

Planning Our Suburbs - Sound Policies Or Fads

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Summary

Environmental scientist **Tony Recsei** draws our attention to the insidious manner in which state planners are shoe-horning in flats, villas and townhouses where once there were suburban homes with front- and backyards.

Program Transcript

Robyn Williams: Have you heard of an organisation called Save Our Suburbs? It's been in the papers a lot recently, led by this man.

Tony Recsei: There's unease in our suburbs as the realisation dawns that the character of our neighbourhoods is changing. What quality distinguishes Australia's suburbs most from those of other countries? When I've asked people this question, the most common response was 'Space'. In an increasingly overcrowded world, we have the wonderful luxury of being able to spread ourselves, of not living on top of one another. It's an advantage we should be able to keep. I calculate that our towns and cities cover less than a quarter of 1% of our land area. That means we can have backyards for children to play in, for hobbies, and to provide us with a haven in which to relax from the relentless pleasures of modern living. Space provides us with a quality of life that makes Australia the envy of the world, but this wonderful attribute is being stolen from us.

Have you noticed the insidious manner in which State planners are shoe-horning in flats, villas and townhouses where once there were suburban homes, with front and backyards. They tear down attractive houses, bulldoze charming gardens and replace them with home units. Formerly peaceful streets are now choked with traffic. Do we really need this excess of apartments? And if so, surely it's bad planning to first build houses and then destroy them to build blocks of flats. Why can't our cities be planned so that they only need to be built once, rather than being constantly rebuilt to the distress of those who live in them?

And why are we losing our green spaces? Why aren't people who tear down perfectly good houses and ruin our environment, regarded as vandals? The reason for all this is a new dogma.

Robyn Williams: That's Tony Recsei, President of Save our Suburbs. And his views were very much affected by a conference held at Australia Technology Park, where two experts from overseas gave the case for high density living. Portland in Oregon on the West Coast of the USA was offered as a model. Tony Recsei responds.

Tony Recsei: Portland has now been frequently cited as a new approach to planning, 'world's best practice', a model that other cities should follow.

For me personally, the forum turned out to be an important occasion, because as I listened to the two planning gurus, I began to comprehend why our city planning is heading in the disastrous direction it is.

The speakers told us how they had instigated the re-planning of Portland to make people less dependent on cars.

They called this Smartgrowth. Smartgrowth, you see, pens and restricts the city within defined boundaries. The trouble is, Smartgrowth is still growth. As more and more people come to live in that restricted area, up goes the population density. The planners see that as good.

Why? Well, you see, they assert that under their plan, little will need to be spent on roads. Instead, money could be poured into public transport in the form of trams.

That sounds good for greenhouse, I think we'd agree. But do they have the engineering data to show that these good things will in fact happen, and if so, to any significant extent? And is it really the best we can do for people? Planners packing them into townhouses and units?

When the speakers were closely questioned at the meeting, they did in fact admit to some flaws in these plans. For instance, I asked Meeky Blizzard how much the use of public transport has increased, and how much car traffic has decreased, as a result of these Smartgrowth policies. She had to admit that forecasts to the year 2040 reveal that even by then people's use of public transport in Portland will increase from the previous 3% to only 6% of all journeys. And in the same period, car traffic will have increased from 4-million car trips per day to a massive 7-million daily trips.

I find it easy to believe this prediction. It fits what we see all around the world, and what we are seeing today in the suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne. In all developed cities we find that the higher the population density, the worse the traffic. The reason everyone doesn't use public transport, even in large 'dense' cities, is because it is so often inconvenient. Public transport is mainly planned to get people to and from work situated in central locations. But 80% of car journeys are not work related, such as shopping, visiting, or taking to their activities. Also, the majority of jobs are no longer in city centres.

Yes, higher population densities do result in a slightly higher percentage of total journeys being made by public transport. But this is completely overwhelmed by the greater number of people living in the area, people who still have to use their cars for most journeys. And to say the obvious, more cars in a restricted space means more congestion. Traffic is horrific in large dense cities, even those featuring good public transport such as London, New York and Paris.

At the meeting, once the predicted traffic increase in Portland was out of the bag, I asked the Smartgrowth advocates what such an increase of cars on pretty much the same road system would do to air pollution there

They acknowledged that for many urban trips, public transport is basically unsuitable and that as crowding on the roads increases, so too will pollution. But they were quite moralistic, and insisted the resulting traffic congestion and pollution is just too bad; people should simply not drive when there is congestion! So in effect they decree that the community should not make such trips at all, irrespective of necessity. This is not just a United States viewpoint. I meet it increasingly among Australian planners who seem to feel they can simply ban the community from making journeys that do not accord with what they deem people should be doing. Of course the reality is that people will still have to make their journeys, and thousands and thousands of people will be stuck for longer and longer in ever-increasing traffic jams, and breathing polluted air.

Therefore I and other members of Save Our Suburbs believe that such complete reliance on inflexible public transport is ideological rather than practical. Planners surely should be more

pragmatic. What's the use of dogmatically basing your planning on what people ought to do, when you know very well that they won't do it?

Further, as we in Australia know, the cost of housing escalates with higher population densities. When asked what the high-density policy is doing to the affordability of housing in Portland, the lecturers admitted that some people prefer to live in the neighbouring town of Vancouver and commute to Portland. In fact, house prices in Portland have skyrocketed. This is a result of land scarcity, caused by the imposition of rigid city boundaries on an ever-growing population. Wendall Cox of the Independence Institute has calculated the sad consequences of this from data provided by the United States Census Bureau and the National Association of Homebuilders.

He finds that the proportion of average Portland families who can now afford a home is only half of what it was before the implementation of Smartgrowth.

All this matters directly to us in Australia because it typifies an ideology that has become powerful in Australian planning.

Here in Australia, high density living is being retrofitted onto suburbs originally designed for low densities. By means of the so-called State Environmental Planning Policy 53, Planning New South Wales is blackmailing Councils to implement high density policies under threat of taking away their planning powers. In Melbourne, the Victorian government is imposing a planning code that forces higher population densities onto communities. In Perth and Brisbane too, higher densities are being introduced.

We are beginning to pay the price. The land price for a house in Sydney has skyrocketed up two-and-a-half times, from the average of \$83,000 in 1992 before high density policies were implemented to the current \$203,000.

Let me mention just a few of the other evils that follow.

We see concrete, bitumen and tiles replacing gardens and open space. As a result, rainwater is no longer absorbed into the ground and rushes off, carrying pollution into creeks.

We hear reports of overloaded sewers regularly overflowing.

We face regular widespread water restrictions which show that water storage is now no longer adequate for the concentrated increased population.

We experience electricity failures. Energy use has escalated due to power hungry high-rises, which depend on lifts and clothes driers. Increasingly units rely on air-conditioning as they mostly can't be shaded by trees or eaves and windows are often kept closed to exclude the noise, odours and excessive neighbour intimacy associated with crowded conditions. And large amounts of energy are needed to provide the materials such as concrete and steel that are required to build the new units. The rubble from good houses that get bulldozed has to be dumped somewhere. So much for saving greenhouses gases.

If such high-density living is the best Smartgrowth can offer, maybe it's time we started thinking outside the square within which the planners' ideas are boxed. For instance, you may well ask how else might we cope with an increasing population. Perhaps we should question the whole basis of policies that inflict population growth pressures.

If we decide that our population has to increase, Save Our Suburbs suggests that, to improve the individual environments in which we live, there should be a balanced development across Australia.

Let me propose some of the alternatives current Australian planners seem to fail to seriously consider.

Rather than retrofitting increased densities onto existing communities, new satellite cities adjacent to existing cities should be developed to cater for a portion of the additional population that we have decided we need. These satellite cities should incorporate desirable features such as green belts, underground electric cabling, energy-efficient buildings, drought-resistant plants and water reuse downstream. They should be of optimal size, with about 200,000 residents each. They should have street layouts designed to maximise access by walking, cycling and public transport. They should be linked up by very fast transport and communication facilities.

Central to all planning should be the goal of eliminating unnecessary travel by making the communities as self-sufficient as possible. This means that work, education, entertainment, shopping, sporting and recreational facilities must be located within easy reach of the residential precincts. Such development will not solve all the problems relating to car use, but will be preferable to forcing high densities into suburbs designed for low density.

There should also be a policy of repopulating declining regions. In this regard, lessons should be learnt from the Whitlam Government's decentralisation attempt. The Commonwealth government must take some responsibility. It cannot just assume, as it does now, that the States can forever shoehorn all new arrivals into existing communities.

The Commonwealth should provide funds to cater for the necessary infrastructure and employment required to promote acceptable decentralised development across the nation. It should also provide workable incentives such as income tax concessions for those who set up a business or work in these areas.

In the longer term, new technology could reduce our dependence on cars by providing a system of public transport that is not constrained to particular routes and particular times. One idea being put forward is the introduction of driverless taxis guided by automated vehicle control systems and powered by environmentally friendly energy sources. Such vehicles would travel in automatically controlled platoons, so enormously increasing lane capacity and safety.

Meanwhile, our existing suburbs should be protected; the character of our neighbourhoods should not be sacrificed to ideological schemes with no foundation in reality.

Faddish dogmatic planning policies, of forcing higher density living onto our suburbs will make our quality of life worse, not better. I find it hard to fathom what is driving this movement. Clearly there must be powerful interests behind it, but not, I think, the public interest.

The consequences will be devastating in the long term. Our cities will become like any other overcrowded city in the world and our Australian way of life will be a distant memory.

Robyn Williams: Let's hope not. Tony Recsei is an environmental scientist and President of Save Our Suburbs.

Next week, Ockham's Razor comes from Adelaide and the doyen of collecting precious objects,

Bill Hall.

I'm Robyn Williams.

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