a comeback.

For Berejiklian, the future of Sydney has always been about infrastructure, and building lots of it. “I think since the Olympics, I would argue, as you would expect, that the previous government spent nearly two decades not doing much,” she tells WISH. “We have turned that around so what you see now, the projects that have come to life in Sydney are the result of eight years of hard work.”

As well as the light rail, the capital works include the new \$12.5 billion Metro train line, which will see a rail tunnel built under Sydney Harbour for the first time, and new underground stations at Barangaroo, Pitt Street and Martin Place. Central Station will also undergo a \$955 million revamp.

“I remember feeling so liberated when the Olympics were on and George Street [was temporarily pedestrianised] and you could go anywhere,” recalls Berejiklian. “But the Olympics was just a short spurt of what we want to feel all the time. What we are building is forever; it is not a moment, it is building us for the future. It is putting us out there as a global city.”

The idea of turning a significant chunk of Sydney's busiest road into a boulevard and to put trams back into the CBD was first mooted in 2007 to address worsening traffic congestion, and the decision was made in 2012 after Barry O'Farrell's Coalition government was elected. "In peak hour alone, we had 200 buses trying to chug their way up George Street. It was moving at single-digit kilometres an hour," recalls Berejiklian. "Even when you were waiting for a bus the pollution was horrific, all that diesel, and it was just a carpark. It was not a place where you want to enjoy a coffee or have a drink, or even shop or anything like that. So [we thought], how can we keep going on like this? And how can we move people more quickly around in a pleasant way?"

Trams have worked successfully in many other cities (including arch rival Melbourne), and were running up George Street from 1899 and through surrounding suburbs in Sydney until the lines were ripped up in 1961 to make way for buses. The new light rail runs for 12km, has 19 stops, and goes from Circular Quay to Central Station through key precincts such as Haymarket and Surry Hills and then on to Randwick on one line (via Randwick Racecourse), and to Kingsford on a second line (via the University of New South Wales in Kensington). The first line opened late last year and the second is due to open next month. It is not a fast service, however, with the journey taking about 50 minutes from Randwick to Circular Quay. Initial user complaints have been centred on the time it takes to get to the city in comparison to the previous bus services.

State Opposition Leader Jodi McKay is one of many critics of the government's handling of the light rail, highlighting the cost blowouts, legal action and delays. She is also not a fan of Berejiklian's focus on building things as a way to make Sydney a more livable city. "What I see with this government is that it's all about infrastructure," she says. "But will that add to the vibrancy of the city? I don't think so. We are not going to oppose it [the light rail] now that it's open, but it has caused the closure of many small businesses over that period and I think it is going to take a long time to recover."

McKay, who oversaw the establishment of the light festival Vivid when she was tourism minister in 2009, believes the centre of Sydney needs a "beating heart". She says that can be achieved by not only attracting locals into the city with an

interesting mix of retail, places to eat and small venues with live music and theatre, but by actually celebrating said locals.

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“Visitors come to the Opera House, they come for the beautiful harbour,” McKay says. “But beyond that, how does this city reflect who we are as a community?” She suggests the answer lies in highlighting our multiculturalism with festivals and events that are traditionally held in suburbs. “We have to have something more to keep them here and compete with Melbourne. If we are encouraging visitors from India, then let’s celebrate our Indian-Australian culture in the city, not just in Blacktown.”

But Berejiklian believes the light rail and the pedestrianisation of George Street will attract more people into the city beyond the traditional nine-to-five hours, as will the increase in the number of apartment buildings. “I think when you have less pollution and greater pedestrian access, it will encourage outdoor dining and make things more amenable for city life,” she says. “And when you have more people living and working and coming into the CBD for entertainment, it naturally creates a greater vibe, a greater nightlife. I think that spurs business to actually open and think about these opportunities. Interestingly, we have always had flexibility when it comes to [later] trading hours but businesses have not taken it up before. I think now there is some incentive for them.”

The Premier says the light rail will also encourage new development along its route as people come to realise they can get to these places without having to worry about driving or getting an Uber. “You find that whenever you create a metro stop or a train stop or a light rail stop, it enhances the renewal of the communities,” she says. “Many people will look up the restaurants and cafes along the route ... it is going to make different precincts come alive, whether it is Haymarket or Surry Hills or the entertainment precinct at Moore Park [next to Fox Studios and the Sydney Cricket Ground].”

This is already happening, with figures showing there has been \$23.1 billion worth of development along the 12km light rail track since construction started in 2015. Commercial offices, apartment buildings and retail complexes are all in various stages of planning or building, or have been completed. There is also the \$3.7 billion transformation of Circular Quay, which includes upgrades to the ferry wharves, a new public plaza, Lend Lease's \$1.5 billion tower and AMP's \$1 billion office block.

“If you look around the city and see how many buildings are popping up, how many new retail businesses are setting up shop – that is why our economic growth is the strongest in the nation,” says Berejiklian. “Our infrastructure program is spurring economic growth and business investment.”

Committee for Sydney chief executive Gabriel Metcalf says the city's new trams and boulevard is a step in the right direction to make the city more globally competitive.

“My point of view is that Sydney is one of the greatest cities in the world today, but it could be even better,” the San Francisco native tells WISH. The most recent report re-leased by the Committee for Sydney, an independent think tank, benchmarked Sydney against 33 cities using 70 performance indices. It found the city was ranked 15th and still outside what are known as the ‘Big Seven’ most influential metropolises: London, New York, Paris, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Singapore and Seoul. “By one measure Sydney remains the second most admired city in the world. We are one of the most popular cities in the world for international students. And we are a hub for highly skilled knowledge economy jobs,” Metcalf states in the report. “But there are issues we need to work on. Sydney is seen as lacking cultural breadth. We are not a world leader on climate change and Sydney is more car dependent than the competition. And the city is a very expensive place to live.”

But the report – and the Committee – also acknowledge that Sydney is a city on the move and one that is making progress in laying the foundations for its future. “I think George Street is going to be fabulous for the Sydney CBD,” Metcalf says. “I hope it is just the first of many more public space improvements to come.” He also believes 2020 is the year in which the Sydney of the future will start to become apparent. “For the past five years Sydney has been going through a massive building boom, which has included both buildings and infrastructure,” he says.

“That is going to continue for some time, but I think this year we will start to see the early results with the light rail. We will see the fencing coming down and more of the emerging city will be revealed.”

Berejiklian's vision for the centre of Sydney is not only about making it a place to live, work and play. She believes that attracting the next generation of industry – innovation – is also key. “We need more opportunities for business to flourish, we need opportunities to have a more diverse industrial sector working here as well,” she says. “One example is our Central-to-Eveleigh precinct [former railway yards turned into space for technology companies]. This is going to be a huge innovation hub for us, it is going to be a tech hub for us, it is going to be like having a silicon valley at the edge of the CBD, so it is really exciting. The new era is all about the digital age, and it is all about robotics and emerging technology and research and innovation. I think it is our time to shine.”

It also means that she is well and truly done with any interstate comparisons. “No disrespect to Melbourne as Melbournites like to have a healthy competition with us, but our competition is cities around the world,” she says. “Singapore and Hong Kong used to be our competition really, and now you also have London and New York, but Sydney is really edging up there in terms of the place to be, the place to invest, the place to work. We have the stability, the lifestyle and now the infrastructure to support that.”

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