

Catherine Carter is ACT Executive Director of the Property Council of Australia, the national representative of the real estate industry.

Capital Critique

CATHERINE CARTER

As ACT Executive Director of the Property, Catherine Carter is responsible for all aspects of the organisation, operations, policy development and public affairs in the ACT.

The Property Council is a leading advocate for greater strategic planning of our major cities, more efficient infrastructure funding mechanisms, taxation reform, planning reform and sustainable development.

Show me a static society and I'll show you one either in, or heading for decline. Show me a society that has no plans or vision for its future, and which is entrenched in its views and resistant to change, and I'll show you a static society. Life itself is dynamic and versatile. Living things need to show that dynamism and adaptability to continue to flourish.

Research into extinctions often spells it out. A species that points itself into a biological corner, becoming too specialised in its choice of home, food and/or behaviour patterns, is a species that has made itself dangerously vulnerable to changing circumstances.

No wonder then, that Professor Don Atkin, chairman of the National Capital Authority has expressed a strong wish for the National Capital Plan to be revamped. He says it is outdated and inadequate to handle changed circumstances - namely our population, which currently at around 350,000 and growing every day. This is a change which we can't, in a democracy, stop. Our population will grow unless we adopt extraordinarily undemocratic measures to prevent it.

So we need a plan that caters for that population, and that means one which allows adaptation to changing circumstances. And such a plan should anticipate demographic changes so that future Canberrans will have the homes, community assets and infrastructure they need.

Certainly today's Canberrans are making their wishes clear. Infill development, for example, in the form of inner-urban housing has proved extremely popular with many. Developments of this type experience immediate demand and gratifyingly heavy sales. Surely an indication that the Australian dream has evolved beyond the quarter-acre block to include other forms of housing. And it seems we no longer expect to stay in one home all our lives. People are choosing tree or sea changes of course. But retirees are also aiming to live at the heart of things in convenient, low maintenance homes close to transport. Young people may choose to live first where the action is, deciding on a suburban house and land package when they start families. And others of all ages make home buying decisions based on a range of lifestyle choices.

The truth is that Canberra's housing market will be driven by the demands and needs of those living, or intending to live in our housing. But to meet that demand intelligently, we need a cogent and well-thought out plan, which integrates with other government planning such as that for land use and infrastructure, and allows for adaptation as circumstances change. And to be ready for changing circumstances, we need to regularly review and assess all our strategic plans for the future of Canberra.

The discussion about Canberra's suburban sprawl versus the need for urban infill, continues unabated. **Canberra HOMEMAKER** asks six prominent social commentators which side of the Urban Density debate that they fall on.

In outlining her vision for Canberra yesterday Ms Carnell, chief minister for six years from 1995, said the city needed urban infill, strongly opposed by many residents, to overcome the continued creation of costly urban sprawl that was unsustainable.

"We need urban infill," she insisted, arguing that "urban sprawl [as represented for her by places like Gungahlin] is not a way to go".

KATE CARNELL AO

Kate Carnell, AO, is a former ACT Chief Minister and current Chief Executive of the Australian Food and Grocery Council

Urban infill is essential if Canberra is to be a sustainable city of the future.

Historically, Canberra has been planned around the car - as the main mode of transport. Our city has expanded to the north and south around new suburbs.

With new suburbs, comes the need for new infrastructure including roads, schools, playing fields, broadband and shopping facilities.

The environmental costs of this sort of development are significant.

And this is before we even consider the huge problems of providing decent public transport to these far-flung suburbs.

Australia's population is predicted to increase to 35 million over the next 40 years and Canberra will get our fair share of this large population spike. So where are we going to put all these new Canberrans?

It is my view that we must focus development around town and employment centres. As a result, we will have nodes of population in areas with existing infrastructure but, more importantly, there will be a business case for a light rail system between these centres.

This would see the first stage of a light rail system down Northbourne Avenue to the Parliamentary triangle and out to Woden Plaza.

Over time, the light rail system would be expanded to Belconnen Mall, Tuggerahong town and Canberra's upgraded new airport.

Infill should then occur around the rail system, including some of the buffer areas such as the vacant land around Yamba Drive.

Infill should also occur around our major arterial highway links but not on hilltops or at the expense of sporting and leisure facilities.



CAROLINE LE COUTEUR MLA



PROFESSOR PAT TROY AO



LES COOK



PETER NEWMAN



The one option that Canberra cannot take in the urban density debate is business as usual. The world is changing, and we will change with it. The Legislative Assembly has just agreed to a world leading reduction of greenhouse gases by 40% by 2020 and peak oil is fast approaching. Canberra also needs to improve housing affordability, and build homes for our increasing population.

The number of people in Canberra households is decreasing while our new houses are now the largest in the world. This gives us the opportunity to make our house sizes better fit our household sizes with more diversity of housing. This will include town houses, apartments and smaller houses. Younger people who want a city lifestyle more than a garden, anyone wanting to live closer to services, employment or entertainment and older people downsizing will appreciate smaller, less expensive and - by Canberra standards - denser housing near our town centres and transport routes.

This will in turn free up larger blocks and houses for people who want big gardens or have bigger households. Many existing houses no longer suit their current households. Changes in lifestyles, along with reducing populations of older suburbs, mean local schools and shops can become less viable.

Dight sizing and increasing density in this way will help our city become more vibrant and facilitate a better public transport system. As densification continues, we need to protect our valuable husband and open spaces as they provide recreational value and shared green space. We must also improve our infrastructure, our parks, schools and other amenities to support our new population. All new developments (in-fill or Greenfield) should suit their site and include solar passive design, disabled access, usable gardens and shared spaces for building occupants.

Andrew Barr stated recently that Walter Burley Griffin is dead, but what is really dead is the Yplan, and the idea that we can keep expanding green-field urban development for ever.

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There is a myriad of questions we could usefully explore not the least of which is the impatience of many of the commentators who forget that Rome was not built in a day (and that they had many a slave to do what was done), neither was Sydney, which for long had critics similar to those that rabbit on about Canberra from a strangely ahistorical perspective. The real problem for me goes to the heart of the issues of the process we are following which will surely ensure that the place will become an unsustainable desert.

The quarter acre block has been dead for sixty years. Why persist with an archaic, incorrect, and loaded question? The objective conditions that led to the quarter acre block subdivision essentially disappeared with the introduction of a piped sewerage system. It suits people to present the argument about urban density in terms of 'quarter acre blocks' because it and along with loaded terms like 'sprawl' means they do not have to think about the issues or resort to empirical evidence about what is actually happening in our cities. If we re-phrase the questions in terms of how we make our cities more sustainable in terms of energy and water consumption, food production, waste management and bio-diversity, social engagement and accessibility, equity and employment opportunities we open up the possibilities for a much more nuanced and meaningful exploration of the form and structure of our cities and the obligations and opportunities for citizens to take greater responsibility for their actions and their contribution to the cultural life of the community - including that of Canberra.

I have problems with comments such as those by some of the more vocal commentators. To me they seem superficial and do no service to those professionals who work to understand the complexity of urban life. These views undermine the ways in which truly creative designers can act as the interpreters of the processes and outcomes to produce felicitous solutions. We are not about producing monuments to the aesthetic sensitivities of building designers whatever the egos of their clients but we are about providing and encouraging our urban designers to create and develop cities that work for all of us in balance with the full range of environmental considerations.

...mind you I've only been here 44 years and am still trying to understand the place.

They must have been mad! How could an educated, intelligent people have been so blind - or, worse still, so selfish - that they were unable or unwilling to see the impracticality of continuing the urban sprawl? That is how future generations, saddled with the trouble and cost of solving the results of our folly, are going to condemn us.

The concept of quarter acre blocks, and home ownership generally, in suburban Australia is not much more than one hundred years old. In the early days, and throughout much of the 20th century, most people used their back yards to grow fruit and vegetables and to keep poultry. In this regard, these people were as independent as they possibly could be. But our way of living is quite different now. How many young or even middle-aged people now use their land for that practical purpose? They have neither the interest in doing so, nor the time. It, and therefore the concept of quarter acre blocks with the inevitable unwieldy and crippling expensive infrastructure they entail, is as outdated as button-up coats.

An increasing number of people today don't want the burden of caring for a large block of land, and they don't have the time anyway. Relieved of the constant effort necessarily involved in doing so, they find it more practical to occupy their leisure time enjoying the public parklands and sporting facilities.

It is a fundamental natural law that a species will die if it is unable to adapt to a drastic change in its environment. As the populations of our cities grow it is essential that we adopt a more intelligent concept of housing them. We must change our way of thinking.

Canberra was designed in the early part of the 20th century. The design was of an elite country town of that period, and was no doubt suited to the living style then enjoyed by the people. But the world has moved on. It is no longer practical arbitrarily to limit the height of buildings, provide vast tracts of unused land between suburbs, and other such restrictions incorporated in the original design. These restrictions do not meet the present demands of the people.

It was an American who wrote "In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is". This is even more so the case in Australia, and the space is costing time, money, and inconvenience. We can't do anything about the size of the continent, but we can and should be doing something about the size of our cities. In-fill and an increase in medium and high density housing will allow the Canberra population to grow without further extending its already ridiculously over-extended boundaries.

Historically, of course, any move to implement such changes can be expected to cause the selfish vocal minority of "haves" to man (or woman) the barricades.

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In all Anglo Saxon cities urban density is an issue due to a 1960's legacy from the UK of awful council flats that were a collection of misery. Nearly every community-minded person in the suburbs ever since has done their duty to oppose density increases. It will obviously reduce property values and lead to 'the slums of the future'.

However in recent decades the densest parts of all Australian cities have become synonymous with wealth and amenity whilst the new outer fringes leafy suburbs have become poorer and poorer. The price of housing in such far flung suburbs is lower but it costs much more to live as they travel so far. The wealthy in Sydney's suburbs like Paddington and the new 20 storey apartments of Green Square are using cars ten times less on a per capita basis than those in the far west. Over a 50 year lifetime people in denser inner areas save \$250,000 in travel costs compared to people on the fringe.

Density builds up around amenity and that can be good transit, walkable areas close to urban facilities and even green leafy streets as in Paddington. Young urban professionals are now the main market for these dense areas as they are not interested in long car commutes trapped on freeways. Despite this obvious market, whenever an area is suggested for redevelopment at higher densities the 'save our suburbs' movements still suggest they will be slums...

There are also some real public issues about continuing car-based urban sprawl:

Our research on the costs of urban development shows that:

1. Governments across Australia subsidise low density urban fringe development by around \$85,000 per block in new infrastructure. If governments switched that to redevelopments there would be 100% redevelopment occurring. If the next 20 years of population in Australian cities went into redevelopment it would save over \$300 billion in government revenue.

2. Fringe developments use an extra 4.4 tonnes of greenhouse gas in transport per household each year. So redevelopments will be a necessary part of any strategy to reduce carbon.

3. Fringe areas have much more obesity and depression related to the lack of walking compared to denser more walkable areas. This translates into serious health costs and if reversed would increase productivity 5% as people are better able to work and are less sick.

The reality is all Australian cities, including Canberra are reaching the limit to which they can sprawl ever outwards. It simply takes too long to get anywhere from these far flung suburbs. Oil price increases are now inevitable over the next 20 years and this will make continued fringe growth highly vulnerable.

The oil price shock of 2008 that precipitated the GFC has left an indelible impression that Australian cities should focus back in to cities continue to go out. As younger people are coming back in to cities there has been consequent reductions in car use. This can be seen in all American and Australian cities that for the first time in history are reducing in per capita car travel and rapidly growing in public transport. We need to facilitate this market not scare it off.

PROFESSOR ROB ADAMS

Director of City Design at the City of Melbourne, Australia. He is a respected and award winning architect who has led the revitalization of the central business district and surrounds.



The need for compact Cities to meet the objectives of greater liveability, financial viability and sustainability is not an either-or game when it comes to suburbia. The facts are that we can through the strategic location of increased densities in a 4 to 6 storey development around activity centres, along road based transport corridors and on existing redevelopment sites double the population of our existing Capital Cities without the need for any further land subdivision and while achieving greater efficiencies out

of our existing infrastructure. This will in Melbourne's case require the transformation of 75% of the existing land in the metro area.

Given that the only sector of our national demographic that is declining is the 'two adult two children' family group while all other sectors are growing our residential requirements are changing in front of our eyes. Close to 40% of housing starts in Melbourne are apartments. The fact is that while the quarter acre block is not dead we possibly do not need anymore, and those that we have need to start generating solar energy, capturing their water and planting more to assist with sequestration and food production.

Canberra more than any other Capital city needs to fill the gaps and stop sprawling onto good agricultural land.

This process has already commenced in other Capital Cities; all we need to do now is to have the courage to streamline our planning schemes to facilitate this transformation.