

The quality of **sprawl**

On 31 October last year HIA National President Bob Day delivered the Tom McKenna Memorial Lecture to the Planning Institute of Australia/University of South Australia housing forum. Following is an abridged version of that address.

To quote just two lines from the poem *The Quality of Sprawl* by Australia's leading poet Les Murray, "Sprawl gets up the nose of many kinds of people (every kind that comes in kinds) whose futures don't include it."

Today I want to do three things:

1. Systematically challenge and refute the arguments used to stop urban sprawl;
2. Highlight the problems associated with urban consolidation; and
3. Show that Australia's current planning ideology has created a massive housing affordability crisis.

Sprawl has always been with us. Our leafy suburbs, historic streets and delightful beachside areas – places we regard with reverence – are all the 'sprawl' of an earlier time. Regrettably though, urban sprawl has become a negative term without any serious examination of its qualities or benefits and without any critical analysis of its troubled alternative – urban congestion.

The formation of the world's cities has always been determined by the means of transport available. As people acquired the means to travel faster and farther, they exercised a choice to live further apart – they chose to live in individual houses. In Australia, this choice was expressed in the universal dream of

a home of your own on a quarter-acre block.

Over the past two decades, however, we have seen a concerted push in Australia to limit urban growth as the urban consolidation movement took hold and urban growth boundaries, restricted use zonings, tree legislation and countless other planning instruments became the order of the day. Planning mania mutated into a planning plague.

It didn't take long, however, before this brave new world of urban planning fell victim to the age-old law of unintended consequences. Take, for example, the reactive attempt of a decade ago to save mature trees by legislating against their removal if they have a trunk circumference over a certain size. Today, the tree lopping business is

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booming as home and land owners, fearful of having trees on their property which they will not be able to remove, cut them down before they reach the mandated size. Without doubt, the mature trees of tomorrow are being felled by the planning regulation of today.



Another unexpected consequence has been the extent to which those living in the inner suburbs are becoming increasingly resistant to higher concentrations of people living in their midst. Groups such as Save Our Suburbs are becoming more and more active in their attempts to preserve the character of their suburbs.

The most devastating consequence though has been the extent to which urban consolidation policy has stifled land supply and sent land prices through the roof. In just five years the price of residential land has doubled. Where land once represented 25 per cent of the cost of a new house and land package, it is now 50 per cent. This is a disaster for a family trying to build their first home. By comparison the cost of building a new house has barely risen.

It is important to remember that the scarcity that propelled land prices upwards is an artificial scarcity. It is the product of restrictions invoked through planning regulation and zoning. The 'land shortage' is a matter of political choice, not of fact. Australia did not have to suffer this affordability crisis.

The case for urban consolidation has been advanced on the back of a number of arguments – namely, that it is good for the environment, that it stems the loss of agricultural land, that it encourages people to use public transport, that it leads to a reduction in motor vehicle use and that it saves on infrastructure costs for government. None of these is true.

Nearly a decade ago Patrick Troy, emeritus professor at the Australian

National University, authored the book *The Perils of Urban Consolidation*, in which he squarely challenged the assumptions on which urban consolidation principles are based. He pointed to flaws in the figures and arguments and he argued that these policies will produce 'mean streets', not 'green streets'.

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In recent days there's been a lot of publicity about biodiversity and so-called 'urban dead zones'. Urban sprawl has been blamed for this decrease in biodiversity. So tell me, looking at the scenes depicted below, which do you think is better for biodiversity? Is it the scenes depicted in photos one to five or is it the flourishing vegetation of suburbia in photo six? The first five scenes are biodiversity dead zones. The last scene, a typical outer suburban street, is a live zone.

The argument that suburbanisation significantly diminishes the agricultural footprint does not stack up either. While the reduction in the agricultural footprint in Australia over the past two decades has resulted in a reduction in land used for agricultural purposes of around 50 million hectares, the loss attributable to urban development is absolutely miniscule.

It has also been argued that urban consolidation helps move people out of cars and onto public transport. Not so. International research on urbanisation



Above: Bob Day says urban consolidation has stifled land supply and sent prices up.

and transport use by Professor Wendell Cox, principal consultant of international research group, Demographia, indicates that urban consolidation leads to longer work journeys, greater road congestion, increased air pollution and is spectacularly unsuccessful in moving people from cars to public transport. Not only that, Professor Troy also points out there is absolutely no evidence that people who live in the city use their cars less than those who live elsewhere. ▶



Left: Leafy suburban streets – a more positive housing model.



The high cost of new infrastructure has been yet another reason advanced for curtailing the growth of cities, yet W.D. Woodhead, in *The Economics of Higher Density Housing* clearly states that: “The assumption that there is excess infrastructure capacity in inner city suburbs is frequently erroneous, the various hydraulic services (water and sewer) in particular are rarely uniform in capacity and often require upgrading. The lack of knowledge as to the status of infrastructure is a matter of concern.” Infrastructure developed to accommodate 1000 to 2000 people per square kilometre simply cannot withstand housing densities double that

number and the cost of renewing or upgrading infrastructure in the inner suburbs is significantly greater than that of providing brand new infrastructure on the fringe.

It has also been suggested that the housing affordability crisis is all part of a world-wide trend. Not true. An international housing affordability study focused on 88 cities in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the US by Demographia has confirmed that land rationing in the form of government-imposed urban containment policies is the principal cause of escalating land prices. Demographia found that housing unaffordability was not the world-

wide problem it was made out to be but was largely confined to Australian cities and cities on the east and west coasts of America where constrictive land use polices are in place.

The situation in Australia is so severe that, according to the Demographia index – which rates affordability by comparing median housing price as a multiple of median household income – all mainland Australian cities feature in the list of most seriously unaffordable places in the world to live. If housing remains at its current level of unaffordability we can expect to see a serious decline in the levels of home ownership among future generations.

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Pricing those on low and moderate incomes out of home ownership has serious consequences. Research confirms what we intuitively know, namely, that people who own their homes experience better health, greater self-confidence, move less, are more involved in their communities, have greater financial independence and much greater wealth than their renting peers. Their children do better at school and those children in turn are more likely to also become homeowners.

The social, emotional and economic benefits that come with home ownership result in a reduced cost of living on a whole-of-life basis and a wider range of choices in retirement. As we all know only too well, if you don’t own your home by the time you retire, you’re in big trouble.

In the end there are a thousand good reasons to allow urban sprawl and not one good reason to persevere with this demonstrably failed policy of urban consolidation. **H**