

IN SIGHT

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CITIES
IN
CRISIS?



TOP OF THE POPS

Melbourne often ‘Tops the Pops’ in the Most Liveable Cities of the World charts—but what don’t those league tables look at? Jane-Frances Kelly and Helen Morrow put them to the test.

“Third most liveable in the world!” announced the headline, when Melbourne’s impressive ranking in the 2009 Economist Intelligence Unit’s Global Liveability Survey was revealed. Other rankings also place Melbourne highly: Monocle has made it 9th most ‘liveable’ for two years, based on its recreational offerings (illustrating the muddiness of the term ‘liveable’), and Mercer’s Quality of Living survey consistently puts Melbourne in the world’s top 10 per cent of cities.

Such a consistently high performance makes for good political speech-fodder, and carries the risk that we become complacent in our attractiveness. But before we rest on our assets, we should ask for what purpose these rankings were put together. Take Mercer’s ranking, for example. It’s designed for use by the human resources divisions of multinational corporations to calculate what salary package and ‘hardship allowances’ executives should be offered for postings around the world. Its methodology therefore can be expected to take the perspective of the globally mobile, highly educated elite (also a fair description of the average Economist reader).

These ‘league tables’ suggest Melbourne is safe, attractive, entertaining and a provider of abundant goods and services – for those that are mobile, skilled and, generally, wealthy. But they don’t say what it is like to live in Melbourne if you are struggling with the costs of living, painful commutes, feel socially isolated or don’t have decent access to basic services.

In addition, these tables don’t report on the range of a city’s performance on any given indicator. For example, while Melbourne might score well on average income, the growing gulf between rich and poor isn’t reflected. Nor that Australia’s low-income households spend almost two-thirds of their income on basic necessities, while wealthy units spend only around 40 per cent¹.

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Low-income households are often clustered in the urban fringe, where they are highly dependent on cars and therefore, as the VAMPIRE index identifies, highly vulnerable to rising fuel prices and at risk of isolation and social exclusion². It’s unlikely these people find Melbourne ‘liveable’, but the indices’ failure to measure the spread and distribution of performance masks such inequalities.

The league tables also struggle to properly measure, or value, intangible aspects of life that can’t be quantified but are essential for people to survive and thrive. Certainly, economic opportunities and efficient markets help make a city liveable. But when asked what they want from their city, people frequently cite social interaction, a feeling of connectedness, public space, new ideas, excitement, colour and movement. Cities must meet the psychological as well as material needs of its residents, but league tables generally do a bad job of taking this into account.

A liveable city need not meet all people’s needs all of the time, but should do so for most, most of the time. Melbourne’s population includes the homeless, the illiterate and uneducated, the unemployed, and the mentally and physically ill. Scoring Melbourne’s liveability should encompass the well-being of all these groups – not just the norm, or indeed of those at the other end of the socio-economic spectrum. In thinking about our cities we must look more deeply than these narrowly based rankings, which ignore the city’s experience for so many. ●

¹ Garnaut, R. 2008, *Garnaut Climate Change Review Final Framework Report*: 388. Cambridge University Press

² Dodson, J. & Sipe, N. 2007, ‘Oil vulnerability in the Australian city: assessing socioeconomic risks from higher urban fuel prices’, *Urban Studies* 44(1): 37–62