

Viva la Revolution

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When Charles Darwin visited Sydney in 1836 aboard the Beagle he wrote in his diary:

“...the whole population, poor and rich, are bent on acquiring wealth ... the number of large houses and other buildings just finished is truly surprising; nevertheless everyone complains of the high rent and the difficulty of acquiring a home.”

From “Sydney/Purgatorio,” by Craig San Roque in *Psyche and the City*, Edited by Thomas Singer

And so it began from the earliest days that Australia’s middle-classes grew into a nation of conspicuous consumers. Perth was however a little slow in this regard and census data shows that for many decades the average working-class home in Perth was small and comprised only four rooms.

The issue now confronting Perth and Australian cities generally is that we are building houses with massive footprints to be occupied by only a few people. There will always be the genuinely wealthy who can afford to build large houses to outwardly display their wealth but this group is by far in the minority. The main problem lies with middle-class Australia.

Emerging in Perth over the last three decades is the rapid increase in the preparedness of our middle-class to accept alarming levels of debt in order to live in huge houses. The average Perth resident has not undergone some biological change that produces gigantism; our families are limited usually to only two offspring; we do not live in multi-generational houses; and we have not all become fabulously wealthy. We are simply displaying an irrational and irresponsible drive for conspicuous consumption. Like our ancestors!



The above streetscape is a montage of houses equally scaled showing two common Perth house types from the first half of the 1900’s side-by-side with current display homes provided by the housing industry. The change in bulk, width and height is self evident. What do these houses all have in common? They will each only house a few people! Up until the 1980’s a house of 150 square metres would house a family of four comfortably. Now it seems that a standard working-class home needs to be more than 300 square metres to house less family members.

All of this is resulting in expanding soulless suburbs, lower densities, increasing housing costs and fewer home ownership opportunities. It is also creating a new phenomena called the ‘working poor’ who are families working desperately hard to hang onto a house they could never afford in the first place.

The great concern to city planners, governments and environmentalists is that if housing size can't be curtailed we will shortly have an unworkable city. Not only do these large houses consume too much land for the number of occupants they house, they also consume too much energy to render their interiors thermally comfortable and they consume too many raw materials in the construction process.



Australian buildings, of which housing forms the greater part, consume 46% of our energy production (Whole of Government Energy Report, Canberra 2002). This could be significantly reduced not only through the use of renewable energy but also through a reduction in housing size.

These four images show housing developments which have occurred in Perth's northern suburbs over the last 10 years.



The homes shown are very large with big footprints, mostly larger than 300 square metres. You will notice not only do these houses have a large footprint many also have a second storey, so the area of these houses is extraordinary for middle class Australians.

The Residential Design Codes have no plot ratio provision for single dwellings leaving only open space provisions to control the size of a building's footprint.

An analysis of most of the sites in these images reveals that almost every dwelling does not meet its minimum open space requirement by a significant amount.



Lack of plot ratio limits is a significant problem and if Local Governments do not strictly enforce open space provisions then houses will just continue to increase in size.

The great majority of Perth houses are built by project builders and this group, together with the real estate industry, are arguably the major contributors to this growing problem.



Project home builders are producing big houses to attract a gullible market and they show no interest at any level in understanding the implication that large numbers of big houses has on our urban environment. The real estate industry has convinced potential home buyers that they will need that fourth bedroom, second bathroom, double garage and alfresco area to maintain the value of their house.

This is resulting in a major lack of housing diversity. The bulk of Perth people live as a couple or are single so the type of mass housing being produced is of no interest to them. The housing industry seems to be almost entirely focussed on providing large 'family' homes even though this target group does not represent the majority of the population.

For many years the domain of the project builder has been Perth's new outer suburbs however, due to dramatically increasing land values, there is a growing trend to demolish existing inner suburban houses and replace them with larger contemporary houses resulting in huge single and double-storey houses appearing in many inner suburban streets. Because these houses are occupied by so few people, the drive to increase inner city densities will be seriously undermined.



In the North West of the State the housing and real estate industries still promote the generic 4 x 2 house with little attention to appropriate passive environmental design in the full knowledge that the city really needs housing for single people and couples.

This photo of housing in Karratha shows a neighbourhood consisting of metropolitan-type houses which are totally reliant on air conditioning systems running continually to render the houses liveable.

Australia is still one of the few developed countries in the world where the housing industry continues to use large quantities of single skin sheet steel products to roof houses. Most other countries adopted thermal panel roofing systems decades ago, even in areas of moderate climates, because they have been focussing on environmentally sustainable housing for many decades. The same of course applies to double glazing.

Australia's housing industry embraces necessary change slowly. To get some idea of how reluctant the industry is to change we only need to look back to the recent period of angst created by the industry when first confronted with proposed Government regulations designed to make their houses more environmentally sustainable.

It is going to take nothing short of a revolution to bring about a rapid change in the housing type being offered to middle-class Australians and there are some specific things to be done. First, Governments at all levels are going to have to become far more assertive if they wish to see the concept of environmentally sustainable, pedestrian focused, mixed-use suburbs becoming the norm for cities like Perth. The current suburbs are nothing like this concept due entirely to house size and poor planning.

Second, the professional players including planners, urban designers and architects need to become more involved in facilitating the provision of appropriate housing and land developments. Architects, in particular, need to make their services more financially acceptable to the average house consumer.

Third, the housing industry needs to diversify its products to include small housing and the real estate industry needs to alter its mantras to encourage people to think 'small and sustainable.'

This is a huge undertaking and to demonstrate show just how far we all have to go on this journey the images below show housing developments for older Australians built in Perth in very recent times. Each of the houses shown will be around say 120 sq metres or larger and will be occupied by one person, perhaps two for a period of time. There is no public open space, and the private open spaces are seriously compromised by over-crowding. The 'sameness' of the development is overwhelming. Of course, every house has to have three bedrooms and a garage.

These developments, and many like them, are not the result of poorly informed or uneducated people. To make a development like this happen it takes planners, architects, and house builders. It also involves Local Government officers who propose approval of the Development Application and Elected Members to vote yes. There are many steps along the way and at each step someone can ask the question 'can't we do better'. But we don't!



The AIUSWA is strongly advocating the need for Perth to build smaller and more diverse house types. The Institute encourages all professionals and consumers alike to take on the challenge and bring about the housing revolution Western Australia so desperately needs.