



MANY THANKS, Long Beach

From your colleagues Down Under

BY JOHN STURGEON AND JOCK LUCAS

Have you heard of *The Castle*? It is a 1997 iconic Australian movie comedy that sees common man Darryl Kerrigan defend his “Castle” from a would-be government acquisition. Unapologetically Australian and utterly hilarious, it is commonly referenced down here in our line of work.

With IRWA conference earlier this year on the west coast, as close as it can be to our home in Brisbane, we saw it as the perfect opportunity to share some of our references with a new audience and see how the rest of the world does right of way.

In June, nine of my colleagues and I from Sturgeon Consulting Group (SCG) had the pleasure of attending the conference in Long Beach. We are a small but energetic company that delivers end-to-end land access, acquisition and delivery solutions. Our team has worked on some of Australia's largest infrastructure projects, where we developed innovative strategies across a variety of sectors.

I am no stranger to IRWA, having attended the annual conference frequently since 2008, however, almost all my colleagues donned the "First Timer" ribbon. For our youngest team member, it was his first conference ever. And what a conference it was! From Texan caravan parks to Heathrow Airport and Nigerian highways, no aspect of property was left unmapped.

We found comfort in hearing that our most commonly faced industry problems are not isolated to Australia. Lack of early engagement, legal disputes, stubborn stakeholders and changing markets are challenges that span borders.

We found the diverse and passionate presenters engaging and knowledgeable. There was not a question that could go unanswered with British barristers, American appraisers and so many other experts available and willing to share their knowledge.

We found it fair dinkum and fantastic.

This year, I had a strong interest in the number of sessions related to how technology is shaping and influencing our industry. New software for GIS, appraisals and data analysis continues to amaze me. As someone who fondly remembers the days of pen and paper, I optimistically welcome our AI overlords and hope we can work harmoniously with them to deliver better solutions for our communities and clients.

On the contrary, many sessions served as a reminder of how important keeping our industry human-centric is. We heard plenty of case studies that highlighted how a simple in-person conversation with a landowner could achieve more than all the technology in the world. I am a firm believer that "property is people," and there is no better place to be reminded of this than with over a thousand professionals who live and breathe it every day.

The Great Eminent Domain Debate was a particular standout, combining education and entertainment in a way we have not seen since Steve Irwin. Our young professional who attended said he learned more about American culture in that one hour than the rest of his trip combined. He would encourage all to attend if given the chance at the next year's conference.

The Whova engagement scoreboard also brought out some of our Australian competitive spirit. Congratulations to Pamela



Taylor, SR/WA, on your victory. For those who do not know, the official conference app could be used to score points for engaging with other attendees through messages, forum posts and comments. It was the perfect motivator to strike up conversations and connect with our international colleagues. Keep an eye out for it next year and see if you can crack the top 10.

The extracurricular activities throughout the conference offered a chance to view our beautiful host city. The boat tour gave us up-close views of the Queen Mary and the International Gateway Bridge, while the aquarium networking event left many of us wondering how one would even begin to appraise such a property. Thank you to all the sponsors who made these events possible.

I had the opportunity to share some of the innovative strategies SCG has implemented as a part of the global right of way projects and international projects updates. It was great to sit alongside our international colleagues and share how we have been doing things Down Under.

The first is an attempt to reduce project wastage by reusing would-be-demolished houses through a lift 'n' shift program. Our state of Queensland is famous for its iconic and aptly named "Queenslander" architecture-style homes, where wooden houses

are raised on stumps to "float" above the uneven terrain. It provides increased ventilation during our summers and keeps out plenty of critters. The style allows for the house to be detached onto the back of a semi-trailer and relocated to a new block of land. It is not uncommon to see whole fields of these detached houses waiting to be shifted to new blocks.

We saw an opportunity to take advantage of this lift 'n' shift ability when over 200 houses were earmarked for demolition as a part of a multibillion-dollar rail expansion project in South East Queensland. After many months of negotiations between numerous government departments, our team has been able to implement a process where houses are inspected before demolition to see if they are viable for a lift 'n' shift. Over 30 homes have been lifted 'n' shifted so far for public housing, saving not only the physical materials, but also providing families in need with new homes. Our efforts resulted in positive media coverage for the project and a prized "CUBIE" award from the state government. This process will be used going forward as a new best practice initiative by the state department.

Early 2022 saw Australia experience some of the worst recorded flood disasters in our nation's history, leaving thousands of people without liveable housing. To address this crisis, the





government established a Voluntary Home Buy-Back scheme, providing an opportunity avenue for impacted property owners to sell their flood-affected houses back to the government. Eligible property owners were provided two appraisals: one at a pre-flood market value, the second at a post-flood and given an option of either. This has allowed hundreds of families to sell their homes and relocate to areas away from the significant flooding.

In other circumstances, property owners were provided funding for floodproofing works including house raising (possible thanks again to our unique architecture) and replacing water damage-prone materials with water-resilient/proof ones.

Our team developed the framework for this program and then managed its delivery, overlooking the quality assurance on hundreds of appraisals.

Similar programs have been undertaken around the world including recently in North Carolina. As climate change continues to cause unprecedented extreme weather events, I expect buy-back programs will become a global standard in response.

Brisbane will be joining iconic cities the likes of Los Angeles, Paris and Tokyo as hosts of the 2032 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games. The impending date has correlated with an abundance of major infrastructure, transport and utility projects; all of which have complicated property requirements. SCG is proud to be supporting many of these projects and will continue to provide quality property programs and solutions.

Outside of the conference, our team spent an additional two weeks road-tripping and flying across California and beyond. Highlights included bear spotting at Lake Tahoe, helicoptering over the Grand Canyon, cocktails in Mexico and July Fourth celebrations in Sausalito.

Sturgeon Consulting Group had a wonderful time in the United States and looks forward to saying g'day to our international colleagues at future conferences.

To the event organizers, presenters and our industry counterparts we had the pleasure of meeting, thank you, from your mates Down Under. 🇺🇸



John has over 30 years' experience as a real estate valuer, project manager, senior advisor, university lecturer and consultant in the property, valuation, acquisition and land access industry. He has negotiated the acquisition and access of more than 5000 properties on various projects throughout Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Asia and North America.



Jock is a communications and property advisor with experience across the transport, infrastructure, energy and sustainability sectors. He has a passion for finding innovative solutions and positive outcomes for the communities he works in.

