



‘AFFORDABILITY THROUGH MODESTY’

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Linley Lutton PhD

Deputy Chair, Australian Institute of Urban Studies

The Australian Institute of Urban Studies warns that our continual desire to build suburbs of super-size houses will lead to Perth becoming an unliveable city in just a few generations.

Perth’s low population density, as distinct from building density, plus our appetite for excessively large and inappropriate houses, are two characteristics which are now impacting on our city’s liveability. This paper briefly describes how Perth has reached this state and then explores a future involving the development of a more modest approach to housing, part of which involves a major paradigm shift to developing smaller housing lots.

Australian houses are now the largest in the world with an average area of 215 square metres. In America the average house is 202 square metres, in France it is 113 square metres and in Britain it is just 76 square metres.

On top of this, our housing is now amongst the most seriously unaffordable in the world. For generations the median house price in Australia has been around 3.0 times median household incomes however Perth has now reached a staggering 6.8 times median household incomes.

A recent BankWest report concludes that only 5 to 20 percent of key workers will be able to afford the current median house price which they predict will only get worse as prices continue to escalate.

Large expensive houses have not always been the norm for Perth. Census figures show that the great majority of pioneering houses were small with four rooms or less and again in 1901 census figures show the majority of dwellings still being small with four rooms or less. Examples of these very small houses can still be seen in Victoria Park's weatherboard precinct and in Shenton Park. These remaining examples of modest housing help to visualise what a streetscape of small houses looked like in Perth's early days.

In the first thirty years of the twentieth century Perth was fairly prosperous and, following the Great War, house numbers boomed. Many of these houses still exist in our inner suburbs ranging from around 80 to 120 square metres.

Following the depression and World War Two, Perth experienced a major housing boom however building materials were scarce, demand was high, so houses were limited to 100 square metres.

The people who built these post war houses are sometimes called the 'builder or veteran generation'. They worked hard, saved, and were very cautious of debt. The baby boomers of today were raised, along with several siblings, in these middle-class family homes.

By the late 1960s and 1970s home builders nationwide, such as AV Jennings, were busy as the first children of the baby boom started to leave home to commence their own families.

A typical large AV Jennings house was around 140 to 150 square metres and comprised three bedrooms, two bathrooms, study, combined lounge dining area and a kitchen with small family meals area. The smaller-model houses were around 120 square metres, had no study and one bathroom. The renowned Petitt and Sevitt homes designed at this time by award winning architect Ken Woolley were on average 150 square metres.

There were of course larger homes being built in Perth at this time but they were few in number compared with the great mass of project homes housing Australia's middle-class families.

In the 1980s things started to rapidly change. The banking industry deregulated, more banks entered the market and lending criteria was relaxed. All that was needed was something to entice people to borrow the large sums on offer. So Australia was introduced to the mighty American McMansion, a mass-produced mini-mansion even the middle-class masses could aspire to build, with the help of the banks.

Unlike their frugal parents, the baby boom generation was not afraid of debt so they started to trade in their modest first houses to build these super-sized houses and so started a period of major change to Perth's entire suburban character.

A decade or so later the children of the baby boomers, the so-called Generation 'X', were also ready to own a McMansion – with all the extras. This generation was raised in a world of conspicuous consumption and, like their parents, embraced debt.

These latest houses range in size from around 220 to 350 square metres. Most are upward of 300 square metres. They all have a home theatre, a restaurant-standard kitchen, a special space just for using computers and the children's bedrooms are all the size of a traditional master bedroom. Other rooms include a living room, an activity room, a home office and a master bedroom more like a hotel suite with its dedicated parent's retreat and Jacuzzi.

Of course any modern house is not complete without a large roofed alfresco area resplendent with tiled floors, an outdoor kitchen and a bar and because modern mothers all feel compelled to drive large four-wheel drive vehicles the garages are huge. The living areas alone in these houses are around 100 square metres which used to be the size of an entire family home just a few generations ago.

Our suburbs consequently have become a sprawling, almost chaotic mosaic devoid of all but residential accommodation as can be seen in Figure 1.



FIG 1 - Comparison between Perth's original and current suburbs

Clockwise from top left are Northern Suburbs, Southern Suburbs, Victoria Park, Mt. Hawthorn. These aerial images are at the same scale and clearly show the different densities between new and old suburbs. The crazy chaotic subdivision pattern with its lack of permeability is self evident.

Along with the sprawl came a hefty reduction in population density. Forty to fifty years ago most houses built by West Australians were occupied by an average of 3.5 people. Current houses are occupied by an average of 2.3 people.

With current average lot sizes around 520 square metres the average population density in our new outer suburbs is around 30 persons per hectare compared with inner suburbs like Subiaco, Mt Hawthorn and Victoria Park which had population densities of around 60 to 80 persons per hectare at the time of their establishment.

This is roughly consistent with other Australian cities which, along with many major cities in North America, rank amongst the most under-populated urban land in the world.

Low population densities fail to provide enough local demand to generate and support many of the activities needed to support city life so we end up with vast suburbs of houses and little else. The absence of small convenient corner stores is a typical example of the consequence of low population densities, and centralised retailing practices.

Not only is our population density dropping, we are also not building an appropriate diversity of housing types. The latest census data shows that the majority of Perth households are occupied by single people or childless couples so you would think we would see a diversity of housing to

accommodate these needs. With the exception of a few locations the vast majority of Perth's suburbs are built as if the entire resident population is a monoculture of families.

Sadly, we are furiously building an unsustainable city full of inappropriate housing none of which future generations will need or want. All this does not bode at all well for the owners of McMansions who will find it difficult to find buyers when they try to downsize.

The big question is what really can be done, if anything? Altering the existing DNA of a city in a democratic society is almost impossible because of private land ownership.



Fig 2 - Small House

Example of a five metre wide by twenty metre deep site upon which is built a 90sqm two storey house

Cities can however be retrofitted, if they have a regular grid, because the grid can be subdivided to make a smaller grid and small houses, no larger than 100 square metres, can be developed on lots ranging from say 75 to 100 square metres. A five metre lot enables older houses with twenty metre frontages and a rear lane to be subdivided many times.

Adopting the 'small house' approach, as shown in Figure 2, and through the use of small lots it is possible to increase population densities in some inner urban areas of Perth to between 150 and 200 people per hectare.

Retrofitting selected areas of inner suburbs in this way can significantly increase inner city housing supply which assists in lowering housing costs and produces more dynamic, economically viable cities. It also provides non-family households the opportunity to live close to the city, which is where they should live. An example of retrofitting is shown in Figure 3.

High-rise buildings are one way of retrofitting a city and sometimes they can make an important contribution however there are many advantages in building smaller houses on a reduced grid.

Groups of small houses make neighbourhoods and provide people with a more direct way to interact with each other. Small houses are also: more affordable to construct; much less costly to run than high-rise buildings; they are more adaptable to changing needs; and they make more pleasant streetscapes.

Small houses also fit more easily into existing inner suburbs because they do not tower over their neighbours.

Naturally this approach requires the establishment of very good standards and planning guidelines. Above all, any city retrofitting activity must reflect good urban design which means the resulting places must be people-friendly and appealing to the inhabitants. Figure 4 shows some of the urban design principles to be achieved in small grid developments.

We have no option, Perth must undergo a significant paradigm shift with respect to house size, if not it is akin to Nero fiddling while Rome burns, and we will find our city unliveable in a few short generations.

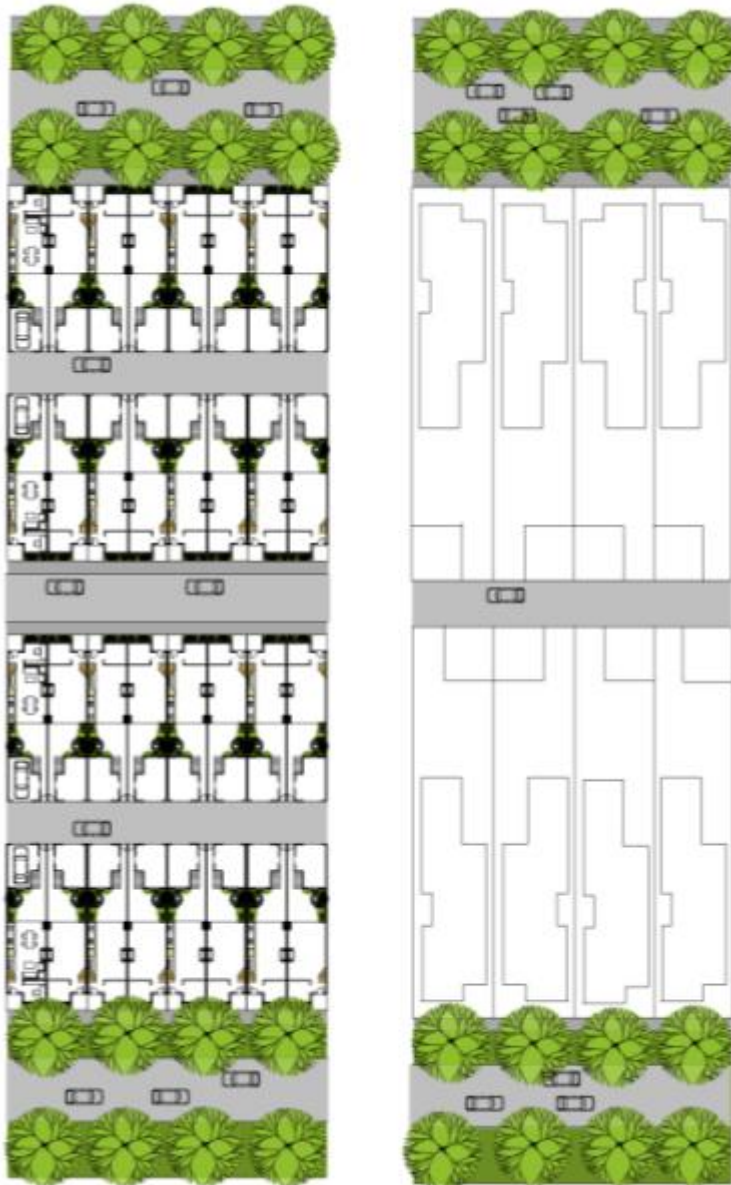


Fig 3 - Retrofitting inner suburban land

This is an example of how the original Mt Hawthorn lots, shown on the right, would appear if the grid were reduced to five metre wide lots. The population density would increase from 48 pph to 193 pph.

The State Government can set the planning framework and offer incentives for this shift to occur however governments don't build cities, the people do, therefore it is incumbent on the citizens of Perth to start accepting that our city is now too large to continue with our current inappropriate housing practices and begin the change to smaller housing.

If the next generations are to stand any chance of leading normal lives we need to start building smaller, more affordable houses which are appropriate and appealing.

We will always need to build family homes however these homes too need to become more modest.

Perth has the opportunity to lead Australia by showing how small really is better when it comes to city planning and house design. After all, we would only be doing what the rest of the developed world has already been doing for centuries.



Fig 4 – Comparison between a small-lot grid and current subdivisions

The two examples show a typical current subdivision approach on the right and a small-lot grid subdivision on the left. Each example is one hectare. Fourteen lots are provided on the right and sixty one on the left. The population density increases from 32 pph to 140 pph respectively. This is sufficient to support a local convenience shop within an easy walk of all residents and still provide two useful pocket parks. Direct mid-block pedestrian connections are provided within the development to enable residents to walk the precinct between street blocks, unlike the present practice on the right.