Oasis of comfort

From ATHOL THOMAS, in Perth

From the air Western Australia's newest town, Shay Gap, looks like a collection of unbuildings huddled together for protection from the harsh Pilbara landscape.

A road slants in from nowhere; another skirts the town. A few trees appear to be struggling for survival in the townsites.

There are no streets in the town itself.

Iron ore

In fact, Shay Gap is perhaps the most imaginative attempt yet to beat the hostility, if not ferocity, of one of the most inhospitable parts of Australia; but a part that is also one of the richest iron-ore belts in the world.

Shay Gap is in the hot country. Its near-neighbours are Marble Bar and Goldsworthy, which in summer compete day after day to post the highest maximum temperatures on the continent. It lies 120 miles east of the Pilbara's major iron-ore port, Port Hedland.

"The Gap", as its residents already call it, is built on powdery brown earth lying between low cliffs of red rock that seem to cradle the heat of the day long after the sun has gone down. The temperature can reach 50 degrees centigrade in summer.

Shay Gap is another company town; one of these built by Goldsworthy.

Mining, the Pilbara iron ore pioneer, Goldsworthy already had a reputation for making the Pilbara bearable for its employees. Among other things it was the first to introduce closed-circuit television.

This device gave it a much lower staff turnover than any other Pilbara company and attracted married couples — more stable work units than itinerant young men looking for quick fortunes.

For the new town, the command — to Perth architect, Mr Lawrence Howroyd was, in effect: "Put down a place in the desert which people will not only find bearable, but attractive".

The result at Shay Gap is what Mr Howroyd calls a "machine for living", an expression which has overtones of 1984 but which, in fact, is meant to convey that men who are prepared to work the mines should not have to sweat out domestic discomfort when they are off-shift.

The town has been designed on the basis that it is a community rather than a collection of individuals — recognition that people are driven by isolation into "togetherness". Because the design was not governed by suburban block by-laws, it could be adventurous by suburban standards.

One of its revolutionary features is an underground trench that contains all the town's basic services — irrigation, sewerage, power and telephone and television cables. There is nothing unsightly sticking out of the ground.
Mr Howroyd describes the trench as an umbilical cord.

There are other features that any progressive town, planner would give his eye teeth to be able to implement.

Shade

The 101 houses (with as many as four bedrooms) are built in groups of 11 in such a way that people can walk in shade from any part of the town to any other.

No resident has to walk more than 200yd to any facility — including the shopping centre, the school and the club. The average distance anyone has to walk anywhere is 40yds.

Residents are also kept cool with an air-conditioning system based on a communal chilled-water plant. Each house taps the main that rings* the town.

In addition, each house is pressurised by a fan coil unit; because pressure inside is higher than it is outside, dust and mcff insects cannot enter.

Another refinement is the irrigation system, which provides up to 60in of "rain" a year. The watering is done at night from high-level misting devices.

The town is expected to develop a green, park-like appearance — an oasis of comfort in a desert.

The building of Shay Gap from the ground up presented a unique opportunity for eliminating the motor car from living areas.

The town is completely free of vehicles, yet each house has a lock-up garage.

Small electric vehicles are used to provide such services as rubbish disposal.