

I have been watching with increasing horror and despair as I see the Canberra I have known for over 30 years disappearing under a tide of increasingly inappropriate development, and I keep thinking "there's got to be something I can do about it". That's why I joined SOS.

What follows are some of my thoughts and also some factual information on what is happening here in Canberra. I hope you can take the time to read it (you may find something of value), but I do realise it's a pretty hefty letter. Once I got started I couldn't stop - I spend a lot of my time in the suburbs of Canberra, and I am VERY concerned by what I see. I also feel completely powerless to stop what I see as an unnecessary and cynical destruction of one of the greatest semi-urban landscapes in the world (i.e. Australian suburbia).

I am not opposed to increased housing density per se, it's just it is happening so fast and so thoughtlessly, as I am sure is the case in Sydney. I find it difficult to argue successfully against this kind of thing, as (at least in Canberra) government and planners couch redevelopment in terms of "flexibility [of housing choice], sustainability and containment of urban sprawl", and one is made to feel like a pariah and an environmental vandal for wanting to live in a single house on a 800m suburban block. Needless to say, there are holes in these arguments (eg. the 'flexibility' myth - how does completely replacing one kind of housing (low density, generally three bedroom houses) with another, more restrictive housing type (1-2 bedroom apartments with stairs, limited parking, no yard, no or limited storage space) provide "more choice"? SOS has addressed this and other myths on the website, which is good to see, but it still irritates me because gov't and planners manage to get so much mileage out of these spurious claims.

Prior to the +/- recent change of local gov't, there was quite a bit of community angst about the pace and type of redevelopment in Canberra, and the present gov't did do something to address community concern, but it appears much of this was simply telling us what we wanted to hear (surprise, surprise), while still forging ahead with their redevelopment agenda. We've had plan after plan, variation after variation, and now, we have the Spatial Plan - a plan for Canberra to 2030 or thereabouts, and it's a scary read. You can see it here if you are interested: <http://www.actpla.act.gov.au/ourcanberra/index.htm> It's got all the right words in it - "sustainability", "environmental", "vibrant", etc., but the overall message seems clear. For the next 15 years, development will be concentrated (but not limited to) a 7.5 km "Urban Intensification Zone", which radiates out from the centre of Canberra and takes in all of old Canberra (ie. that built between 1920s and the mid 1960s). This is the area in which most redevelopment is taking place at the moment. Canberra is not all that big, and substantial portions of the older parts of the city are presently being ravaged and converted to those awful apartments one sees in all major cities these days. In some cases ENTIRE SUBURBS (eg. Braddon; with the exception of a small 'heritage' portion), have been re-zoned to high or medium density, with little or no thought for any of the existing amenity, suburban landscape or buildings. There are also other worrying things, such as suggestions to "remove the need for third party notification and appeal rights provided the requirements and principles of "High Quality Sustainable Design are met...", and lifting restrictions on dual occupancy (as if there were any to begin with anyway!).

Destruction of the existing suburban landscape and/or buildings is something that particularly concerns me, and is also something that other people may have trouble grasping - it's fairly well established that Federation, Victorian, and other pre-war architecture is significant, at least to some degree, and should be preserved in some way or form. This is all well and good, and SOME of the older parts of suburban Canberra which reflect Burley Griffin's Garden City concept, and some significant houses, are being retained (at least for now; more on that later), BUT the vast majority of dwellings in this " Urban Intensification Zone" are not that old - most are post war (1940s, 1950s, 1960s), and, to me anyway, make up a significant part of both Canberra's character and appeal. We are in real danger of losing a large proportion of these architectural styles in Canberra, replacing them with faceless boxes and turning much of what could be a very desirable inner city location into a bland, soulless, urban desert. This is akin to the slum clearance/redevelopment that was slated for Sydney in the late 1950s/early 1960s - highly desirable terrace houses and the like in Glebe, Woolloomooloo, Paddington, etc were to be demolished (I think entire suburbs were up for wholesale redevelopment) and replaced with multi-storey towers, which are now recognised as one of the WORST ways to house people. You are probably well aware of those issues anyway, I mention them just by way of example.

Much of the housing of the type I described above is still completely liveable, 'flexible' and entirely suitable for almost anyone. True, there are some areas where cheap, rather poorly built housing was erected quickly to cater for Canberra's booming population in the late 1950s-1960s, and perhaps there's no great

loss where these are concerned (other than the amenity of the existing residents), but much of the existing housing stock in these areas is well built, stylish and (I believe) of heritage significance, if not now, then in the future. Features like high ceilings, large living spaces, good amenity (eg block size, car accomodation), solid construction (how many solid-brick houses are being built today?) are all hallmarks of many of these dwellings, not to mention the grace and elegance of many of the designs (at least to my eyes), which are NOT being replicated today! I have been attempting to photograph as much of what remains in the suburbs where redevelopment is most rampant (eg. Turner and Braddon), for my own records, and it really makes me sad to see these often beautiful houses destroyed.

This brings me to another point which I find particularly distressing, namely the "domino effect" of redevelopment. By this I mean the rapid decline in an area once it has been rezoned - you know, first the area is rezoned, then the houses are bought one-by-one by developers and then only some die-hards remain. They don't HAVE to move, but what choice do they really have? Adjacent houses are rented to a succession of tenants who have no personal attachment or investment in the property (and why should they – the building is only going to be demolished anyway) and the properties eventually fall in to disrepair. Then there's the construction phase, followed by the inevitable loss of amenity when you end up with a 10-storey tower in your backyard (as one poor individual has in one of our suburbs - the only remaining house in that block - built by the owner 50 years ago, he doesn't want to move (and why should he)). This is something which is rarely mentioned, but which I believe is very significant - we always hear about 'flexibility' and 'choice', but any attempt to arrive at a REAL mix of housing types in an area invariably ends with the complete elimination of the original low density housing at the expense of higher densities. There are attempts at retaining heritage buildings in suburbia, but an example I have seen of this in Canberra is laughable - a flat-roofed heritage house has been retained in a multi-unit development, but the units are being built to within INCHES (and I mean INCHES!) of the existing house, such that it is almost unrecognisable. In that scenario you might as well demolish the bloody thing - to me a heritage house should be retained in some semblance of its original surroundings, not swallowed up amoeba-like by the adjacent development.

I feel that Canberra is facing a major threat to its' character and amenity, one which also shows no signs of abating, if current government policy is any indication. I only hope we can do something to halt, or at least lessen the impact of this before we lose one of the greatest suburban landscapes in Australia.