

# **Reconsidering the logic and practice of urban housing intervention**

An exploration of urban consolidation policy narratives and their  
implications for sustainability and equity

by

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in the discipline of  
Humanities

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# Author's Declaration

I declare that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00262), Approval Number: HURGS-19-14.



# Statement of Contributors

This study was made possible by an Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) and Curtin Research Scholarship (CRS).

I was fortunate to have been granted a two-year top-up scholarship from the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI). This included the opportunity to participate in an annual post-graduate symposium for the two years I was an AHURI scholar, which I found immensely helpful.

The interviews conducted for this study were transcribed by a third party (Transcription Puppy) online.

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# Abstract

In Australia, urban consolidation policies have not lived up to their social or environmental promises in practice. This is despite at least three decades since becoming planning orthodoxy across much of the developed western world. Recent government efforts have focused on increasing the supply and quality of medium density infill housing in the greyfields, via innovation and demonstration projects. Urban research on this latest iteration has mostly proceeded from the assumption that these efforts reflect a maturing government approach to realising compact city goals. There has been limited critical attention given to the political dimensions of the policy goals or housing problem narratives, and the current interventions require more consideration within their historical-political-economic context of urban growth management.

This thesis applies a novel policy-centred lens drawing from theories of policy design and social constructionism to the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention. First, a ‘long view’ of shifting Australian housing problem and solution narratives is developed using the literature. Second, the lens is applied to an exemplar sustainable greyfields redevelopment precinct in Fremantle, Western Australia. The objective is to determine the extent to which cutting edge medium density housing interventions are contributing to ‘actually existing’ sustainability and affordability as promised. Presented in three vignettes (including the ‘missing middle’ as metaphor, Gen Y House architectural demonstration, and the proposed baugruppen cooperative development), the findings suggest that current efforts are unlikely to realise improved social and environmental outcomes to previous iterations of government intervention. Instead, the research indicates that if successfully mainstreamed, the innovations would generate outcomes that move away from well-established best practice principles.

An argument is made that the current logic and practice of the missing middle is reflective of an emergent ‘sustainability fix’ that effectively maintains and advances business as usual. The key implication of this diagnosis is that the current sustainability logics risk derailing the progressive potential of housing innovations and models. This suggests that urban planning and housing scholars need to take a more critical stance in greyfields policy research and avoid taking government rationales at face value. A key recommendation is that progressive urban researchers and advocates refocus their measures of success from the adoption of innovations to the realisation of desired social and environmental outcomes. More broadly, this research demonstrates the utility and capacity of a policy-centred analytical lens for revealing embedded flaws and contradictions in government housing interventions.





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# Dedication

For my beloved nanna

*Ida May Mitchell 1930-2018*

And to my Terrance... who sat calmly by my side through all the painful writing days and gave me timely nudges to get outside for fresh air.



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# List of Abbreviations

<b>ABS</b>	Australian Bureau of Statistics
<b>AHURI</b>	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute
<b>BITRE</b>	Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport, and Regional Economics
<b>CRCLCL</b>	Community Research Centre for Low Carbon Living
<b>CUSP</b>	Curtin University Sustainability Policy (Institute)
<b>CUT</b>	Critical Urban Theory
<b>DAP</b>	Development Assessment Panel
<b>MLP</b>	Multi-Level Perspective
<b>MRA</b>	Metropolitan Redevelopment Authority
<b>NIMBY</b>	Not-In-My-Back-Yard
<b>NSW</b>	New South Wales
<b>NU</b>	New Urbanism/ New Urbanist
<b>SHAC</b>	Sustainable Housing for Artists and Creatives
<b>TOD</b>	Transit-Oriented Development
<b>TM</b>	Transitions Management
<b>UDIA</b>	Urban Development Institute of Australia
<b>ULL</b>	Urban Living Laboratories ('labs')
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>VEIL</b>	Victorian Eco-Innovation Lab
<b>WA</b>	Western Australia
<b>WGV</b>	White Gum Valley





# Chapter 1 Introduction

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We need dissent because orthodoxy is never impartial. Orthodoxy can be wrong (Farrelly, 2019).

There is no climate justice without a clear and central focus on housing justice (Rice, Cohen, Long, & Jurjevich, 2020, p. 16).

Critical thinking without hope is cynicism, but hope without critical thinking is naiveté (Maria Popova, quoted in Solnit, 2016, p. xii).

~~~~~

## 1.1 Chapter introduction

The compact city model has not lived up to its promises. This is despite at least three decades since its logic became planning orthodoxy in Australia and across much of the developed world. This thesis reflects on the most recent logic and practice of urban consolidation housing interventions in an Australian context. Recent government efforts have focused on increasing the supply and quality of medium density ‘infill’ housing in the inner and middle suburban region, via innovation and demonstration projects. This research project joins the extensive urban scholarship that considers why urban morphology has been so slow and resistant to change, and why social and environmental higher density housing outcomes have been persistently mediocre, despite policy rationalisations promising the opposite. Going beyond explanations of policy implementation failure, this thesis considers the political dimensions of how urban housing problems are interpreted and the implications of these interpretations for the solutions proposed and adopted. Importantly, this research seeks productive pathways for scholars to demand and realise ‘actually existing’ sustainable and equitable urban housing outcomes in the Australian context, but with relevance to other cities and progressive projects.

## 1.2 Overview

The objective of this thesis is to critically examine, question, and rethink the logic and practice of urban housing intervention, specifically in relation to urban consolidation policy in an Australian setting. The aim is to provide insights that can practically, and critically, guide advocacy and innovations and realise ‘actually existing’ environmental and social sustainability outcomes in urban housing. The context is infill housing interventions in the ‘greyfields’ and emergent interventions that showcase new design and housing models as solutions. This research is important because as Australian urban consolidation policy “rolls on” (Crommelin et al., 2017), the promised outcomes continually fall short. Therefore, this thesis aims to target the logic and practice of ‘cutting edge’ interventions in this space and consider whether they actually represent progress towards sustainability. If not, the very assumptions and ideas upon which current urban housing interventions are based may require re-thinking. This thesis therefore asks the question:

*Do we need to rethink the logic and practice of urban housing intervention in order to realise ‘actually existing’ sustainable and equitable outcomes?*

The project focuses on a particular (greyfields, infill) redevelopment site in Fremantle, Western Australia (the White Gum Valley – WGV precinct) which featured a number of ‘cutting edge’ government-led housing innovations and demonstration projects. Two projects, and one policy metaphor used to justify recent innovations, are scrutinised and presented in three vignettes. The research employs an interpretive lens drawing on insights from policy studies. The findings reveal some counter-productive and regressive tendencies in the logic and practice of urban housing intervention which threaten to maintain or *advance* mediocre social and environmental built form outcomes arising in this context. Some competing government objectives are also identified through an analysis of intervention choices, which point to policy ‘failures’ occurring by design. This finding unsettles the dominant assumption in much of the literature on greyfields/ infill housing that governments have merely fallen short in the implementation of sound policy objectives, and suggests that the practice *and* logic of urban housing intervention may need to be re-thought. The thesis concludes with a call to urban researchers and progressive housing advocates to ensure they keep their ‘eyes on the prize’ and claim the ‘discursive’ (rather than merely the practical) ground in their fight for environmental and social urban housing justice.

## 1.3 Context

This section outlines the meaning of ‘urban housing intervention’ for the purposes of this thesis. A brief description of the logic and practice of urban housing interventions of relevance to this project is also provided.

### 1.3.1 The logic and practice of urban housing intervention

#### *'Housing intervention'*

The material and social outcomes of housing are shaped by a myriad of different factors, such as macroeconomic trends, bank lending requirements, cultural norms, immigration, and politics (to name but a few). Governments can intervene to influence different aspects of housing, including its location, design, ownership arrangements, and its distribution. The Australian government operates as a federation of six states and two self-governing territories, each with their own constitutions, parliaments, governments and laws. As a general rule, the Commonwealth government intervenes in housing *demand* factors, including through the welfare system and taxation arrangements, whereas the state governments primarily intervene in matters of housing *supply*, such as through land use planning and the delivery of homelessness services (AHURI, 2018). Within the states and territories, a third tier of municipal government is involved in housing through localised planning and development approvals and heritage provisions. Despite the deep influence of Commonwealth macroeconomic levers on housing markets in the Australian system, the majority of the *responsibility* for housing outcomes is devolved to state or municipal scales of government.

At the state government level in Australia, 'housing policy' falls across several bureaucratic domains. Explicit 'affordable housing' policy is generally located in community services, who manage the public housing system, deliver homelessness programs, and provide various other services to assist low income households to access housing (for example: through low interest loans). Where community services' agencies are targeted at the low income sub-market, the broader housing system is influenced by state and local governments predominantly through the planning system. Planning interventions play a role in directing the location of new housing and regulating building design and land uses. State governments also intervene through finance and taxation (for example: through the housing exchange 'stamp duty' tax) and through direct coordination and delivery of significant land redevelopment projects.

This bureaucratic system makes ‘housing policy’ a slightly awkward focus of study in Australia. Departments and ministers with housing responsibilities are often focused only on housing unaffordability and crisis accommodation services. They commonly work in parallel to other portfolios such as urban and regional planning and treasury who, in reality, have much broader influence on the system of housing. Due to these factors, this thesis refers more broadly to the ‘logic and practice of urban housing intervention’. This closely resembles Clapham’s (2018) definition of housing policy as “any action taken by any government or government agency to influence the processes or outcomes of housing” (p.164). Such a description enables the analytical focus on ‘housing intervention’ to cross bureaucratic siloes and include instruments or projects that may not be strictly considered ‘policies’. While this project is centred on the logic and practice of urban consolidation policy, which is typically the domain of urban planning, the use of the term “urban housing intervention” provides this research with the flexibility to centre the discussion on *housing* despite the largely indirect focus on housing in the planning system.

*Logic: compact city*

To understand the current urban housing logic, it is necessary to introduce the embedded planning orthodoxies of ‘sustainable development’ and the ‘compact city’ model. Over the last three decades, the competing urban pressures of population growth, economic growth, infrastructure delivery, and urban liveability have been resolved philosophically and practically via the compact city model. This model emerged in the 1980s and 1990s and was based on the concept of ‘sustainable development’. The most common definition of sustainable development comes from the Brundtland Report which describes it as:

Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987).

In other words, ‘sustainable development’ provided a conceptual framework that accommodated pressures for economic (and urban) development to be progressed, while also ensuring social and environmental well-being for the world’s citizens. A ‘compact’ or consolidation urban form has been widely interpreted as the best model for balancing these various issues (S. Campbell, 2016; Jenks, 2019).

The pursuit of a compact urban form translates into limiting urban spread, and a preference for new growth to be accommodated within existing metropolitan areas. For housing, governments have sought to increase residential densities and have targeted higher density development around centralised public transport routes and in proximity to services such as schools and shopping centres. The objective of increasing higher density housing responds to the ‘problem’ of low density suburban spread, commonly referred to as ‘sprawl’. Sprawl is associated with several problems including: ongoing loss of agricultural lands on the urban periphery; locked-in reliance on the automobile to access employment and services; and a high cost and inefficiency of infrastructure provision. In Australia, similar to many other countries around the world, the push for higher density housing goes against long-held cultural aspirations for detached, suburban homes and well-established low density development patterns. The compact city model has been alternatively termed ‘smart growth in the US, but is more commonly referred to as ‘urban consolidation’ in Australia.

In addition to addressing various economic and environmental issues with development, a compact urban form is rationalised as *offering* a range of social and environmental benefits. For example, a residential pattern coordinated with public transit or in walking or cycling distance from services can reduce a city’s carbon footprint. Higher density dwellings are often smaller than suburban homes and have thus been viewed as more energy efficient. Socially, urban intensification is said to generate a vibrant and cosmopolitan environment for its citizens. New urbanists have advocated for ‘mixed use development’ in which multiple land uses are located in one area, and activity can be maintained throughout the day, night, or week. This cosmopolitan activity has also been associated with increased urban safety, as there are always ‘eyes on the street’(J. Jacobs, 1961). Lastly, the creation of neighbourhoods catering for walking and cycling offers a healthier lifestyle than the reliance on cars for transport. Therefore, higher density housing, and urban intensification more generally, is widely believed to be a healthier, safer, more exciting, and more environmentally friendly development model than low density suburban patterns that are dependent on the automobile and feature larger dwellings.

### *Urban housing interventions: practice*

State and local governments in Australia intervene to implement urban consolidation objectives in various ways, though generally these are enacted via planning mechanisms. At a high level, a consolidation policy is articulated in long term state government strategic plans. These plans map out where residential housing growth will be spatially targeted into the future. They also set out planned transport routes and land use distributions, for example in relation to preserving green nature corridors. In terms of housing, all the state governments have set targets for determining the extent to which new housing is to be delivered within the existing metropolitan boundaries compared with the urban fringe. These state government plans also map out key ‘activity centres’ and ‘corridors’ where housing intensification is prioritised and where retail and community service hubs can be delivered.

The primary mechanism for realising these targets has been through land zoning instruments. Land zoning regulates what land can be used for, and the extent of development allowed on a particular site. Increasing the density potential in strategically targeted areas enhances the value of urban land and encourages the (re)development of lots at higher densities. For example, where an older single detached dwelling exists on a lot zoned for higher density housing, redevelopment of that site can yield additional dwellings (and profit). Beyond zoning instruments, State Government land development agencies frequently take a more active role in coordinating the development of large strategic urban sites. While the actual delivery of dwellings is usually handed over to private developers, the land agency will determine the overall project vision and provide the infrastructure and leadership to deliver that vision (van den Nouwelant, Davison, Gurran, Pinnegar, & Randolph, 2015)

### **1.3.2 Problem: compact city realities**

While the logic and practice of urban consolidation is well-established in Australia, and around the world, research suggests that the social and environmental outcomes of these policies in practice have been mixed at best (S. Campbell, 2016; Jenks, 2019). A recent review of the literature found that there was little evidence supporting the claimed environmental benefits of urban consolidation policies (Gren, Colding, Berghauser-Pont, & Marcus, 2019). In fact, some studies have suggested that high density housing might be *more* energy intensive in both construction and operation (Randolph & Troy, 2011). Other studies have indicated there might be ‘compensatory’ mechanisms at play in which urban citizens living in high densities reduce their travel emissions in their daily commute, but travel more extensively (especially by plane) for leisure, thus maintaining a high carbon footprint (Holden & Norland, 2005).

The social outcomes have been even more contested (Bramley & Power, 2009). Many scholars have highlighted the way that urban redevelopment and intensification can eventuate in gentrification and displacement of lower income citizens (Quastel, Moos, & Lynch, 2012; Rice et al., 2020; Shaw, 2013). These outcomes can drive urban segregation, where wealthy citizens have access to transit-oriented, high amenity locations, while low income residents are relegated to areas with poorer service provision and high levels of automobile dependence (Bunker et al., 2017). Others have questioned the liveability and mental health outcomes of high density living, with mixed results (Larcombe, van Etten, Logan, Prescott, & Horwitz, 2019; Mouratidis, 2018).

In Australia, despite urban consolidation being planning orthodoxy for at least three decades (Crommelin et al., 2017; Dodson, 2010), its results in practice have often been underwhelming, with sub-optimal social and material housing outcomes. First, despite being well-established in Australian strategic planning, urban consolidation objectives have proven difficult to achieve, with urban morphology and cultural housing aspirations slow to change (Bunker et al., 2017; Hurley, Taylor, & Dodson, 2017). Many researchers have documented the persistent divergence of development patterns from the compact city visions in government plans (Buxton, Goodman, & March, 2012; Ford & March, 2012; Forster, 2006). The proportion of new infill compared with greenfield development has started to increase in recent years. In Perth in 2017 new net infill reached its highest level since recording began in 2011 – at 42% (Department of Planning Lands and Heritage, 2019, p. 2). As implied by this figure, though, this means that 58% of new development continues to occur at the ever expanding urban fringe. Therefore, the transition to a more compact form is slow to be realised in the Australian context, where single detached housing and low density urban morphology has long been the norm.

Second, the *housing* outcomes arising in a context of urban consolidation have been found to be problematic in several ways. One of the key problems identified with the current supply of housing in Australian cities is its lack of diversity in terms of dwelling typologies (AHURI, 2020; Western Australian Planning Commission, 2015). This lack of diversity is said to be at odds with the changing needs of the population and shifts in demographics – especially in relation to the growth of single person households (Frances-Kelly, 2011). Rowley and James (2017) point out that while infill housing *is* being delivered across the city, the price of the diverse dwellings produced has continued to reflect location value. This has created a disparity between luxury (high-cost) developments in desirable locations, and lower-quality unit development in the outer metropolitan areas. Therefore, *affordable* housing, in terms of both ownership and rental options has failed to be meaningfully achieved in the transit-oriented, inner city, high amenity areas.

The material outcomes of higher density housing produced to date have also been criticised. Recently, the apartment development industry in Australia has been reeling from several high profile building defect scandals which involved residents being evacuated from their properties (Hanmer, 2019). Research has suggested that a high proportion of apartments (up to 85% in NSW built since 2000 (Easthope, Randolph, & Judd, 2012)) have structural or safety defects (Shergold & Weir, 2018). Others have documented the over-development of apartments which has compromised the urban liveability of both the apartments themselves, and the broader neighbourhood (Hodyl, 2015). The maximisation of yield within apartment buildings has also contributed to poor quality outcomes, such as bedrooms without windows.

### 1.3.3 Greyfields redevelopment

In response to many of these issues, increasing and improving medium density ‘infill’ housing has emerged as a key policy focus over the last decade in Australia (Lehmann, 2017; Newton, 2018) and around the world (Charmes & Keil, 2015; Frank, Mayaud, Hong, Fisher, & Kershaw, 2019; Wegmann, 2020). Policy makers and urban researchers have widely viewed the goal of increasing the supply and quality of medium density greyfields housing as necessary for finally realising the objectives of urban consolidation policy – and for doing so in a more mature and sophisticated manner than has been achieved to date (Murray et al., 2015; Newton, 2018; Rowley & Phibbs, 2012; Wegmann, 2020). For example, Newton and Glackin (2014) argue that:

There is clear evidence that the middle ring established suburbs have been under-performing as a demographic absorber, housing supplier, and job attractor. The sustainable development of Australia’s cities will depend significantly on how these sections of our cities are regenerated to incorporate more medium density mixed use infill development (p.3).

‘Infill’ simply refers to development occurring within the existing metropolitan area, usually with an associated increase in dwelling density (Rowley & Phibbs, 2012). The focus on infill has been increasingly centred on the inner and middle suburban regions, defined as the ‘greyfields’ (Newton, 2010). Newton (2010) describes the greyfields as comprising:

The ageing, occupied residential tracts of suburbs which are physically, technologically and environmentally obsolescent and which represent economically outdated, failing or under-capitalized real estate assets. They typically occur in a 5–25 km radius of the centre of each capital city and are service-, transport-, amenity- and employment-rich compared to the outer and peri-urban suburbs (p.81).



In Australia to date, (as in the US and New Zealand) new infill housing has predominantly been delivered in central locations in high rise apartment typologies or in large-scale redevelopment sites on remediated land (known as ‘brownfields’). It has proven more challenging to deliver a broad uplift in housing densities across metropolitan regions, and to achieve the architecturally pleasing mid-rise typologies depicted in New Urbanist visions. Therefore, recent government efforts and research interest has been focused on the development of processes and mechanisms through which these inner and middle established suburbs can be *re-developed* and intensified with *medium* density housing typologies (Murray et al., 2015).

Increasing the supply of good quality and well-located *medium* density housing has often been interpreted as offering a more appealing, diverse, and liveable built form than typical high rise apartment development (Rowley & James, 2017; Sharam, McShane, Alves, Bryant, & Shihab-Smith, 2012). It is interpreted as crucial for delivering meaningful housing choice through varied and diverse dwelling options. In Australia, this responds to social market research, such as the ‘Housing We’d Choose’ reports, which indicates that while households may be willing to trade-off space for location, the greatest demand was for well-located, semi-detached and low-rise typologies (J.-F. Kelly, 2011; State of Western Australia, 2013). Such multi-residential dwellings have been found to be under-supplied compared to standard one and two bedroom apartment units and could offer more affordable urban housing options, especially for families. It therefore offers the potential of blending into existing low density (sub)urban landscapes while maintaining the neighbourhood character. In the US and Canada (and more recently in Australia), this shortfall of diverse and more ‘liveable’ housing typologies across the metropolitan region has been described as the ‘missing middle’ (Florida, 2018; Wegmann, 2020). The missing middle metaphor, and its potential implications for housing outcomes, is examined in depth in Vignette 1 in Chapter 6.

State governments in this context have been focused on developing opportunities for larger scale redevelopment of *precincts*; increasing *mid-rise* housing typologies, and improving the built form *design* outcomes of infill development (Department of Planning Lands and Heritage, 2015; Murray et al., 2015; Newton, 2018). Some of the interventions being implemented by governments include: government-led precinct scale development coordination, improving design codes for medium density built form, and showcasing quality design. The perceived need for innovation in the design and construction of medium density typologies has driven an interest in architectural design competitions, and government-led demonstration projects (T. Moore & Higgins, 2016). In line with global trends in this space, governments have been increasingly partnering with private industry and universities to create experimental ‘living laboratory’ sites where innovative housing innovations can be tested (Caprotti & Cowley, 2017; T. Moore, Horne, & Doyon, 2020). The WGV redevelopment precinct in Western Australia, which forms the empirical focal point for this research, is one example of an innovation site which aims to translate new designs and technologies into mainstream housing development practice (Byrne, Hosking, & Syed, 2019).

## 1.4 Existing research contributions

Previous Australian urban scholarship on the topic of infill housing intervention has predominantly focused on identifying issues limiting the effective delivery of urban consolidation objectives. Studies have highlighted regulatory, practical, and cultural barriers to achieving high quality greyfields development. For example, built form and density outcomes are constrained by the size of existing suburban lots, with few mechanisms available to coordinate the amalgamation of individually owned sites (Gallagher, Sigler, & Liu, 2020; Murray et al., 2015; Newton & Glackin, 2014). In this context, researchers have criticised blanket re-zoning mechanisms for producing ad hoc, small scale housing redevelopment with very modest density gains. This has been shown to result in a loss of permeable green space and mediocre built form outcomes (Legacy, Pinnegar, & Wiesel, 2013).

Others have identified perverse policy incentives where re-zoning for higher densities in high value locations have encouraged speculative land holding without creating new medium density housing supply (Woodcock, Dovey, Wollan, & Robertson, 2011). The redevelopment of the greyfields has also been stymied by persistent community opposition, and existing landholders have proven to be a politically powerful force in their quest to retain the suburban character of their neighbourhoods (Nematollahi, Tiwari, & Hedgecock, 2016; Whittemore & BenDor, 2019). Perceptions of over-development and poor quality outcomes in other locations have not been helpful to governments attempting broader urban intensification (Hodyl, 2015; Palmer, 2018).

The literature review (presented in Chapter 2) shows how these various issues have largely been interpreted as *ineffective* or *inadequate* government intervention to achieve its urban consolidation objectives. Some have argued there is a lack of knowledge capacity amongst policy makers about urban development finance which has led to the deployment of ineffective government instruments (Rowley & Phibbs, 2012). It is also commonly assumed that government planners lack effective policy tools to deliver well-designed and coordinated greyfields redevelopment (Murray et al., 2015; Newton & Glackin, 2014), or to gain community support (Roman Trubka & Glackin, 2016).

Numerous urban planning and housing researchers have traced the way that the implementation of urban consolidation objectives has been constrained by large-scale political-economic restructuring that has increasingly favoured market-based solutions to policy problems (Crommelin et al., 2017; Gleeson & Low, 2000b; van den Nouwelant et al., 2015). Over the past few decades there has been a well-documented shift towards industry self-regulation (rather than government-led compliance); public-private partnerships in land redevelopment projects; and deregulation of urban planning to smooth the way for developers (Bunker et al., 2017; K. Davidson & Gleeson, 2014; Gurran & Ruming, 2015). In this context, state and local governments have relied heavily on indirect planning tools (such as re-zoning) to direct the location and density of new urban housing, rather than using more direct regulatory mechanisms (Randolph & Freestone, 2012).

This preference is said to have allowed the development industry, rather than government, to shape housing outcomes (Bunker et al., 2017; Buxton et al., 2012; Gleeson, Dodson, & Spiller, 2010). Researchers have demonstrated that the reliance on the private market to deliver government objectives has been associated with skewed supply and demand factors, especially in markets dominated by investor-purchasers and renters, as is common in higher density developments (Palmer, 2018; Sharam, Bryant, & Alves, 2015). In such markets, research has highlighted a tendency towards yield maximisation over dwelling liveability (Martel, 2013), and a lack of diversity and affordability in higher density offerings, especially in central locations for families and low income earners (Rowley & James, 2017). Therefore, many of the sub-optimal social and environmental higher density housing outcomes have been attributed to market failures and a lack of meaningful government intervention to address them.

In light of these conclusions, it is widely agreed that more effective and coordinated government intervention is required to achieve liveable, affordable, and sustainable housing outcomes in the greyfields (Bolleter, 2016; Murray et al., 2015; Newton, Glackin, Witheridge, & Garner, 2020). In this context, urban scholarship has been active in developing potential government mechanisms and innovative solutions to increase the supply and quality of medium density infill housing. For example, the *Greening the Greyfields* research project has resulted in recommendations for new policy tools to deliver coordinated precinct-scale development, some of which have been implemented in Victoria (Newton, 2018). In associated research, community engagement tools have been developed to enable collective visioning and participation with local neighbourhoods (Glackin & Trubka, 2012).

Others have proposed progressive innovations in the financing, procurement, ownership, design, and construction of medium density development (McGee, Wynne, & Lehmann, 2017; T. Moore et al., 2020; Sharam et al., 2012). To overcome skewed supply and demand of higher density products, many have suggested cooperative, demand-led housing development arrangements in which future occupants are able to influence the built form outcomes upfront (Palmer, 2018; Sharam et al., 2015). Co-operative arrangements, such as the German *Baugruppen* model ('building groups'), are said to offer new mechanisms for procuring high quality medium density developments that could better meet the diverse needs and deliver better value for money (Palmer, 2018; Ring, 2014). Advocates have commonly focused on the identification of barriers and opportunities (including for government intervention) to increase the uptake of these models into the broader housing development system (Palmer, 2018; Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012). A proposed government-led Baugruppen demonstration project at the WGV site is examined in detail in Vignette 3, Chapter 6.

## 1.5 Some neglected considerations

There has been broad recognition by urban planning and housing researchers that, in practice, the housing outcomes of urban consolidation policies have been underwhelming. This thesis aligns itself with the extensive urban planning and housing scholarship which examines *why* these issues persist and *how* 'actually existing' (Weller & O'Neill, 2014), sustainable and equitable urban housing outcomes might be realised in the latest efforts to intensify the greyfields. The existing research on the greyfields and government intervention has drawn attention to several problems with the implementation of urban consolidation objectives, including in the greyfields. It has also been active in developing improved government mechanisms and new innovative housing models to increase the supply and quality of medium density infill housing.

The review of the literature conducted for this research project, however, identifies some areas that warrant further scrutiny. In particular, the diagnosis of policy implementation failure assumes that the problem lies in the *calibration* of government interventions, however, less critical attention has been paid to the rationales and logic shaping policy goals and current practice. While many urban scholars have, over the years, contested the logic and claims of the compact city narrative (Brain, 2005; Dodson & Gleeson, 2007; Neuman, 2005; Troy, 1992), these critiques have not been fully considered in the context of greyfields redevelopment efforts. Instead, there is a sense that the latest government focus on *medium* density and improving design outcomes reflects an acknowledgement of previous failings and a renewed commitment to delivering the compact city vision in a more sophisticated manner than in the past.

Chapter 2 will argue that the analytical focus on the calibration of government intervention has driven a fairly instrumentalist research approach targeting ‘how to’ questions, while neglecting the political dimensions of policy goal formulation. In particular, research approached in this way does not consider the politically and socially constructed nature of policy *problem* and solution narratives informing government intervention. Housing policy research approached in this way has been previously criticised as resting on the “the fiction of government benevolence” in policy making (K. Jacobs & Pawson, 2015). This is because it relies on the assumption governments are working towards their stated goals but that failings have occurred inadvertently in the implementation process. In the context of greyfields redevelopment, this means that while urban consolidation objectives are assumed to be intact, any mediocre outcomes are attributed to the incomplete or misguided delivery of the sustainable compact city model.

This thesis instead responds to Jacobs (2015a) who has called for greater scrutiny of government intentionality that goes beyond acceptance of face value policy rationales to consider the various influences and pressures to which a particular ‘solution’ responds. There have been growing contributions of this kind in the context of ‘affordable housing’ policy (Gurran & Phibbs, 2015; K. Jacobs, 2015b), but less so in the context of urban consolidation policy (Gurran and Phibbs (2013) are an exception), and even less in relation to the emergent logic and practice of *greyfields* housing intervention.

It is acknowledged that there are well-established critical and theoretical accounts of urban redevelopment and urban consolidation, however previous scholars have drawn attention to a “schism” (Clapham, 2018) evident in housing research between empirical, policy-centred research on the one hand and theoretically driven analyses on the other (K. Jacobs & Manzi, 2017). As a fundamentally practice-based discipline, there is a strong desire for urban planning and housing research to be pragmatic and able to inform real-world policy making. Various scholars have lamented the way that these pressures have encouraged research which is largely a-theoretical and overly empirical (K. Jacobs, 2015a; Kemeny, 2004; Weller & O’Neill, 2014). This is true for the majority of research conducted on the issue of urban housing interventions in the greyfields which has, to date, tended towards pragmatic, solutions-oriented policy analysis.

At the same time, theoretically-driven urban scholarship has been criticised for having little connection with the every-day practice of urban planning in Australia (Hurley & Taylor, 2015; March, 2010; Troy, 2013). Chapter 3 outlines the dominant theoretical lens that has been applied to explain the persistence of housing inequalities and sub-optimal built form outcomes in urban centres. Critical urban theory and Marxist-inspired analytical approaches have highlighted the influence of neoliberalism on the chosen government responses to policy issues (Marcuse, 2012; Swyngedouw, Moulaert, & Rodriguez, 2002). In urban housing, neoliberal policy-making trends have been associated with governments acquiescing to industry demands and allowing the private development market to determine housing outcomes (Bunker et al., 2017). This is provided as a common explanation for why the goals of urban consolidation, especially the social and environmental benefits promised, have been underwhelming in practice.

Critical urban theory offers important insights for this research by providing more structural explanations for persistent housing problems and policy responses than much of the pragmatic urban planning scholarship. In particular, political-economy studies have made important observations about the role of powerful elites in shaping the policy narrative to suit their interests, and the way that dominant (often global) narratives about the role of government can legitimise those vested interests (Gurran & Ruming, 2015; Lerner, 2000; Theodore & Peck, 2011). Such insights are therefore relevant and useful for reflecting critically on the way that urban housing problem and solution narratives are politically constructed. In addition, such perspectives can provide space to consider alternative (sometimes regressive) government objectives underlying problem interpretations and intervention choices.

While critical theories were the first port of call for locating a suitable critical lens for this research project, a few limitations were identified for the purposes of this research. In particular, these theories have been criticised for providing deterministic accounts of urban policy-making which overstate the influence of global, structural forces while minimising contextual explanatory factors (Storper, 2016; Weller & O'Neill, 2014; Yiftachel, 2016). This has been described as a tendency to “read for dominance, rather than difference” (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 623). In other words, the diagnosis of neoliberalisation can prevent contextualised insights and the somewhat abstracted conclusions may not overcome the schism between theory and practice in housing policy research.

In attempting to address the schism, urban planning and housing researchers have been increasingly drawn to socio-technical transitions theories to determine pathways for shifting towards more sustainable and equitable urban environments (Bulkeley & Castán Broto, 2013; Frantzeskaki, Broto, Coenen, & Loorbach, 2017; Horne, Moore, de Haan, & Gleeson, 2018). Several researchers have utilised these frameworks to determine pathways for speeding up the transition to a compact city, including in the greyfields (Moloney & Horne, 2015; Newton, 2018). Transitions perspectives have evolved from innovation theory and policy change literature, and they offer a systems lens to tackle complex policy issues (such as housing or energy) (Loorbach, 2010). Researchers have been attracted to transitions frameworks, such as the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP), as useful for mapping the system of practice (Geels, 2010). The MLP is a comprehensive tool that identifies different scales of practice and innovation potential, including at the landscape (macro), regime (meso), and niche (micro) scale. Therefore, this tool applies theoretical insights of system change in a highly contextualised manner. For this reason, socio-technical transitions perspectives have been attractive to scholars attempting to overcome the research schism and provide robust, contextualised insights that can practically assist in the transition to a more sustainable, compact urban environment.

The scholarly interest and application of transitions frameworks has mirrored the increasing use of experimentation, demonstration and innovation in the logic and practice of urban housing government intervention (Caprotti & Cowley, 2017). There is, however, a substantial body of literature that scrutinises the governance of transition and has suggested that these emergent practices may actively legitimise political-economic re-structuring and benefit new urban elites (Joshua Evans, 2016; Gibbs & O'Neill, 2014; Shove & Walker, 2007). In addition, a range of scholars have highlighted the technicism imbued in transitions perspectives which can generate fairly linear and instrumental policy analyses (Bulkeley & Castán Broto, 2013; Gibbs & O'Neill, 2014). Chapter 2 will argue that socio-technical transitions theories, though growing in popularity amongst urban scholars, may neglect the political dimensions of housing problems and solutions, and pay inadequate critical attention to the intervention goals. Therefore, critiques of transitions approaches indicate that the growing application of these theories to the greyfields housing context may risk reinforcing the instrumentalism in the existing literature. To date, these critiques have not been connected to the research or practice of greyfields urban housing intervention which has been widely assumed to be an 'unambiguously progressive' pursuit.

## 1.6 Research question

In light of the gaps and issues outlined above, this thesis reorients the analytical lens onto the goals, logic, and practice of urban housing intervention. By doing so, this research project illuminates an alternative interpretation of how and why urban consolidation interventions have often been sub-optimal. Importantly, it does so by considering the most recent, best practice ideas in urban consolidation in greyfields redevelopment focused on design innovation, participation, and professional development.

This thesis asks the central question:

*Do we need to rethink the logic and practice of urban housing intervention in order to realise 'actually existing' sustainable and equitable outcomes?*

This will be answered via the following sub-questions:

1. What meanings and narratives inform current and emerging interventions?
2. What are the actual and potential implications of these meanings and narratives for urban housing outcomes? (material and social)
3. What is obscured, ignored, and/or privileged as a result of the way that problems and solutions in urban housing are interpreted?



4. Based on the answers to the above sub-questions, in what ways would the logic and practice of urban housing intervention need to be reconsidered for sustainable and equitable outcomes to be realised in practice?

## 1.7 Niche

To answer the research questions posed above, this research project applies a novel policy-centred lens to interpret ‘what is going on here’ (Oliver, 2012) in the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention (specifically in the greyfields). This policy-centred lens consists of three key (interrelated) components: mapping the policy design of the current goals and means of government intervention; reflecting on the way that housing problems and solutions are constructed; and positioning the current logic and practice of urban housing interventions into the longer history of urban growth management in Australia.

First, this thesis draws on theories of ‘policy design’ to map out the logic and practice of current urban housing intervention in the greyfields (Bobrow, 2006; Bobrow & Dryzek, 1987; Howlett & Lejano, 2012). Policy design theory has sometimes tended towards instrumental-rationalism where scholars have theorised about the components for crafting ‘good’ policy (Howlett & Lejano, 2012). A sub-set of this literature, though, has considered policy design not as verb, but as noun (Howlett & Lejano, 2012; Schneider & Sidney, 2009). This thesis employs the latter approach, which posits that the analysis of policy goals and instruments *in situ* can illuminate useful insights about government intent and problem interpretations (known as ‘problematisations’). For example, Howlett’s (2009) nested framework of policy design (Figure 1.1) assists in mapping the various norms and influences shaping government intervention choices, and this is considered at three scales of abstraction (macro governance norms, meso regime logics, micro operational plans).

Policy content			
	Governance arrangements	Policy regime logics	Policy targets
<i>Policy goals</i>	Governance mode  eg. market governance	Policy objectives  eg. correcting market or governance failures	Policy targets  eg. assessing actor interests, resources and impact on actors re: equity, effectiveness, efficiency
<b>Policy component</b>			
<i>Policy means</i>	Policy implementation preferences  eg. non-state based – family, market, community	Preferred implementation style and policy tool choices  eg. choice of authority or organisation-based tools	Policy tool calibration  eg. technical aspects of policy tools such as coercion and visibility

**Figure 1.1: Howlett's nested model of policy design** (Howlett, 2009)

The emphasis on policy goal and instrument *choices* is important for this research because it explores the socially and political constructed nature of social issues. Importantly, theories of policy-making highlight that policy problem constructions influence where government attention is directed and how interventions are calibrated (Kingdon, 1984; Schneider & Sidney, 2009). Reflecting on problematisations enables this research project to engage in “problem-questioning” in contrast to rational policy research focused on “problem-solving” (emphasis original, Bacchi, 2009, p. xvii) It has therefore been chosen as a useful approach for addressing the instrumentalism in much of the current research on greyfields housing interventions, and for reflecting on the intervention *goals* as well as the means.

The third (interrelated) component of the policy-centred lens employed is an examination of urban housing problems and solution in the Australian context *over time*. Several urban scholars have drawn attention to the way that urban development and density narratives have shifted over time, and have shown that these changes often reflect economic priorities or governing trends (A. Davison, 2006; Dodson, 2012; Flanagan & Jacobs, 2019; Gurran & Ruming, 2015). It is argued that considering the problem and solution narratives of urban housing intervention over time will be useful in illuminating the political dimensions of government objectives which is currently lacking in the literature on *medium* density infill housing intervention. It will also position the latest intervention logic and practice within the broader context of urban consolidation policy, which has, to date, produced fairly poor social and environmental outcomes (outlined earlier).

The policy and problem-centred approach taken in this thesis contributes to addressing the schism in housing policy research between empirical and theoretical insights. In particular, a policy design lens is argued to be suitable for addressing some of the limitations of the neoliberalisation diagnosis of critical urban theory. By focussing the lens on actually existing logic and practice, the analysis can overcome the risk of seeing ‘dominance over difference’ and making a priori assumptions of hegemonic neoliberalism. There is, however, still space for the consideration of broader political-economic factors that shape policy decisions. This is achieved by considering the factors shaping policy design at the macro, meso, and micro scales, and by taking a ‘long view’ of changing housing priorities over time (Flanagan & Jacobs, 2019).

A policy design approach was also chosen for this research because it centres on *government* narratives and practices. For some political theorists, processes of neoliberalisation have been interpreted as a retreat of government from governing and a reduction in government *capacity* to achieve its goals (Rhodes, 2007; Vabo & Roiseland, 2012). Many scholars have documented the growing influence and involvement of external stakeholders in shaping policy goals and means. This thesis, however, takes the position that, despite this trend, governments continue to possess capacity in urban governance. In line with policy scholars such as Bacchi (2009), it is argued that governments hold a privileged position in the political construction of problem and solution narratives. The analytical re-centring of government capacity in shaping the logic and practice of urban housing intervention crucially provides this thesis with ability to think beyond structural determinism. This is because it assumes that governments ultimately determine the degree of involvement of external, private actors in decision making and service delivery, even if the current preference is for partnership with and reliance on, the private sector.

## 1.8 Significance of this research

Despite the extensive research that has documented the ambiguous and even negative social and environmental outcomes of the compact city model, it continues to be pursued as planning orthodoxy across the developed world. In Australia (and similarly elsewhere), the most recent phase of urban consolidation policy has increasingly focused on re-developing and intensifying the ‘greyfields’, with a key policy and research interest in increasing the supply and quality of medium density housing typologies. As outlined earlier, the Australian urban planning and housing literature has mostly interpreted the government interest in these objectives as reflective of a maturing of urban consolidation implementation. It is argued that a more cautious and critical analysis of the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention in the greyfields is pertinent to ensure that social and environmental outcomes are actually realised in practice in this latest stage.

The logic and practice being implemented in the greyfields is currently aligned with broader urban governance trends favouring experimentation, innovation, demonstration, and urban design approaches. Critical sustainability research has, however, warned that low carbon transitions may be advancing capital accumulation and exacerbating social and environmental problems (K. Davidson & Gleeson, 2014; Gibbs & O'Neill, 2014; Rice et al., 2020; Scheller & Thörn, 2018; While, Jonas, & Gibbs, 2004). In particular, many scholars over the years have drawn attention to the ambiguity of 'sustainability' in urban governance, which has commonly been used creatively by vested interests to achieve their own (financial) ends (Brown, 2016; Gunder, 2011). With "urban experimentation...firmly on the policy, planning and scholarly urban agenda" (Caprotti & Cowley, 2017, p. 1442), it is argued that urban researchers and housing advocates need to be more alert to the potential ways in which current objectives and 'unambiguously socially progressive' (Baker & Evans, 2016) projects may be maintaining the existing socio-technical system rather than transforming it.

By highlighting the socially and politically constructed nature of urban housing problems, this thesis critically interrogates the potential implications of current logic and practice for 'actually existing' social and environmental outcomes. Rather than taking the concerted government and research focus on greyfields redevelopment at face value, this study reflects on the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention within its historical-political-economic context. This context, importantly, includes the years of lucklustre and mediocre housing outcomes of urban consolidation policy to consider how the well-established logic and favoured practices might be actively contributing to those outcomes. In illuminating these potentially regressive tendencies in current urban housing intervention logic and practice a more reflexive, rather than instrumental, discussion is generated about how to achieve urban sustainability and equity. Ultimately, urban consolidation logic and practice may need to be reconsidered. As urban consolidation policy implementation 'rolls on', this study represents a timely critical reflection on 'what is going on here' that may be able to prevent previous mistakes being repeated.

## 1.9 Research method

This thesis adopts a constructivist epistemology and an interpretive methodological approach to answer the research questions. Constructionists understand social reality as being accessed through language and discourse (Kemeny, 2004, p. 2). This lens is conducive to the task of deciphering the problem and solution narratives shaping urban housing intervention. This is because it emphasises a relational and interactive production of knowledge which is mediated through collective stories and explanations. Methodologically, this project utilised multiple methods to gain access to the emerging logic and practice of urban housing intervention. The particular methods included qualitative interviews with senior urban development stakeholders, policy and media analysis, and observation of industry events and government negotiation. These sources of knowledge, though, played a supportive role for the researcher to interpret the key ‘data’ source which was the actual actions and rationalisations of government in the context of infill housing intervention. The objective of the research was to gain a “thick description” (Geertz, 2003) of this logic and action in practice in order to critically reflect on the likely outcomes and potential implications of the current government interventions.

With ‘housing policy’ located in an awkward bureaucratic position, and urban consolidation representing a broad set of government ideas and practices, this project required a contextual focal point. The White Gum Valley (WGV) medium density infill redevelopment project in Fremantle, Western Australia provided that focus. It was chosen because it has been highly regarded as an exemplar sustainable infill project, it was government-led, and it featured several different types of housing innovations. While various energy, water and waste efficiency technologies were tested on the WGV ‘living laboratory’ site in partnership with local universities, it also featured various innovative housing procurement, design, and intervention models that aligned with ideas currently advocated by progressive urban researchers.

The WGV development, however, should not be understood as a typical case study in which generalisable conclusions are made based on the data collected. Instead, WGV was used as an access point, a way of grounding and containing this research project, with the purpose of interpreting the logic and practice of infill development more broadly in the Perth and Australian context. Therefore, the interviews and policy analysis did not solely revolve around WGV, but included Perth’s metropolitan strategic plans, broader industry trends, and interviews with agencies not actively involved in WGV. This approach reflects a hermeneutic research process in which the ‘whole’ picture is interpreted via analysis of the parts, and where the researcher zooms in and out of the phenomena to understand its characteristics (S. Robinson & Kerr, 2015).

The hermeneutic, interpretive approach taken in this project lent itself to being presented as vignettes, and these are outlined in Chapter 6. Vignettes consist of small case studies which enable multiple rich descriptive stories to be told and are often used to interpret nuanced actions of actors and situations in a particular context (Langer, 2016). The use of vignettes in this thesis is useful for overcoming the schism in housing research. This is because it applies an empirically grounded lens but uses the context as a way of illuminating broader trends and narratives.

## 1.10 Key findings

This research identifies several reasons why the logic and practice may need to be reconsidered. Analysis of the policy design illustrates that the current ideas and interventions are likely to produce similar issues to previous iterations of urban consolidation. It is concluded that the missing middle (logic and practice) represents an emergent ‘sustainability fix’ that advances existing socio-technical-economic-political housing practices but presents it as something new. The discussion chapter makes some observations about how this fix is effective including: its future-orientation, its moral disciplining; and its indirect intervention logic and practice. Ultimately, the findings suggest that the current logic and practice of intervention could be *derailing* the progressive potential of housing innovations, leading to *regression* rather than transition to more sustainable and equitable transitions. The key implication of this is that progressive researchers and housing advocates need to be more alert to the goals of their projects and not be satisfied with their partial implementation. Instead, they should keep their ‘eyes on the prize’ and demand a transformation of the *conversation* rather seeking to overcome barriers to known solutions and ends.

## 1.11 Research scope

The key area of interest for this thesis is on the latest housing innovations being deployed in the broader implementation of ‘urban consolidation policy’ in Australia. The research project contributes specifically to Australian urban housing and planning research, and especially to the emerging literature around intensifying the suburban greyfields. To critique the latest iteration of urban housing interventions, this thesis draws on strands of critical urban theory, policy design, and social constructionism. The theoretical and methodological approach, outlined earlier, has enabled new critical insights about emerging housing innovations which are empirically grounded but grounded in an understanding of their political-economic context.

The journey of completing this thesis has not been a straightforward one. It started out as a fairly typical attempt to identify (and seek remedies to overcome) the policy barriers preventing the proliferation of cooperative housing projects in Australia. Innovations such as the Baugruppen model, community land trusts, and tiny houses all had intuitive appeal and obvious progressive potential. As a young person grappling with future housing pathways and inspired by community-led housing projects, the researcher initially intended to follow a small number of innovative projects and trace the policy barriers encountered along the way. As the research progressed, however, it was suspected that the most cutting edge government-led innovations in this space, such as those in the WGV precinct, were problematic in a number of ways. These problems seemed less a result of implementation errors and more to do with their intent; their very purpose. Based on this realisation, the project evolved and became focused on the *active* ways governments may be contributing to ‘actually existing’ social and environmental outcomes. In the case of urban consolidation policy in Australia, these outcomes have been persistently mediocre. This research project shines a light on the role governments continue to play in shaping these urban realities.

As a result, the development of this thesis has been more iterative than was originally planned. Chapters 2 and 3 both present overviews of theoretical frameworks which this research project ultimately *didn't* choose to adopt in full (for reasons which are clearly outlined in each respective chapter). Explaining why, for example, critical urban theory doesn't quite fit (chapter 3) is crucial to explaining how a policy-centred approach is a better fit for this project. Similarly, examination of the transitions literature (chapter 2) is necessary to explain the normative lens through which the latest ‘unambiguously progressive’ innovations are often analysed – but which this thesis advocates a move away from.

The inclusion of this literature is reflective of the iterative, hermeneutic research approach that has been employed for this project. As described in chapter 4, this involved developing a ‘pre-understanding’ of the context and then zooming in and out to look at the parts to understand the whole picture. The theoretical literature outlined in Chapters 2 and 3 were then used to build a critical representation of the current policy context. The method chosen, however, does not lend itself easily to a linear thesis format. The iterative nature of the project meant that a specific theoretical framework was not fully adopted and then applied to a subject to yield conclusions. The theoretical and the empirical data spoke to each other. For example, while the ‘sustainability fix’ emerges as a key explanatory theoretical concept in chapter 7, it became relevant in the late stages of analysis and could not be established early in the thesis document as *the* adopted theoretical framework. In fact, doing so would not be reflective of the iterative method. As a result, this thesis should be read as reflective of this research journey, rather than a traditional analysis of data using a predetermined theoretical framework.

It is also noted that each of the innovations and narratives analysed in this research could have warranted its own distinct study. However, the point of this thesis has been to position current innovations within their broader historical and political context. Therefore, it is argued that the research gains its depth *from* its breadth, in the sense that the process of zooming in and out provided the ability to see the bigger picture while also gaining nuanced insights into the discursive power of policy narratives.

While this research provides a thick description of the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention, it doesn't offer an explanation of local actor *agency*; problematisations are analysed, however, specific insights are not offered regarding who ultimately 'designs' policy narratives or how particular problematisations are constructed. Instead, this research will perform a more descriptive function and reflect on the implications of the current problematisations and policy logic.

## 1.12 Thesis outline

This thesis proceeds in the following manner:

**Chapter 2** provides an overview and background of the logic and practice of urban housing intervention, specifically in relation to the recent government interest in Australia in increasing the supply and quality of medium density housing in the greyfields. Second, the existing Australian urban planning and housing literature on this topic is summarised, including the extensive empirical insights available about flawed policy instruments and inadequate government oversight over development. Following this summary, the various gaps are highlighted including the lack of critical attention given to the political dimensions of policy goals and problem narratives; inadequate consideration of government intent; and the persistent schism in housing research that limits cross-pollination of theoretical and empirical insights. Lastly, the increasingly popular socio-technical transitions frameworks are introduced, and the emerging critiques of these approaches are highlighted.

**Chapter 3** locates the analytical position and approach taken in this thesis. First, critical urban theory is introduced and its valuable insights for interpreting urban consolidation policy and urban development are highlighted. Second, several limitations are identified for addressing the gaps outlined in Chapter 2. Third, a novel policy-centred lens is put forward as a useful approach for overcoming these limitations and for addressing the gaps in the current urban housing and planning literature.

**Chapter 4** describes the epistemological and methodological approach taken in this thesis. The research questions are also re-introduced.



**Chapter 5:** draws on the literature to trace the history of urban growth management in Australia with a focus on the shifting problem and solution narratives relevant to housing and density. ‘Urban growth management’ is the term used in this chapter rather than urban consolidation policy as this enables a focus on changing interpretations of density and liveability prior to the compact city model becoming planning orthodoxy. By examining the various epochs of urban growth management (its logic and practice), various themes are identified that carry through to today. This chapter is important as this thesis argues that the current ‘innovative’ logic and practice in the greyfields needs to be contextualised in the longer history of urban consolidation policy. It responds to the weakness in the current literature on greyfields redevelopment in which the emergent goals and interventions are taken at face value as unambiguously progressive.

**Chapter 6:** presents the insights from the interviews, observations, and policy analysis in three vignettes. The first vignette examines the missing middle as policy metaphor that has emerged as a key problem and solution narrative in the context of greyfields redevelopment – including at WGV. The second vignette looks at the Gen Y House architectural competition and demonstration project that was constructed at WGV. The Gen Y House project was rationalised as a way of meeting the financial and liveability needs of the next generation of home owners. The third vignette focusses on the proposed (but to date, unrealised) baugruppen demonstration project, which was also located in the WGV precinct.

**Chapter 7:** reflects on the insights from Chapters 5 and 6 and considers the current policy design in relation to urban housing intervention in the greyfields. In particular, conclusions are drawn about the potential implications and productivity of the problem and solution narratives that are evident within the current policy design. It is proposed that the missing middle represents a new sustainability ‘fix’ that is effective in holding together various interests and contested claims. It is demonstrated that the current logic and practice possesses regressive tendencies and is likely to exacerbate existing housing inequalities, without ensuring the high quality urban design promised.

**Chapter 8** outlines how the insights presented in Chapter 5 and 6 have addressed the infill housing literature gaps and how it responds to each of the research questions posed in the research. This chapter makes some final conclusions about the policy and research implications of this research. Lastly, it reflects on the utility and limitations of the approach taken in this thesis.

# Chapter 2     The logic and practice of urban housing intervention

## 2.1     Chapter introduction

The compact city model, or ‘urban consolidation’ in Australia, has been planning orthodoxy across the developed world for several decades. The most recent Australian iteration of this policy is focused on increasing the supply and quality of medium density housing the ‘greyfields’. This chapter provides an introduction to the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention as it relates to the greyfields. Some previous critiques of practice are outlined which demonstrates that the social and environmental promises of urban consolidation have not been borne out in practice. Following that, it is argued that there is a gap in the Australian urban planning and housing research in which there has not been enough critical analysis of the intentions, political construction, or ‘actually existing’ implications of the most recent logic and practice of urban housing intervention. It is posited that this may be explained by a long-standing ‘schism’ in housing research between theoretical and empirical approaches with minimal cross-pollination. While many urban scholars have turned to socio-technical transitions theories to overcome this divide, this chapter finishes by arguing that these approaches risk further sidelining critical reflections on the political dimensions of policy goals.

## 2.2     Research context

Increasing the supply and quality of medium density infill housing has emerged as a key policy objective over the last decade in Australia (Lehmann, 2017; Murray et al., 2015; Newton, 2018) and around the world (Charmes & Keil, 2015; Frank et al., 2019; Wegmann, 2020). This interest represents the most recent iteration of urban consolidation (compact city) policy implementation and forms the context for this research. ‘Infill’ housing simply refers to development delivered *within* the existing metropolitan area, usually with an associated increase in dwelling density (Rowley & Phibbs, 2012). While the pursuit of more infill housing has long been central to achieving urban consolidation objectives, there has been a growing emphasis on the benefits of *mid-rise* typologies, and a more concerted government effort to transform existing inner and middle ring suburbs into higher density neighbourhoods (Newton et al., 2020; Wegmann, 2020).

Newton (2010) has referred to these suburban areas, which are perceived as having strong potential for intensification, as the ‘greyfields’ which comprise:

The ageing, occupied residential tracts of suburbs which are physically, technologically and environmentally obsolescent and which represent economically outdated, failing or under-capitalized real estate assets. They typically occur in a 5–25 km radius of the centre of each capital city and are service-, transport-, amenity- and employment-rich compared to the outer and peri-urban suburbs (p.81).

The greyfields have been viewed as distinct from other forms of urban development including the ‘brownfields’ (large-scale, high density redevelopment of strategic sites, often requiring government-funded land remediation) and ‘greenfields’ (suburban housing development on the urban fringe, generally consisting of low density, detached housing). In contrast, the greyfields are characterised by their fragmented land ownership and their existing infrastructure and community (Murray et al., 2015; Newton, 2010). Their redevelopment (and intensification is therefore understood to be more complex than the brownfields or greenfields endeavours, requiring new policy instruments and a distinct strategic approach.

The key rationale for increasing *medium* density development is that it offers more ‘liveable’, subtle, and appealing higher density built form than traditional high rise towers (Rowley & James, 2017; Sharam et al., 2012). Social market research previously conducted in Australia found that while households were willing to trade-off space for location, the greatest demand was for well-located, semi-detached and mid/low-rise typologies suitable for families (J.-F. Kelly, 2011; State of Western Australia, 2013). Despite this demand, though, such housing is considered under-supplied compared to more standard one and two bedroom units. In the US and Canada (and more recently in Australia), this shortfall of diverse and liveable housing typologies in the greyfields has been described as the missing middle (Florida, 2018; Newton et al., 2020; Wegmann, 2020).

The key theme of government (and research) interest in this space has been the need for *innovation*, including in policy instruments, participation tools, architectural design, construction techniques, development procurement, as well as land and housing ownership arrangements (Caprotti & Cowley, 2017; Horne et al., 2018; Newton, 2018). New design codes for medium density housing are being (or have been) developed by several states. State and local governments have also coordinated *precinct-scale* redevelopment projects in the greyfields to experiment with promising technologies and designs. For example, the White Gum Valley suburban redevelopment site in Fremantle, Western Australia, which is the empirical focal point for this research, has been considered a ‘living laboratory’ for testing new sustainable and affordable housing innovations suited to the greyfields (Byrne et al., 2019; Wiktorowicz et al., 2018). In this context, there has been a growing interest in government-led demonstration projects to showcase innovative construction and procurement arrangements (T. Moore & Higgins, 2016). These various government intervention ‘practices’, and the associated logic of the missing middle, form the focus of this thesis.

## 2.3 Defining urban housing intervention

This study uses the term ‘urban housing intervention’ to define the scope of interest due to the somewhat awkward and disjointed nature of ‘housing policy’ in Australia. At its most basic level, governments play a role in ensuring their citizens have access to adequate shelter. In liberal-democratic societies, this involves government interventions to influence the capitalist housing market, and providing safety net alternatives when people are left out, or fall out, of this system. Governments also set standards to ensure that dwellings are safe and healthy to reside in. Beyond this role in meeting basic human need for shelter though, ‘urban housing interventions’ are also concerned with the spatial coordination of housing *at scale*. As the rate of urbanisation has accelerated, governments across the globe have been faced with the twin (often competing) challenges of meeting their citizens need for shelter while also ensuring city regions function as a whole. Therefore, the governance of housing occurs at multiple scales; it affects all citizens; and requires the balancing of individual and collective needs.

For the purposes of this study, the term ‘housing intervention’ refers to Clapham’s (2018) definition as “any action taken by any government or government agency to influence the processes or outcomes of housing” (p.165). Clapham defines seven key mechanisms through which governments typically intervene in the processes or outcomes of housing. **Regulatory** instruments are used for setting minimum standards for construction or determining parameters of appropriate actor behaviour in the housing market. Governments intervene through **direct provision** of social housing dwellings or they may invest in developing infrastructure (for example: roads, sewerage) that enables the construction of new housing supply. Financial **subsidies** may be used to influence actor behaviour in market. For example, government grants enable first home buyers to purchase housing they would have otherwise been unable to afford. Another example would be tax incentives encouraging investment in rental housing, which is common practice in Australia. Governments also play a key role in provision of **information or guidance**. This might involve community services assisting individuals to find and maintain housing; making housing market statistics and trends publicly available; or showcasing new design and construction techniques to the private development sector. Relatedly, governments play a role influencing relationships between the multitude of actors in the system, and set patterns of **accountability** for these various actors.

In addition to the more tangible intervention types listed above, Clapham's breakdown has been adopted for this project because it also highlights the key role governments play in **discursive problem framing** and narrative setting. For instance, negative stereotyping of citizens experiencing homelessness as lazy or dangerous can justify a lack of government investment in community programs, but it may also influence the types of assistance that are offered by civic organisations (Schneider & Ingram, 1988). Relatedly, governments influence the processes and outcomes of housing through **active non-intervention**. For example, the choice to *not* intervene in expensive housing markets could lead to low income earners being unable to secure appropriate shelter. These two final types of intervention are particularly relevant to this research project, which will critically analyse the current urban housing intervention logic and practice, and consider how problem interpretations prioritise some solutions while neglecting others.

## 2.4 Australian housing policy context

As briefly outlined in Chapter 1, Australia is a federation of six states and two territories each with their own constitutions, parliaments, and laws. While the Commonwealth (federal) government plays a coordinating role in broad macroeconomic and population issues, the states and territories take the lead in infrastructure and service delivery. For 'housing policy' this means that, in the Australian context, federal government interventions generally target housing *demand* factors, while the states focus on *supply-side* housing provision measures (AHURI, 2018). While this divide exists in a formal sense, in practice there is some ambiguity regarding funding responsibilities, and some overlap in regulatory function. For example, the National Construction Code stipulates minimum safety, quality and energy efficiency standards, however the state governments each rely on their own (varying) systems for regulating compliance with these requirements. In this multi-layered housing policy system, the responsibility and accountability for housing outcomes (including design and distribution) largely falls to states. It is notable, for instance, that Australia does not have a robust national housing strategy and the Federal Minister for Housing is positioned in the outer ministry, rather than in the core cabinet. This is despite the extremely influential role the Commonwealth plays in setting the parameters of the housing market.

At the state government level, 'housing interventions' fall into three broad categories: community services, treasury, and urban land use planning. The community services role centres specifically on the provision of, and access to, housing for low or no income households. State governments manage their own social housing systems, they distribute low interest loans for key workers, and they deliver homelessness services (along with the not-for-profit sector). The state treasury plays a key role in taxation, especially that relating to housing sales. For example, a stamp duty tax is collected when a house or land is sold, with the amount calculated as a proportion of the total sale price. First home buyer grants are also organised at the state government level.

Beyond the specific housing focus in community services and treasury, urban land use planning deals with 'housing' in a much more indirect manner. In the Australian system, state governments play a key role shaping both strategic and statutory planning controls, and relegate some lower-order responsibilities in design and development approval to local government entities. From a strategic perspective, state and local planning agencies set out longer term development pathways determining where new housing should be delivered and allocating land use provisions for different areas (ie. green biodiversity corridors or commercial/ industrial hubs). These mechanisms ensure that development occurs in a way that preserves urban liveability, mobility, and environmental health. Statutory planning, on the other hand, enacts specific planning provisions through development approvals and design at the building scale. The missing middle housing interventions of interest in this thesis fall predominantly within the domain of urban planning, and specifically those related to the implementation of urban consolidation policy.

A notable feature of housing intervention in Australia is that even at these lower scales of government, there is not a comprehensive strategy for *housing* per se, even though the most dominant land use is residential. In fact, it is arguably significant that low income housing, and broader planning systems are managed in separate bureaucratic domains even though they rely on and influence each other. Dalton (2009) has characterised this lack of direct focus on 'housing' in governmental administration as politically-driven policy retrenchment. As will be made apparent throughout this thesis, the relative sidelining of 'housing' specific policy in countries such as Australia and Canada has implications for how problems are understood, how solutions are calibrated, and how outcomes are measured. It also renders the task of analysing 'housing intervention' more complicated, as the range of influential policy levers impacting housing is extensive, though many of these interventions are indirect and/or bureaucratically siloed.

## 2.5 The logic and practice of urban housing intervention

The current logic and practice of urban housing intervention in the greyfields is an extension of urban consolidation policy, which is informed by the compact city model and sustainable development norms. The following section outlines the logic of the compact city model of sustainable development and provides an overview of some relevant ‘best practice’ principles. Finally, a brief overview is given of the instruments (practice) state and local governments have used to implement urban consolidation in the Australian context.

### 2.5.1 The sustainable compact city model

As the dominant growth management strategy for cities around the world, urban consolidation is considered the solution or alternative to ongoing and unmanaged urban spread. Urban planners primarily manage this spread by encouraging and facilitating *intensification* of the existing urban realm. For housing, this means that the focus is predominantly on increasing dwelling densities and increasing the proportion of multi-residential development. In countries such as Australia that developed in age of the automobile, consolidation is a direct contrast to the ongoing development of detached, suburban development being produced at low densities, which is land intensive (A. Davison, 2006).

Urban consolidation goals broadly align with the ‘compact city’ model that emerged globally in the 1980s and 1990s as a sustainable approach to urban development (Hillman, 1996). The most widely cited description of ‘sustainable development’ comes from the Brundtland Report of 1987 called *Our Common Future* which stated:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987).

This globally recognised concept accommodated the desire (and need) for economic and population growth but sought to balance the impact of this growth by limiting associated negative social and environmental impacts. For cities, a compact city was perceived to offer the best approach for achieving a combination of economic, environmental, and social benefits, known as the ‘triple bottom line’ (S. Campbell, 1996; Newman & Kenworthy, 1999).

In line with the concept of sustainable development, the *environmental* imperatives of a compact city model are perhaps most prominent in its narrative. The minimisation of urban ‘sprawl’ is rationalised as a way of preserving the agricultural and ecologically-valuable hinterlands beyond the metropolitan region, thus protecting local resource provision, including for food (Hillman, 1996). The early influential work of Newman and Kenworthy (1989) also linked urban spread to the explosion in automobile use throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century which enabled people to reside at increasing distances to their places of employment. The resulting urban form is said to have locked in ‘automobile dependence’ which contributes to high carbon emissions to this day (Newman & Kenworthy, 2015). In contrast, a compact city dominated by public and active transport modes (such as walking and cycling) is said to enable cities to have a smaller carbon footprint (Frank et al., 2019).

A compact urban form has also been associated with a range of social and well-being benefits for city residents (Bramley & Power, 2009). An environment that promotes walking and cycling has strong health benefits and is perceived to be more socially connected, cosmopolitan and vibrant as a result of the higher population density and localised mobility (Newman & Matan, 2012). Influenced by the work of Jane Jacobs (1961), higher densities have been associated with improved safety as there are more ‘eyes on the street’ due to diverse activities occurring in hyper-localised economies and communities. The provision of smaller, more diverse housing typologies is also said to improve housing ‘choice’, including smaller, affordable options (Yates, 2001). Proponents argue that housing diversity enables households to reside in dwellings that suit their needs throughout their life stages, such as older people wishing to ‘age-in-place’ (downsize but remain in their neighbourhood) (Rowley and Phibbs, 2012). Having this housing choice has also been seen as an environmental benefit because single person or couple households can find ‘efficient’ housing with a smaller carbon footprint than if they were to live in a detached family home.

Finally, but importantly, the concept of sustainable development obtained broad support due to its accommodation of continuing urban and economic growth. Part of the appeal of compact city model is that it supports ongoing urban (economic) growth to continue by directing new development upwards via intensification rather than outwards via urban spread. Despite the tripartite ‘triple win’ rationalisations (Newman & Kenworthy, 1999), several scholars point out that the compact city model is unevenly skewed towards maintaining these economic imperatives (Bibri et al, 2020; Campbell, 2016).



In a more pragmatic sense, a compact city is viewed favourably by governments for improving resource efficiency. This is because higher population densities produce useful economies of scale for the delivery of high quality infrastructure for everyone, including public transit and community services such as schools (R Trubka & Bilsborough, 2010). In contrast, providing infrastructure at low densities that spread into the urban peripheries is considered to be both expensive and inefficient. In Australia, Dodson (2012) points out that early rationales for urban consolidation arose more from these pragmatic economic and service delivery issues that governments were increasingly faced with as the cities became unmanageable than they did from compact city ideals<sup>1</sup>. Despite this, the triple win arguments in favour of urban consolidation in Australia broadly align with compact city sustainable development rationalities.

## 2.5.2 Best practice principles

The *practice* of urban consolidation policy implementation principally involves a mix of increasing dwelling densities, providing public transit infrastructure, and ensuring that adequate green and public space is available across the metropolitan region. To achieve the triple bottom line objectives, transit-oriented development (TOD) is widely considered best practice (Bertolini, Curtis, & Renne, 2009; Cervero, 2004; Thomas & Cousins, 1996). TOD involves targeting housing intensification in areas of close proximity to public transport routes. Another key ingredient for success is the inclusion of a diversity of land uses in one location, known as mixed use development, where a range of services can be accessed within reasonable walking or cycling distance from residences (Bibri, Krogstie, & Kärrholm, 2020). Ensuring that developments contain a mix of uses particularly aligns with the Jane Jacob's hyper-localism rationalities described earlier, in which diversity is associated with urban vitality and community safety.

In traditionally low density cities, such as in Australia, strategic land use plans have commonly accommodated these 'best practice' principles by directing new, higher density development to designated activity centres and urban transport corridors (for example: Adams, 2009). This approach has the benefit of creating higher density hubs, while at the same time protecting the established low density suburbs. Similarly, the New Urbanist (NU) movement, which emerged out of the United States and continues to proliferate to this day, emphasises the need for good quality architectural design in the development of mixed use, walkable and compact urban environments (Brain, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> These contextual factors will be explored in more depth in the historical overview of urban growth management in Chapter 5.

While both of these visions endorse mixed use and TOD as good practice, the NU movement has a greater focus on *mid-rise* dwellings as the best fit for generating vibrant and liveability communities. New Urbanism is also perhaps more normative in that it is depicted as an optimal urban form to be broadly realised across metropolitan regions. In contrast, the corridors and activity centres approach is more pragmatic in that it *accommodates* necessary intensification in targeted locations as a way of preserving the character of existing suburbs (where communities have proven resistance to change). This distinction is important for the purposes of this research, because, as will become apparent, Australian government implementation of urban consolidation policy has traditionally resembled the activity centres or corridors models, however the recent emphasis on missing middle housing is more reflective of NU ideals. The implications of this will be considered in Chapter 6 and 7.

In the Australian context, governments have relied almost entirely on land use zoning tools to realise urban consolidation in practice (Duckworth-Smith, 2015). Across each of the state capital cities, governments have targets (ranging from 47% in Perth to up to 70% in Melbourne and Sydney) regarding the proportion of new development that must be delivered within the existing metropolitan region compared with the urban fringe. With those targets in place, local governments are then responsible for delivering the stipulated increase in dwellings through rezoning lots for higher densities. Rezoning generally increases the value of land due to the uplift in redevelopment potential, and is designed to encourage incremental redevelopment with progressive density gains. Beyond land rezoning, state (and to a lesser extent local) governments will often take a more active role in larger redevelopments on a project basis (Van den Nouwelant et al, 2015; Shaw, 2013). This has frequently been the approach for significant waterfront or central sites, especially where land remediation is required to transition previously industrial areas into high density urban precincts (Newton, 2010). While urban *intensification* has been the focus, it is worth pointing out that *limiting* new development at the urban fringes via urban growth boundaries has been a less common intervention, and where they have been enacted, they have come under constant pressure to be expanded (this will be explored more in Chapter 5: history).

## 2.6 Compact city realities

The compact city model has now been planning orthodoxy across the developed world for at least twenty years, and it continues to be considered by many as the best framework for realising liveable and sustainable cities (Crommelin et al., 2017). In practice, though, the environmental and social outcomes of such policies have been mixed at best (Jenks, 2019). An extensive review of the literature conducted by Gren et al.(2019) recently found limited empirical evidence to support the environmental claims associated with the compact city. Criticisms concerning the environmental outcomes have generally focused on two issues. First, some studies have drawn attention to the high embodied energy of higher density developments compared with single detached dwellings, and have questioned claims that smaller (higher density) dwellings automatically translate into reduced energy consumption (Randolph & Troy, 2011; Xu, Haase, Su, & Yang, 2019). Second, researchers have questioned the high consumption lifestyles of urbanites which may cancel out any benefits of living in smaller housing and regularly using public transport (Lo, 2016). For example, Holden and Norland (2005) found evidence suggesting that apartment dwellers were more likely to travel extensively for leisure, generating large carbon footprints from international flying or long road trips.

The social outcomes have also been mixed (Bramley & Power, 2009; McCrea & Walters, 2012; Thomas & Cousins, 1996). While walkable high density neighbourhoods have been associated with better public health and liveability (Newman & Matan, 2012), several studies suggest a more nuanced or complicated relationship between well-being and compact urban form (Haarhoff, Beattie, & Dupuis, 2016; Mouratidis, 2018; Neuman, 2005). For instance, Bramley et al.(2009) found a negative association between high density living and factors such as neighbourhood satisfaction and community safety, but a positive association with community engagement. In contrast, Mouratidis (2018) found that density was positively associated with neighbourhood satisfaction. However, he noted that the analysed liveable urban neighbourhoods *also* had low levels of traffic, noise, and litter which were identified as key to the positive results. Finally, Haarhoff et al.(2016) studied the liveability of high density apartments in Auckland, New Zealand and found that even though there were some social benefits, the majority of residents living in apartments still aspired to traditional, detached ownership in the future.

What is increasingly becoming clear, though, is the difficulty of delivering liveable *and* affordable high density (McKenzie, Fiona, & Rowley, 2013; Quastel et al., 2012; Rice et al., 2020). The problem is that high quality, transit and amenity-oriented density generally comes with an inflated price tag. Numerous studies have documented cases where urban renewal and housing intensification have led to gentrification, pushing lower income households into lower value (and often lower amenity) neighbourhoods (Porter, 2009; Rosen & Walks, 2014). Recent critiques have also suggested that low carbon urban housing interventions play a distinct role in these processes (Rice et al, 2020). Several studies have indicated that the only way the private market can deliver affordable higher density housing products is to locate them in low value areas often without the necessary transit services or other urban amenities) or to deliver low quality products (Randolph, 2006; Rowley & James, 2017; Troy, 1992). Troy argued as early as 1992 that relying on the market would generate a plethora of “mean” low quality dwellings across the city (p.41). Therefore, many have argued that the social benefits of high density living will only be realised with direct government intervention or provision, and not through intensification alone (van den Nouwelant et al., 2015; Yates, 2001). In fact, the research indicates that well-planned intensification is likely to *contribute to* localised housing unaffordability (Atkinson, 2011; Rosen & Walks, 2014).

In the Australian context, despite being well-established in strategic planning for decades, urban consolidation goals have proven difficult to achieve, with urban morphology and cultural housing aspirations being slow to change (Bunker et al., 2017; Hurley et al., 2017). Numerous researchers have documented the way the on-the-ground development realities have remained divergent to strategic plans (Dodson, 2010; Ford & March, 2012; Forster, 2006). While the strategic plans target density in particular activity centres or along transit corridors, in practice infill housing has been delivered in a piecemeal and ad hoc fashion, often with poor quality built form outcomes and with only very modest density gains (Bolleter, 2016; Duckworth-Smith, 2015; Gallagher et al., 2020; Randolph & Freestone, 2012). For example, a knock-down-rebuild (KDR) phenomenon has been observed in high value inner and middle suburbia zoned for intensification in which older housing stock is demolished by landowners and replaced with much larger single dwellings (Pinnegar, Freestone, & Randolph, 2010). Such processes are eliminating any near-future potential for intensification and, perversely, may drive greater household energy demands and the loss of vegetation, thus representing a *worsening* of environmental outcomes (Newton & Glackin, 2014).

Government plans for urban consolidation have also been at odds with community wishes, and resistance to suburban redevelopment has been significant (Glackin & Dionisio, 2016; Nematollahi et al., 2016; Whitemore & BenDor, 2019). Local communities have proven to be a politically powerful force in the fight against density in their neighbourhoods and have often been successful in delaying the intensification processes outlined in strategic plans (Gurran & Bramley, 2017). These issues have not been helped by evidence of over-development and poor quality apartment outcomes such as the construction of bedrooms without windows or poorly designed internal spaces (Hodyl, 2015). Recently, several high profile evacuations from apartment towers have drawn attention to systemic issues with building defects across the sector. Therefore, negative public perceptions of density, combined with a cultural familiarity with detached family housing, have slowed the realisation of urban consolidation objectives.

Finally, the higher density housing units produced to date have often failed to meet the needs of everyday households, in terms of both their utility and their cost (Bunker, Holloway, & Randolph, 2005; Martel, 2013; Sharam et al., 2015). Various studies have highlighted the way that apartment market demand is skewed towards the needs of speculative investors over owner occupiers (Palmer, 2018; Woodcock et al., 2011). This has contributed to an over-supply of inflexible and homogenous one-bedroom units targeted at narrow sub-markets rather than the diverse housing typologies envisioned by compact city narratives (Martel, 2013; Sharam et al., 2012). In particular, multiple studies have identified a lack of diverse and affordable higher density housing options suitable for families (Kerr, Klocker, & Gibson, 2020; Raynor, 2018; Rowley & James, 2017). In line with broader critiques around gentrification processes, urban scholars have shown that the market has delivered a contrast of boutique, liveable high density products in central locations and standard, low quality units in low value areas – thus generating socially segregated housing outcomes, and not the socially diverse communities imagined (McKenzie et al., 2013; Pinnegar, Randolph, & Troy, 2020).

## 2.7 Interpreting lacklustre results

Urban planning and housing researchers have explained these lacklustre and mediocre results in two key (interrelated) ways. First, researchers have attributed problematic outcomes to ineffective government implementation of urban consolidation objectives and best practice principles. Second, many have documented the influence of neoliberal policy rationalities dominating government implementation preferences. This is said to have led to inadequate government intervention, and an over-reliance on the private market to deliver on strategic planning objectives. These two explanations are outlined below.

## 2.7.1 Implementation barriers

The first dominant explanation for the sub-optimal and lacklustre outcomes of urban consolidation policy to date is that they are the result of ineffective and inadequate government implementation. Gleeson, Dodson & Spiller (2010) note the “underdevelopment of the mechanisms that guide urban development” (p.118) and Crommelin et al.(2017) have argued that governments have “struggled to adequately integrate land-use and transport planning” in line with compact city visions (p.115). Similarly, Forster (2006) has previously suggested that strategic urban plans present an “over-neat” vision of desirable growth which fails to engage with the complex realities of city-making (p.173), a conclusion that continues to resonate with housing researchers today (Bunker et al., 2017). For this reason, Tomlinson (2012) has referred to Australia’s ‘unintended cities’.

These observations suggest a case in which the policy goals and policy means are misaligned. Some have attributed this to a knowledge deficit amongst policy makers about the realities of the urban development processes they which to influence (Bunker, 2014; Forster, 2006). Rowley and Phibbs (2012) identify a lack of financial literacy among planning professionals about the fundamentals of private development feasibility. This lack of comprehension is perceived to have led to the development of inappropriate or ineffective regulatory settings for higher density development, especially in cases where planners seek to influence developer behaviour via ‘carrot’ and ‘stick’ mechanisms (Rowley & Phibbs, 2012).

Others have raised attention to the perverse development outcomes occurring in a context of urban consolidation (Bolleter, 2016; Buxton et al., 2012; Legacy et al., 2013). Woodcock et al. (2011), in a case-study of a Melbourne suburb rezoned for urban intensification, found the planning approvals system encouraged and rewarded developers to game the system through speculative activities including land banking. In this case, the policy was found to be creating a double fail, in which land values were inflated while also constraining the supply of new higher density development. Dodson & Gleeson (2007) have argued that ‘density’ is a “remarkably blunt instrument and one that risks visiting potentially destructive and disruptive forces upon urban communities, especially if wielded by planners who are insensitive to the wider complexity of urban social processes” (np). Therefore, Bunker (2014) has argued that blanket rezoning tools alone are not an effective instrument, and more strategic coordination by governments is required.

In the greyfields, sub-optimal design and density outcomes have been attributed to a strategic blind spot in which limited planning mechanisms are directed at the broader residential landscape (suburbia) where the majority of redevelopment activity is actually occurring (Bolleter, 2016; Gleeson, Dodson, & Spiller, 2012). With limited planning tools actively coordinating suburban development patterns, planning schemes have persistently implied that “if it is not illegal, then it is appropriate” (March & Low, 2004, p. 62). This is particularly understood to be the case in relation to the KDR phenomenon, and the ad hoc, (often poor quality) subdivisions occurring in the strategically significant inner and middle ring regions (Legacy et al., 2013; Maginn, Goodman, Gurran, & Ruming, 2016; Pinnegar et al., 2010).

## 2.7.2 Market-led development

Another (related) explanation given for the lag and sub-optimal built form outcomes of urban consolidation policy is that it has resulted from a government preference for market-based policy tools over direct regulation in a context of neoliberal urban policy-making (Beer, Kearins, & Pieters, 2006; Bunker, 2014; Crommelin et al., 2017; Gleeson & Low, 2000b). The restructuring of urban governance over several decades has involved increased reliance on the market and on private partners to deliver urban policy objectives. Governments have favoured industry self-regulation over government auditing in high rise construction; have set about reducing regulatory planning ‘barriers’ which delay development; and have handed the redevelopment of government land assets over to the private market to deliver (Buxton et al., 2012; Gleeson & Low, 2000b; Gurran & Phibbs, 2013; Maginn et al., 2016; van den Nouwelant et al., 2015). Many have noted that these approaches have resulted in the development industry, rather than the government, ultimately being left to dictate the location and form of higher density housing products (Bunker et al., 2017; Randolph, 2006; Rawnsley & Spiller, 2012; Ruming, 2018).

Urban planning and housing researchers have argued that the reliance on market based policy instruments has led to the promised social and environmental benefits of the compact city model failing to materialise (Gethin Davison & Legacy, 2014; Gurran & Ruming, 2015; Martel, Whitzman, & Sheko, 2019). The shift towards self-regulation in the high-rise construction market has recently culminated in widespread building defects and little legal recourse for unit owners (Easthope & Randolph, 2016). In an examination of outsourced urban land redevelopment in Queensland, Davison and Legacy (2014) found that social and environmental objectives were “only sought on condition that they do not harm commercial viability”, and were therefore not prioritised (or realised) (p.170). As Crommelin et al.(2017) have argued, this economic imperative “creates a tension, as it means renewal must be both financially viable and politically feasible” (p.116).

Allowing the private market to determine the form and location of higher density housing products has also been associated with the lack of dwelling diversity and sub-optimal built form outcomes (Martel et al., 2019; Randolph & Freestone, 2012; Sharam, 2020). Researchers have pointed out that the apartment market has been dominated by investor-owners and rental tenants, in contrast with the high owner-occupation rates in low density, suburban housing (Guironnet, Attuyer, & Halbert, 2016; Palmer, 2018). This has been shown to have skewed the procurement of apartment development towards financial investment considerations, and failed to meet household needs in several ways (Birrell & Healy, 2013; Bunker et al., 2005; Martel et al., 2019; Sharam et al., 2015). This procurement pipeline results in a disconnection between the eventual occupant and the developer who is making the initial design decisions (Palmer, 2018; Sharam et al., 2015). Martel et al.(2013) found that this disconnection drove outcomes driven by “Gresham’s Law” in which more tangible, quantifiable design credentials (such as the number of bedrooms or car spaces) are privileged over qualitative, liveability features (such as natural light and internal functionality).

## 2.8 Greyfields housing: research gaps

As illustrated in the above discussion, there has been broad recognition that, in practice, the housing outcomes of urban consolidation policies have been underwhelming and have resulted in fairly mediocre material and social housing outcomes. The Australian urban planning and housing literature provides an abundance of empirical insights into these existing problems including evidence of mismatched policy goals and means, perverse incentives, weak government oversight of (sub)urban development, and skewed supply and demand factors in an investor-dominated higher density housing market. Much of the current research, however, has proceeded from the assumption that while the policy *goals* are sound, it is government implementation of those goals that has been either ineffective or incomplete.

Where studies have diagnosed policy implementation failures, it has been commonly assumed that the *calibration* of policy levers has been plagued by poor understanding of the development landscape or that they have inadvertently generated perverse policy outcomes. Similarly, where governments have relied on the private market to achieve their objectives, researchers have focused on problematic policy *tool* selection (albeit influenced by structural factors – to be explored further in Chapter 3). As the implementation of urban consolidation “rolls on” (Crommelin et al., 2017) into its next phase focused on the medium density greyfields redevelopment, it is argued there has been a lack of attention given to the political dimensions of the policy goals themselves or the additional or alternative objectives of government in this space.



The goals of increasing the supply and quality of medium density housing are widely framed as an important component for ‘transitioning’ towards more sustainable and equitable urban environments (Horne et al., 2018; McGee et al., 2017; Newton, 2018). For example, Newton, Meyer & Glackin (2017) describe the “compact city transition” as involving a necessary shift from the “suburban” to the “urban”, which involves moving “from a low-density urban form dominated by detached housing with its own surrounding private space to one where there is a significant presence of medium-density and apartment accommodation” (p.1718). While there are contextual differences, similar arguments have been made elsewhere, especially in the US and Canada (Frank et al., 2019). For instance, Wegmann (2020) argues that, in Canada and the US, single-use zoning should be widely replaced with multi-residential zoning to enable the diverse housing typologies necessary for building sustainable urban regions.

Not all the urban planning and housing scholarship on infill policy has been so fervent about the normative ‘goodness’ of these goals. There has been a general sense in the Australian urban planning and housing literature, however, that the recent government interest in increasing the supply and quality of medium density infill housing is reflective of a *maturing* approach to urban consolidation policy implementation. From this perspective, the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention is interpreted as an acknowledgement of, and *response* to, previous policy failures by government. For example, government interest in precinct-scale suburban redevelopment is welcome as it is viewed as a more direct response to the problem of piecemeal, fragmented suburban infill that has been produced to date (Murray et al., 2015; Newton, 2018). The strategic delivery of precincts is imbued with potential for incorporating mixed uses and coordinating meaningful uplift in housing density near public transit nodes (in line with TOD principles) (Thomson, Newton, & Newman, 2019). Therefore, such approaches offer the potential of addressing the lacklustre consolidation implementation to date, and to do so in a more coordinated manner.

*Medium* density typologies (in contrast to high rise development), are commonly viewed as offering a (more) reasonable middle ground between affordability; liveability; and environmental and economic sustainability (Frank et al., 2019; Sharam, 2020). In particular, mid-rise built form has been perceived as aligning more closely with household demand for central and (relatively) affordable family homes (Rowley & James, 2017). Housing researchers have therefore seen the potential of increasing the supply and quality of medium density typologies for realigning skewed demand and supply factors in the housing market (Palmer, 2018; Sharam, 2020). Similarly, increasing the supply and, importantly, the *quality* of medium density housing typologies is viewed as a way of overcoming persistent community resistance to intensification (Duckworth-Smith, 2015; Glackin & Dionisio, 2016). While those resisting density have commonly been characterised in the media as selfish landowners resistant to change (known as NIMBYs, or ‘not-in-my-backyard’ types), urban housing researchers have pointed out this resistance often stems legitimately from concerns about poor quality outcomes produced elsewhere (Maginn et al., 2016; Ruming, 2014) and from a failure to be included in the renewal processes (Newton, 2010). Therefore increasing the provision of well-designed medium density housing is considered a more sophisticated and liveable approach to urban intensification than has been delivered previously.

With medium density infill housing largely seen as a *response* to previous urban consolidation implementation failures, there has been a tendency to take recent government interest in this space at face value. For instance, Rowley and James (2017) unproblematically accept that the primary objective of Perth’s urban consolidation strategy (Directions 2031) “is to create affordable living” (p.30). In this context, the urban planning and housing research has taken a fairly instrumentalist approach that recommends new innovations or improved processes for increasing the supply and quality of medium density infill housing. For example, some have recommended more effective policy mechanisms to remedy the consequences of perverse incentives or blunt re-zoning instruments (Dodson, 2012; Newton et al., 2020; Pinnegar, Randolph, & Freestone, 2015).

Separately, housing researchers have recommended a range of innovative housing delivery and design models that have potential for re-aligning household need and housing supply (McGee et al., 2017). Palmer (2018) argues that potential multi-residential housing purchasers would benefit from mechanisms that would enable self-initiated development via cooperative building arrangements. Similarly, Sharam et al.(2015), advocates ‘matching markets’ and creating a platform for would-be purchasers to congregate based on their needs. This could lead the multiple households joining up to self-initiate development or, alternatively, it could allow developers to be matched with buyers predevelopment. At the very least, the aggregation of demand via new technology offers the potential for developers to gain a more nuanced understanding of demand, thus providing a business case for unconventional typologies.

Many of these policy solutions and innovative housing models undoubtedly hold potential for creating more sustainable, equitable, and coordinated cities. The current conversation, however, neglects consideration of the political dimensions of policy goal formulation and the active role that governments may have played in producing sub-optimal housing outcomes in previous iterations of urban consolidation. Instead, the current greyfields housing research relies on an assumption “of government benevolence” (K. Jacobs, 2015a) in which:

For understandable reasons, researchers still adhere to a view that governments are amenable to evidence-based research, and that at some point policy makers will be swayed to adopt appropriate reforms (p.55).

None of this is to say that there hasn’t been critique of compact city goals or previous urban consolidation policies. What this research project aims to address, instead, is the relative *sidelining* of these existing critiques in the current implementation-focused analyses of the most recent logic and practice of urban housing intervention in the greyfields. Instead, the most recent iteration of urban consolidation appears to be widely considered unambiguously progressive with the only risk to success being ineffective or inadequate government intervention.

This minimal critical engagement with the policy goals and government intent can be partly explained by an established “schism” (Clapham, 2018) in housing policy research in which theoretical-informed scholarship has a tendency to remain separate from empirically-driven analyses (Gurran, 2018; Lawson, 2018). As a fundamentally practice-based discipline, there is a strong desire for urban planning research to be pragmatic and able to inform real-world policy making. Such pressures can produce research that is solutions-focused. This pressure has been amplified in a competitive research environment in which funding is increasingly tied to impact and outcomes measurement (Steele, 2012). Various scholars have lamented the way that these pressures have encouraged research which is largely a-theoretical and overly empirical (K. Jacobs, 2015a; O’Neill, 2008).

At the same time, the more theoretically-driven urban scholarship has been criticised for having little connection with the every-day practice of urban planning in Australia (Hurley & Taylor, 2015; March, 2010; Troy, 2013). March (2010), for example, has previously argued that:

If planning is a reformist and change-oriented practice, theory ought to inform and assist planners in seeking positive change. However, even a cursory examination of planning in Australia leads one to conclude that theory apparently has little to do with the vast majority of practice (p.109).

Similarly, Brain (2005) has argued that critical discussion around new urbanism and the compact city:

...has been rendered unproductive by misconceptions that produce a tendency to talk past one another. Scholars criticize practitioners for not addressing broad issues rooted in the fundamental structures of society, while practitioners criticize their scholarly

colleagues for not really engaging in the immediate task of building better cities (p.218).

In reality, though, Clapham (2018) argues that all research has a theoretical basis, even if it is not made explicit. He argues, similarly to March (2010), that theoretically-informed urban planning and housing policy scholarship needs to find ways to be more impactful and useful in negotiations for better policy. One approach suggested for bridging this divide is for housing research to be focused on the policy goals and means in their context, and bringing in theories of the policy making process to interpret the factors shaping their content (Clapham, 2018; Kemeny, 2004). A good example of this is Gurran and Phibbs' (2015) study about affordable housing policy, in which they were able to provide evidence of alternative and additional government motivations. Based on their empirical insights, their study successfully drew on theories of policy capture to provide an explanation for the persistent 'failure' of government to deliver on their rhetorical objectives.

In contrast, if housing research is theory-driven, there is a risk that features specific to the housing policy context will be minimised. As Clapham (2018) argues, "the use of theory in housing research is problematic as the unique nature of housing means that the application of general theories drawn from other fields is not always useful" (p.177). The following section outlines a key approach urban planning and housing researchers have taken in Australia to address the 'schism' by applying theories of innovation and change directly to the particularities of the local policy context. It will be suggested though, that this emergent approach risks producing similar limitations to those described above. Chapter 3 then suggests an alternate policy-centred lens for analysing the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention that will be applied in this thesis.

## 2.9 Socio-technical transitions theories: emerging research interest

Researchers trying to overcome the schism in housing research have been drawn to the socio-technical transitions literature to assist in finally realising a sustainable and equitable (compact) urban form. 'Socio-technical transitions' theory is a lens that has been increasingly applied to the context of urban housing intervention (Lehmann, 2015; Martiskainen & Kivimaa, 2018; Morrissey, Moloney, & Moore, 2018; Newton, 2018). For example, in 2018, an edited book was released called *Urban Sustainability Transitions: Australian Cases, International Perspectives*, which aimed to "introduce" Australian urban scholarship to transitions theories while also enriching these theories with insights from urban studies (edited by Moore, de Haan, Horne & Gleeson). Transitions theories offer a systems-perspective for examining complex policy issues such as housing (Geels & Schot, 2007). As Geels (2010) explains:

Socio-technical transitions to sustainability do not come about easily, because existing energy, transport, housing and agri-food systems are stabilized by lock-in mechanisms that relate to sunk investments, behavioural patterns, vested interests, infrastructure, favourable subsidies and regulations (pg.495).

Transitions theories focus on these systems of practice to determine barriers to, and identify potential interventions for, progressive (sustainable) change. Therefore, the use of these frameworks represents one key way that urban planning and housing researchers have attempted to overcome the theory-practice divide. In the discussion that follows, the socio-technical transitions lens is outlined, and its promise as a research lens is considered in light of the gaps identified above.

For urban planning and housing researchers, transitions theories offer a useful lens for determining how urban morphology can be meaningfully shifted after years of inadequate progress towards consolidation goals and persistent sub-optimal housing outcomes. With its basis in theories of innovation systems and institutional policy change, transitions perspectives offer a theoretically-informed lens that remains empirically grounded in the system it analyses (Loorbach, 2010). Therefore, this lens offers opportunities for producing practical policy-centred insights while drawing on theories of innovation and policy change. It is acknowledged that there is significant theoretical and practical variation under the umbrella of ‘socio-technical transitions theories’, however, there is limited scope to provide a full break-down of this variation here (for a good overview see: Savaget, Geissdoerfer, Kharrazi, & Evans, 2019). The following section outlines some of the common elements of such theories, as well as the key points that relate to urban development and housing innovation.

In transitions theories, cities are depicted as complex socio-technical systems in which interconnected institutions, actors, practices and technologies form a relatively stable ‘regime’ of practice (Geels, 2012). This literature aims to understand and determine pathways of intervention in these systems with a primary goal to generate urgent, necessary, and comprehensive progressive change (Martiskainen & Kivimaa, 2018). Cities have been considered to hold particular transformative potential and are deemed crucial sites for this change (Castán Broto & Bulkeley, 2013; Nevens, Frantzeskaki, Gorissen, & Loorbach, 2013). Therefore, transitions frameworks have been commonly invoked in the context of climate change in which complex systems require rapid and systemic transition. For instance, they have previously analysed pathways for government-led energy transition in Europe (Kern & Smith, 2008).

One key framework used to analyse transformation strategies and potential is the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) which is used as a heuristic to analyse transformation dynamics and potential at different scales (Geels, 2012). According to this model, at the micro scale niche innovations represent fringe experiments or ideas which are outside of the mainstream system of practice (ie. the 'regime'). The socio-technical regime is the broader scale of practice (such as: housing development) that includes regulations, institutions, actor networks, and habitual practices. At the macro scale, the socio-technical landscape consists of structural elements that influence the regime, such as macroeconomics and cultural or governance norms.

Transitions theories primarily target change at the socio-technical regime scale, though this is necessarily achieved through interaction with the macro and micro scales (Middlemiss & Parrish, 2010; Seyfang, 2010). Transitions frameworks understand the landscape (political-economic, structural factors) as providing both constraints and opportunities for change (Geels & Schot, 2007). New windows of opportunity can open up in the context of pressure on the macro political-economic system, for example, in the case of climate change where systems will be forced to adapt regardless of government willingness to do so. The task of transitions research and practice is to develop, exploit, and/or coordinate opportunities for change that emerge or exist in the current landscape (Hodson & Marvin, 2010; A. Smith, 2007).

Experimentation is interpreted as a key strategy for stimulating change in transitions approaches. Revolutionary change originates in niches, as they provide spaces of protection outside of the regime and spaces to fail and innovate (Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012). Increasingly though, transitions literature has been focused on *accelerating* progressive urban transformation through Transitions Management (TM) (Gaziulusoy, 2014; Loorbach, 2010; Moloney & Horne, 2015). TM involves coordination of *systematic* experimentation and adjustment of institutional settings to address 'wicked' problems in society (Loorbach & Shiroyama, 2016). This purposive approach enables innovations to be given the institutional and financial support to identify and iron out barriers along the way, which improves their capacity to be translated into the mainstream, thus shifting the broader regime of practice (Bulkeley & Castán Broto, 2013).

Urban planning and housing research has been interested in both the radical and systematic potential of niche experimentation in the pursuit of more and better medium density infill housing. In this context there has been growing interest in creating purposive institutional sites of innovation (Joshua Evans, 2016). This has involved the advocacy for, or creation of, a real-world incubation space or specific projects with the goal of supporting mutual learning through practice (N. Forrest & Wiek, 2014; Nevens et al., 2013). These purposive experimental sites have alternatively described as “transitions arenas” (Loorbach, 2010) and as ‘urban living laboratories’ (ULLs) (Caprotti & Cowley, 2017; James Evans & Karvonen, 2011; Joshua Evans, 2016; Voytenko, McCormick, Evans, & Schliwa, 2016). ULLs and sites of innovation have proliferated across the Western world, most notably in Europe (Nesti, 2018). An early example was the BedZED project in the UK, which, with its highly energy efficient design and community-oriented practices, provided a test-bed of sustainable practices and sought to provide a replicable example of ‘ready-made solutions’ for sustainable (sub)urban housing (Lovell, 2007, p. 6).

In the Australian context, the ‘Greening the Greyfields’ research and policy project involved the creation of a ‘transitions arena’ which provided space for the co-creation of mechanisms for effectively re-generating inner and middle suburbia (Newton, 2018). While this project was geographically targeted across numerous infill sites, the innovation space was considered a:

...virtual arena comprising experts assembled as part of an applied research network to co-create the innovative new instruments and practices capable of being substituted for and/or integrated with current processes (Newton, 2018, p. 157).

Again in Melbourne, the VEIL innovation lab project was affiliated with a different university, and, while it involved a much more ambitious and far-reaching visioning exercise than the greening the greyfields project, finding mechanisms for increasing the supply and quality of urban housing was a key component of their vision of a sustainable city (Gaziulusoy & Ryan, 2017). Lastly, the empirical case study examined in this thesis (the White Gum Valley housing precinct in Western Australia) has been marketed as a ‘living lab’ in which medium density housing typologies and sustainable technologies (in water, waste, energy) are being tested and demonstrated to encourage mainstream translation (Byrne et al., 2019; Wiktorowicz et al., 2018). The WGV project was a state government-led project that was delivered in partnership with the local government, the private sector, and two universities.

The insights offered by transitions frameworks respond well with the problem diagnoses in the urban planning and housing research regarding implementation failure and over-reliance on the private market in this policy space. For example, the creation of purposive sites of innovation and experimentation are an attempt to reformulate urban housing intervention mechanisms and improve their coordination and effectiveness. These sites are also delivered via a specific public-private assemblage which have included a notable and increasingly important role for universities (James Evans & Karvonen, 2011; Voytenko et al., 2016). This reflects research suggesting that urban transitions require intermediaries who can coordinate resources and translate learning *between scales* (Moloney & Horne, 2015; A. Smith, 2007). The strong role for universities also reflects the collaborative goals of TM strategies, with universities seemingly well placed to facilitate participatory processes, and integrate “different perspectives and bodies of knowledge and expertise” (McCormick, Anderberg, Coenen, & Neij, 2013). From this perspective, then, purposive innovation has the potential to address diagnosed issues such as a knowledge deficit amongst policy makers, as universities can act as intermediaries between scales of practice and across bureaucratic institutions.

Researchers have also utilised the socio-technical transitions literature to determine how their more radical niche innovations can be disseminated into mainstream practice (Alexander & Rutherford, 2018; Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012). There has been strong interest in grassroots micro innovation, particularly in relation to housing design and delivery mechanisms (McGee et al., 2017; T. Moore & Doyon, 2018). In contrast to the purposive, strategic transitions management approaches, niche experimentation is often considered a response to the absence of effective or meaningful government intervention. For example, Alexander & Rutherford (2018) outline the Transition Town Model (a community-led suburban renewal model) as a reaction to the lack of government action in this space. Their aim is to translate the benefits of this model to the regime in the absence of effective government intervention. Similarly, experiments with alternative tenure or land ownership arrangements have been analysed to determine the barriers and opportunities for penetrating the regime and shifting the speculative, capitalist housing (Crabtree, 2014; Palmer, 2018). These studies do sometimes offer policy recommendations that might reduce the barriers to take-up, however, innovations such as new platforms for ‘matching markets’ (Sharam et al., 2015) have been pursued with the current market. Therefore, transitions theories offer a mechanism for overcoming the key issues identified by the urban planning and housing research as limiting the supply and quality of medium density infill development.



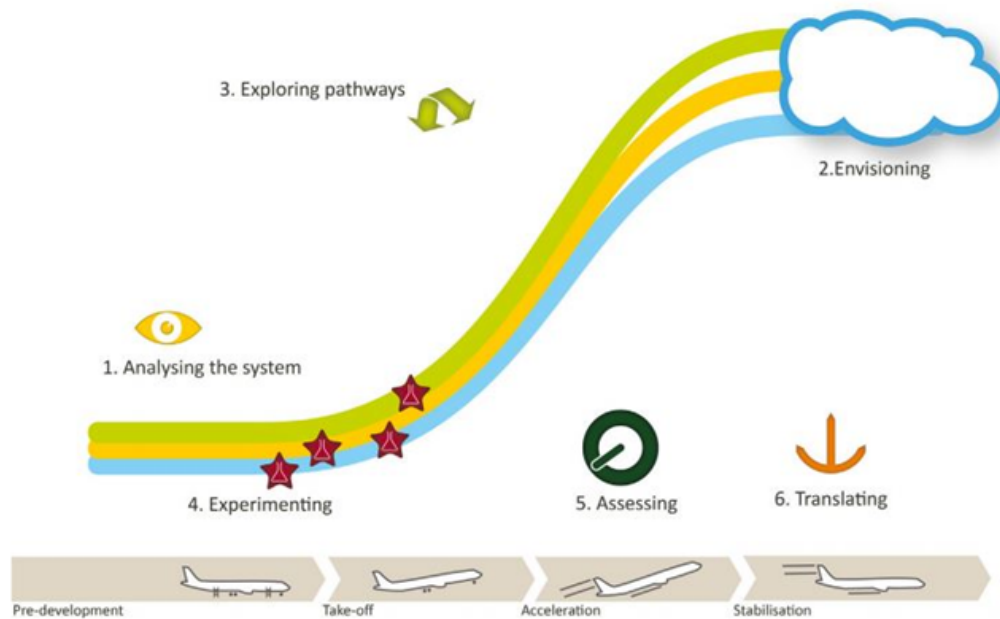
## 2.10 A word of caution: transitions

As outlined, the growing scholarly interest in socio-technical transitions theories has mirrored the growing popularity of its approaches in practice, including purposive experimentation, innovation, and demonstration projects (Caprotti & Cowley, 2017). Despite the practices and theories of socio-technical transition being increasingly deployed in the context of urban housing intervention, there is both a long-standing and emergent literature that provides some cautionary insights about these approaches (Joshua Evans, 2016; Hodson & Marvin, 2010; Lovell, 2008; McGuirk, Bulkeley, & Dowling, 2014; Shove & Walker, 2007). In particular, these critiques suggest that transitions approaches may suffer from a similar instrumentalism to the urban planning and housing literature, and that increasing scholarly interest in these theories risks further neglect of the political dimensions of policy goals and problem framing. These arguments are outlined below.

As outlined earlier in this chapter, socio-technical transitions theories view systematic or niche innovation and experimentation as key strategies for stimulating change. Various scholars, however, have argued that the growing popularity of these strategies reflects a broader “technocratic” trend in which urban systems are publicly depicted as measureable and predicable (Joshua Evans, 2016; Gleeson, 2013; Peck, 2016). Gleeson (2013) has identified a ‘new urbanology’, which is reflected in a “tide of interest and ambition flowing into broad readerships” (p.1841) and which presents observable patterns and laws in cities. Despite the presentation of urban experimentation as a scientific or technical exercise, though, many point out that such practices are inherently political (Bulkeley & Castán Broto, 2013; Rosol, Béal, & Mössner, 2017; Shove & Walker, 2007). Therefore, critical researchers (especially from the discipline of geography) are calling for more critical engagement with the now popular notion of the “urban experiment” as a (new) form of urban governance, and as a way of conceptualising the city in view of future urban development” (Caprotti & Cowley, 2017, p. 1442).

Various scholars have drawn attention to the way that government-led experimentation frames the goals and problems in particular ways (Joshua Evans, 2016; McGuirk et al., 2014). Evans (2016) argues that “‘what works’ is too often narrowly conceived in relation to understandings of failure, understandings which are...contingent upon neoliberal assumptions” (p.439). In this context, particular versions or depictions of sustainability will be advanced, while alternative visions may be neglected (Marvin & Guy, 1997; S. Moore, 2013). Gleeson (2013) argues that “the sympathies of urbanology certainly lie with market capitalism (p.1846). Bulkeley & Castan-Broto (2013) have therefore argued that “experiments are not some side show to the main business of urban climate governance, but they are the critical means through which governing is accomplished (p.372). In other words, the discourse and practice of government-led experimentation has political dimensions of that are obscured by its presentation as a scientific and technical exercise.

One of the key implications of this favouring of techno-scientific approaches is that urban housing solutions can be presented a-politically as objective ‘best practice’(Bulkeley, 2006; Harris & Moore, 2015). This is evident in transitions research which tends towards rationalist instrumentalism by pursuing ‘known’ desirable futures in a linear manner (Guy & Marvin, 2001; Shove & Walker, 2007). Despite the collaborative visioning processes that underpin TM strategies, compact city logic forms the basis of many of these progressive urban housing innovations. In this context, the need for an increase in the quantity and quality of medium density housing is agreed upon, however the mechanisms for achieving it, and the pathways on which we can get there, are open for discussion. Figure 2.1 depicts this process well. In a fairly linear manner, once the visioning process has been conducted, the focus is on understanding the barriers and opportunities for getting there, including the development of ‘reinforcing steps’ and purposive translation of experiments into mainstream practice (Neuens et al., 2013). Therefore, interpreting urban policy knowledge in this way risks ongoing under-examination of ‘best practice’ policy goals and government intent (S. Moore, 2013).



**Figure 2.1: Transitions management pathway** (Neuens et al., 2013, p. 114)

This tendency has been especially evident in research on housing innovations. Niche housing arrangements, such as cooperative models, have often been advocated by researchers who (rightly) recognise their radical and progressive potential to improve the quality and equity of urban housing. Housing scholars interested in these models have commonly focused on the barriers and opportunities for scaling up these arrangements and have suggested different policy mechanisms that governments could adopt in order to facilitate this uptake, including niche experimentation (K. Evans, 2018; T. Moore & Doyon, 2018; Palmer, 2018; Seyfang, 2010). While many of these innovative arrangements do hold progressive potential, though, it is possible that the linear ‘how to’ questioning encouraged by a transitions lens may neglect deeper questioning about the potential implications of the mainstreaming of an innovation or its positioning within its political-economic context. Scheller & Thorn (2018) have argued that,

These contextual aspects remain under-theorised in contemporary cohousing research, which tends to be normative in the sense that it usually starts from the assumption that cohousing, if successful, is a positive thing in itself because it is practiced with the intention to counteract the unsustainability of contemporary urban development (p.915).

To illustrate, one recent and typical study sought a clearer definition of what differentiated tiny houses (physically, conceptually, and economically) from standard home construction and ownership in the US (Shearer & Burton, 2019). The aim of this clarification was to assist in the scaling up of the movement, which is considered an innovative model of affordable and liveable urban housing that could be added to (and improve) the broader system of housing provision. What the research took for granted, though, was the inherent and unproblematic desirability of the tiny house model as a housing solution that could (or should) be scaled up. The concluding section of the paper posed the following questions for further research:

How can (or will) the tiny house movement lead to changes in mainstream housing markets?

What are the challenges facing people who want to live in a tiny house?

What contribution can tiny houses make to the broader housing affordability crisis?

What is the potential for greater commercialization of tiny house production?

To what extent does the provision of tiny housing require changes to local planning schemes?

(Shearer & Burton, 2019, p. 315).

While the tiny house movement remains a niche, low consumption lifestyle choice its social and environmental credentials may be strong, however, the implications of off-grid, tiny houses becoming a government or commercial solution for affordable housing arguably requires greater scrutiny. To illustrate, some pertinent questions might have included:

What are the potential implications of a broader uptake of tiny house ideas – especially if they were initiated from a government or commercial perspective?

Who are the likely beneficiaries and losers were the tiny house movement scaled up?

What challenges is the city facing that is generating a desire, and potentially a growing need, for tiny houses?

One possible explanation for this linear questioning is that transitions frameworks focus on mapping the institutional landscape of practice, with the goal of facilitating progressive change. While the MLP comprehensively captures the various scales of influence, including micro and macro structural factors, on the system of practice, it neglects consideration of the political factors that *shaped* the emergence of that landscape.

In response to this criticism, various transitions scholars have sought to engage more meaningfully with political factors in their analyses of socio-technical change (Geels, 2014; Shove & Walker, 2007; A. Smith, Stirling, & Berkhout, 2005). For example, Block and Paredis (2013) sought a more nuanced understanding of factors that influence the success of purposive urban transition. By analysing the impact of mayoral leadership on the mainstreaming of living lab innovations, the authors identify a need for political entrepreneurs to influence the policy agenda, to connect policy streams, and create coalitions of actors with the power to advance sustainable transition. Similarly, Geels (2014) conceptualises the myriad ways regime actors can resist and limit transition, including through discursive, institutional, material and instrumental strategies. In doing so, he acknowledges the political nature of agenda setting and problem formulation regarding urban transition.

While such responses integrate politics and power into the transitions lens, though, they still generally lack acknowledgement of the political characteristics of the ideas and knowledge informing the *transition* goals themselves (Luque-Ayala, Marvin, & Bulkeley, 2018). Geels (2014) does admit that technological advancement evident in transitions approaches can be presented as a-political and concedes that “while claiming to follow neutral expert advice, the government often supports low-carbon options that fit incumbent interests” (p.35). Despite this acknowledgement though, the overall conclusions generally refer to these political dimensions as being political *barriers* to achieving the known and progressive transitions goals (such as a compact city), albeit with a greater sophistication in the analysis of the mechanisms through which the socio-technical regime remains stable.

#### *Transformation or business-as-usual?*

A key question in the literature on transitions and experimentation, then, is whether niche or systemic experimentation and innovation practices contribute to genuine transformation or the continuation of business as usual dynamics (McGuirk et al., 2014; Moloney & Horne, 2015; A. Smith, 2012). Within the transitions literature itself, scholars have documented a lack of meaningful transformation and the difficulty niches have faced (especially the more radical ones) penetrating the regime (Lovell, 2007; A. Smith, 2007). Many note the range of difficulties with scaling up unique and contextualised housing models (N. Forrest & Wiek, 2014; Gibbs & O'Neill, 2014; A. Smith, 2007). Seyfang & Haxeltine (2012) found that it is often the culture and values inside the niche that offer it ‘protection’ from the regime, and that the dissemination of values and culture is perhaps not as straight forward as translating the benefits of innovative technologies. Mainstreaming potential has therefore been found to be limited by inherent dissimilarities of niches compared with the mainstream system of practice (Boyer, 2015; N. Forrest & Wiek, 2014; T. Moore, 2018). Smith (2007) found that in order to be successfully mainstreamed, niches need to be ‘intermediately’ positioned - not too radical or mainstream - and somewhat aligned with the existing socio-technical system..

Such research suggests that rather than transforming the system, the progressive potential of innovations may be eroded once it is placed within that system. Crabtree (2018) has warned that “it is possible that the (albeit gradual and piecemeal) diffusion into mainstream housing of ecological design and community-driven practices such as ‘deliberative development’ may reflect not so much a *scaling up* as a *spreading out*” (emphasis added, pp.28-29). This is supported by a small, but growing, critical literature on cohousing arrangements that outline some problematic outcomes *in practice*, especially as such models grow in popularity (Chiodelli & Baglione, 2014; Droste, 2015; Scheller & Thörn, 2018; Sharam, 2020). Droste (2015) and Chiodelli & Baglione (2014) found that if cities do not effectively govern co-housing as a tenure it can encourage a specific form of gated communities and reduce them to middle-class exclusivity. Similarly, Sharam (2020) has noted that ‘deliberative development’ models will not achieve the potential affordability and equity benefits if they operate in the open housing market (ie. the existing system) without government intervention. Therefore, this research indicates that ‘effective’ translation into the system may in practice be characterised by transformation of the *innovation* to fit the system, rather than transformation of the socio-technical regime itself.

Scheller & Thorn (2018) also found that “in some cases, local or national government may use their support for cohousing as a way to legitimize economically, socially, and ecologically *unsustainable* large-scale urban restructuring” (emphasis added, p.931). If this is the case, there is a risk that by taking the emerging logic and practice of urban housing intervention (centred on experimentation and innovation) at face value, advocates and progressive urban researchers may be (inadvertently or not) contributing to the advancement of *regressive* practices. Moloney and Horne (2015) suggest that this is particularly relevant where technical solutions are being presented a-politically as ‘best practice’. They argue that:

While some efficiency gains will be achieved through technical measures, social change framed in this way, will ignore the multitude of ways that unsustainable practices and patterns of development can continue business-as-usual (Moloney & Horne, 2015, p. 2450).

Marvin and Guy (1997) observed this phenomenon in the discourse and practice of ‘the new localism’ that was popular in the 1990s. They found that rather than achieving the sustainability goals that were articulated in the discourse, advocates and progressive scholars formed a coalition that in practice served to entrench various ‘myths’ that supported broader political-economic restructuring trends.

The above suggests that urban planning and housing researchers examining the interventions in relation to medium density housing may need to more critically scrutinize the alternative and additional motivations of government and question whether a similar coalition is forming around these new instruments. If governance is being accomplished via experimentation, it “raises important analytical questions regarding who is being served and how state, private and public relations are being restructured” (Joshua Evans, 2016, pp. 437–438). Similarly, the proliferation of new partnership arrangements is said to have enabled new urban elites to shape the urban policy agenda. As Evans and Karvonen (2011) point out, “a wide variety of organisations – notably universities, government bodies, and private companies – are using the term [ULL] in an unapologetically boosterish manner to develop and market their own approaches to sustainability” (emphasis added, p.126). In response, this thesis reflects on the likely beneficiaries of small number of innovative urban housing models recently showcased by state and local governments, and scrutinises government intent beyond what is presented rhetorically or at face value.

To go beyond face value assessment, this research project draws on a rich and extensive body of urban scholarship which has traced the shifting logic and practice of Australian urban housing intervention over time. Studies, for example, by Bunker et al.(2017), Gurran and Phibbs (2013), Gleeson and Low (2000b); and MacCallum and Hopkins (2011) have usefully positioned the previous iterations of urban consolidation policy implementation within their political-economic or historical context. Such analyses often illuminate the ways in which new government practices and ideas are motivated by broader restructuring efforts, including attempts to de-regulate or re-regulate the development system in favour of particular elite interests. For instance, Gurran & Phibbs (2013) analysed a ‘housing supply crisis’ narrative in Australia, and highlighted the changing problem and solution logics over a decade. They were able to demonstrate a growing alignment in discourse between government and development lobby groups, and position that growing alignment within the broader context of neoliberal restructuring that was being advanced at the time.

This thesis argues that the research into current greyfields housing interventions would be enriched by reflecting critically on the political-economic and historical context in which innovation and experimentation logic and practice is emergent. To date, these considerations have been neglected in the pragmatic Australian scholarship. Therefore, one of the tasks of this research project is to position some current ‘innovative’ infill housing interventions in their historical, political-economic context of urban consolidation policy implementation in Australia. This historical analysis is developed in Chapter 5, and draws on secondary existing literature to gain a ‘long view’ as a mechanism for better understanding the present (Flanagan & Jacobs, 2019).

## 2.11 Chapter summary

This chapter has introduced the logic and practice of current medium density infill housing intervention which forms the basis of this research. While many have critiqued the merit and outcomes of urban consolidation policy implementation over its thirty-year history, it has been argued that research on the latest iteration in the greyfields has not been well-connected to these existing critiques. Instead, the most recent government interventions have been widely assumed to reflect a maturing approach to approach consolidation that better aligns with the housing needs of households and improves built form outcomes. It has been argued that the existing research has remained fairly instrumental in approach, recommending innovations and policy tools for governments to adopt. There has been less critical examination in Australia of additional or alternative government objectives or the political dimensions of the policy *goals*. A long-standing “schism” in housing research was highlighted which may explain the current gaps. While urban planning and housing researchers have recently been attempting to overcome this divide using socio-technical transition theory, it was argued that this increasingly popular approach may lock in instrumental lines of thinking and neglect the potentially regressive characteristics of government-led transition. This thesis will address these issues by paying critical attention to the policy goals and by positioning the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention into its historical-political-economic context. The following chapter considers what an appropriate critical lens for this research might look like, and locates the theoretical and analytical position taken in this project.



# Chapter 3     Analytical framework: finding a critical lens

## 3.1     Chapter introduction

As outlined in Chapter 2, this thesis aims to bridge the gap between empirical and theoretical scholarship in urban planning and housing research, specifically in relation to the emerging governance practices being introduced to increase the supply and quality of medium density housing. As various scholars have argued, critical examination of these emerging practices (featuring innovation and experimentation) is urgently required. This chapter explores the analytical and theoretical approaches taken by others in this space, and ultimately adopts a policy-centred lens for this research that offers empirically grounded insights while also taking into account structural constraints.

## 3.2     Critical theory and the neoliberal diagnosis

Perhaps the most dominant *critical* interpretation of current practice and its consequences is that since the 1980s liberal-democratic societies have witnessed major political restructuring inspired by neoliberalism. Drawing largely on Marxist theories, critical theorists understand neoliberalism as a political project that enhances and perpetuates capitalist accumulation (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014; Brenner, Marcuse, & Mayer, 2012; Larnier, 2000; McGuirk, 2005; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009). Ideologically, neoliberalism has been associated with the promotion of deregulation and liberalisation of global economic markets, including the privatisation of state-provided services and state-owned enterprises (Jessop, 2002).

As a mode of governance, neoliberalism inspires a managerial approach in which corporate practices are translated into the public sector (Kjaer, 2009). Public-private partnership arrangements have proliferated in this context as the inclusion of the private sector into service delivery is said to harness its inherent efficiencies and improve services by stimulating healthy competition between providers (Stoker, 1998). The legitimate role of government in governing has been reconfigured to favour facilitation and coordination of services over direct provision. In other words, the rise of neoliberal rationalities has generated a style of government that has eroded the traditional role of government in governing (Rhodes, 1996). The following discussion provides a summary of some of the key insights from critical urban theory for examining the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention.

### 3.2.1 Housing and urban consolidation

While the socio-technical transitions literature, outlined in the previous chapter, emphasises the strategic importance of cities and urban-scale approaches for addressing global warming, critical scholars have, in contrast, emphasised the strategic importance of cities in the *advancement of capitalism* (Peck et al., 2009; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). It is argued that the significance of cities has increased in the ‘neoliberal era’ as their essentiality as sites of wealth accumulation has been emphasised (Peck et al., 2009). In this context, cities are posited as sites of regulatory institutionalisation of capital accumulation (McGuirk, 2012). Brenner et al.(2012) describes urbanisation itself as being part of “capitalist enclosure” that is constitutive of the entrenchment of capitalism. Therefore, the urban realm is theorised as being strategically significant because it is at this scale that neoliberal ideas are institutionalised and where they play out (Theodore & Peck, 2011). From this perspective, the rise of government (and industry-led) urban experimentation and innovation logic and practice can be understood more sceptically as a reflection of new mechanisms for capitalist accumulation in an era of neoliberalisation (K. Davidson & Gleeson, 2014).

Critical theory provides a useful and insightful structural account of government interventions that emphasises the political dimensions of policy-making. Various scholars describe the increasing commodification of housing as one of the key problems with urban development contributing to its sub-optimal outcomes today (Guironnet et al., 2016; Marcuse, 2012; Pinnegar et al., 2020; Rolnik, 2013). From a critical theory perspective, housing unaffordability is the result of inherent inequalities in capitalist societies which have been amplified under neoliberalism. As Barnett (2005) describes, “liberalism is the affirmation of the moral sovereignty of the individual expressed in the principle of equality” (p.4). While housing markets theoretically enable participation for all, in reality, the responsibility for housing accumulation (or not) rests on individuals, but the ability to access it does not. It has been argued that government policies that support or enable private investment in housing markets can actually be better described as ‘reverse welfarism’ (K. Jacobs, 2015a) and as ‘redistributive’ (Wilson, 2004). This is because enabling speculation and investment in housing cumulatively benefits the already asset rich, and minimises entry for the ‘have-nots’, thereby (actively) transferring further wealth into the hands of those with existing capital.

For some critical theory scholars, the logic and practice of urban consolidation policy is itself interpreted as representative of neoliberal urbanism. They point out that urban consolidation objectives have driven policies favouring urban renewal which have opened up urban areas for further capital accumulation (Porter, 2009; Shaw, 2013). Urban regeneration, for instance, has been widely observed to have driven gentrification and displaced working class suburbanites through the increase in speculation and investment in ‘regenerated’ areas (J.-F. Kelly & Donegan, 2014; Quastel et al., 2012; Rosen & Walks, 2014). This had led some critical theorists to interpret gentrification not as an unintended consequence of redevelopment, but as a global urban strategy that is constitutive of neoliberal urbanism (Brenner & Schmid, 2015; N. Smith, 2002).

Others have characterised the instruments used to achieve urban consolidation policies as reflective of the dominance of neoliberal governing trend (Crommelin et al., 2017; Gurran & Ruming, 2015; Porter, 2009). In this context, governments have favoured planning instruments that *facilitate* new intensified development over regulatory *constraints* to urban fringe development such as urban growth boundaries (Buxton et al., 2012). Similarly, governments have demonstrated an aversion to directly shaping development outcomes, and have preferred to partner with the private sector, and be directed by private developers who are perceived to have the best understanding of the market (Halbert & Attuyer, 2016; Shaw, 2013).

### 3.2.2 Power and influence

Critical urban researchers also draw attention to the political dimensions of policy narratives by highlighting the way that urban citizens have been enrolled into neoliberal governing rationalities that shape housing interventions (Davies, 2014a; Swyngedouw, 2005). For example, the ideas of ‘consumer sovereignty’ and entrepreneurialism promote participation in the housing market through speculation and investment; and values of individualism and freedom of choice are promoted to suggest that government intervention in housing markets is an unwelcome intrusion that impinges on these rights (Sager, 2015). Culturally, housing in a neoliberal era has been increasingly valued for its exchange value in a market made up of entrepreneurial consumers, while the notion of housing as a basic human right and shelter has been relatively sidelined (Marcuse, 2012).

Alongside the commodification of housing, political economy perspectives assist in unpacking the imbalances of power in urban development practices and the shaping of policy knowledge. According to the ‘growth machine’ hypothesis (Molotch, 1976), urban development and its outcomes can be interpreted as a product of “coalitions of land based elites, tied to the economic possibilities of place, (who) drive urban politics in their quest to expand the local economy and accumulate wealth” (Jonas & Wilson, 1999). There are two key ways in which these coalitions of elites are theorised as being involved in enhancing the urban growth machine. First, elites gain access through the disproportionate amount of resources they have at their disposal relative to other urban actors. Urban regime theorists emphasise the requirement of governments in liberal-democratic societies (particularly in the modern era) to rely on external resources in order to achieve their goals (Blanco, 2013; Stone, 2015). The resultant reliance on public-private partnerships means that some private sector actors have a privileged position in regards to agenda setting and policy formulation (Mossberger, 2009).

This can be applied to urban housing, which is largely developed through the private market and by private citizens. In order to achieve housing outcomes relating to urban consolidation plans, for instance, urban regime theorists point out that governments are forced to negotiate and bargain with those producing the housing they wish to affect (Blanco, 2015; Mossberger, 2009). It is no surprise, then, that many policies and development outcomes are perceived to be oriented towards developer interests rather than the wider community or the eventual habitants of the dwellings constructed. Regime theorists would attribute the skewed supply and demand outcomes in higher density housing (described in Chapter 2) as being a result of inherently unequal resources among actors, and therefore unequal access to power and decision-making spaces.

Second, urban elites are able to build consensus around growth strategies that suit their profit-oriented goals. This consensus does not only occur through “power over” actors via resource dominance, but also through the act of convincing, persuading and normalising practices which benefit the ‘rentier’ class (Davies, 2012). From this perspective neoliberal ideology has provided the vehicle for consensus building around increasingly normalised growth imperatives motivating urban politics. This notion of ‘convincing’ the public and policy making officials has been described as “neoliberal governmentality” (Swyngedouw, 2005).

From the perspective of governmentality, the compact city model itself can be understood as a product of successful alignment and normalisation of elite and political interests, as well as cultural norms or trends. Rosen and Walks (2014) use the term ‘condo-ism’ to describe a “mode of development rooted in a nexus of, on the one hand, the economic interests of the private sector development industry and the state, and on the other new urbane yet privatized residential preferences, lifestyles, and consumption interests among consumers” (p.290). They describe the way that the intensification imperative has replaced industrialisation as the modern driver of necessary urban growth. The narrative surrounding urban intensification in Canada, then, represents a “structured coherence” (Harvey, 1985; Rosen & Walks, 2014) that results from successfully marrying elite and political interests which ultimately manifests in wider consumptive behaviours in broader society.

### 3.2.3 Change and progressive potential

This section considers how critical theory interprets the potential for progressive change. This assists in distinguishing this literature from the socio-technical transitions approaches, and provides the context for the discussion that follows, regarding the theoretical position taken in this project.

#### 3.2.3.1 Neoliberalisation: essentialism

Neoliberal *ideology* espouses the value of privatisation, competitiveness and the liberalisation of markets free from government intervention (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). As this economic rationality has been widely adopted, the “roll-out” (Peck & Tickell, 2002) of neoliberalism is said to have led to the “internationalization of policy development” (Beer, Kearins, & Pieters, 2007, p. 13). Peck and Theodore (2012) have described the contemporary phenomenon of “fast policy transfer” in which ‘effective’ policy, and urban models, are exported around the world and taken up in places with varied cultures and institutional histories. In this globalised policy environment, cities deemed to have achieved successful outcomes in urban regeneration, sustainable development, or urban design, are held up as exemplars the rest of the world can learn from. Exemplars include “the Barcelona model” (Blanco, 2015), the “Vancouver model” (Boddy, 2004), or the “Singapore model” (Huat, 2011) which have been put on an international platform for the policy community to replicate.

The globalisation of urban policy models is said to contribute to a ‘formulaic’ approach to urban development (Shaw, 2013). Neoliberal ideology encourages competitiveness *between* cities across the world as cities attempt to generate innovation, attract entrepreneurial talent, and maximise their growth potential (Rosol et al., 2017). In this context, ‘best practice’ urban policy models (such as New Urbanism or compact city principles) are adopted around the world as cities attempt to keep up with global trends (Peck et al., 2009). This globalisation of best practice has been described as post-politicisation; through which alternatives are taken off the table and contestation is sidelined to prioritise ‘best practice’ technical implementation (Swyngedouw, 2009). One example of policy transfer can be seen in the homogeneity of major brownfield developments, particularly waterfront regeneration projects around the world, which have similar growth-oriented strategies and focus on technical urban design principles (Shaw, 2013). The outcomes of this type of imported planning have been variously described as “placeless neoliberalism” (Hackworth & Moriah, 2006; Shaw, 2013), and “anywhere town” (Rydin, 2013). Therefore, the globalisation of best practice is said to have led to greater homogeneity of urban settings across the world.

### 3.2.3.2 Neoliberalisation: contextualism

The globalisation of neoliberal urbanism has been notable for its essentialism, and its increasingly homogenous physical manifestations. At the same time, however, critical theorists have stressed the peculiar nature of neoliberal urbanism in the way that it has been adapted in uneven and contradictory ways across the world. Several authors have therefore referred to ‘neoliberalisation’ as *process*, which differs significantly from its essential features as *ideology* (Blanco, Griggs, & Sullivan, 2014; Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Peck et al., 2009; Wilson, 2004). The neoliberalisation of urban policy is described as a recognisable *pattern* featuring market-oriented restructuring and economic rationality, but it does not conform to a universal template of actual practice on the ground (Peck et al., 2009, p. 51). This lack of universality in practice is evident despite the growing interest in generic urban models.

One of the features of neoliberalisation has been its ‘contradictory creativity’ (Peck et al., 2009). This refers to the way neoliberal rationalities appear to be self-reinforcing in that there is a tendency to misrepresent the real effects of policies to justify further restructuring in favour of elite capital accumulation (Peck et al., 2009). While the liberalisation of markets without government intervention is a feature of neoliberal ideology, in practice the state has been crucial in enforcing market-discipline, and deregulation attempts have often led to the need for greater centralisation for accountability and effectiveness (dubbed ‘re-regulation’ (Keil, 2002)). It is this snowballing policy and political restructuring that Brenner and Theodore (2002) describe as ‘creative destruction’. This characteristic of neoliberalisation leads to the argument that it is hegemonic. This is because “hegemony is a political type of relation maintained by an ideology able to embrace what opposes it” (Sager, 2015, p. 270).

Critical urban theorists highlight, therefore, the ways that neoliberal rationalities are negotiated in the heterogeneous political-historical-institutional context. Brenner and Theodore (2002) have used a conceptual framework, termed ‘actually existing neoliberalism’, to enable the study of its geographically situated, negotiated and variegated nature (Wilson, 2004). Their analytical approach acknowledges the path dependent nature of institutional and political contexts, which neoliberal rationalities interact and negotiate with on the ground (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Their conceptualisation of actually existing neoliberalism therefore provides scope for greater complexity, nuance and contextual analysis into critical urban studies.

### 3.2.4 Emerging governance practices

In contrast to the optimism embedded in socio-technical transitions perspectives, critical urban theorists have characterised the emerging governance practices of experimentation and innovation as another iteration of neoliberal urbanism resulting from “creative destruction” (Haughton, Allmendinger, & Oosterlynck, 2013; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2013). Haughton et al. (2013) have argued that urban experimentation is facilitating the new “soft” spaces of governance outside rigid planning processes. This selective re-working of urban governance, though, has opened up opportunities for new elites to shape the policy agenda. Urban living laboratories, for example, have amplified the role of universities, and transitions pathways advocate for intermediaries to translate learnings across scales. Therefore, the emerging practices have been described as “hegemonic projects in-the-making that relate carbon to the city in distinctive...ways” (McGuirk et al., 2014, p. 23).

### 3.3 The limits of CUT analysis for this thesis

As demonstrated, CUT accounts of housing policies and their outcomes are immensely useful for considering the political-economic dimensions of policy-making. They also draw attention to the inherent power imbalances that normative practices institutionalise. Neoliberalisation and the shifts that have occurred in government-society relations in the modern era have led to the significant restructuring of urban governance over several decades – a process which is ongoing. For the purposes of this research project, critical theory was the first port of call for locating a suitable critical theoretical framework for understanding the emerging logic and practice of urban housing intervention. While such perspectives have been shown to provide insight into the political dimensions of policy goal formation and problem and solution narratives, it is argued that this approach has some limitations for overcoming the schism between theoretical and empirical housing research. This argument is set out below.

#### 3.3.1 Dominance over difference

A key debate of relevance for this research centres on whether or not neoliberalism is hegemonic (Sager, 2015; Storper & Scott, 2016; Weller & O'Neill, 2014). While scholarly interest in 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Brenner & Theodore, 2002) has emphasised the *negotiation* of neoliberal rationalities with other structural forces in context, the critical lens remains focused primarily on the reconstitution of neoliberal ideas in practice. Some have argued that analysis oriented towards the identification of actually existing neoliberalism can run the risk of what Gibson-Graham (2008) describe as "reading for dominance, not for difference" (p.623). In other words, a key criticism of critical theory is that it focuses its lens too sharply on the forces of neoliberalisation and in doing so minimises the importance of other forces shaping our cities. This has led some scholars to question the 'reification' of neoliberalism to hegemonic status in interpretation of urban phenomena (Storper & Scott, 2016; Weller & O'Neill, 2014).



This debate has explicitly played out in relation to urban consolidation policy, with scholars reflecting on the extent to which contextual demands for environmental outcomes has shaped policy-making compared with demand for new modes of capital accumulation (Raco, 2005; Sager, 2015). Gibbs and Krueger (2012) employed a “decentred institutional analysis” technique to the examination of smart growth and land use regulation in Boston in the United States. They observed a mediation of *various* dilemmas, traditions and beliefs. While at a high level, their findings square with research about the neoliberalisation of urban planning policy, they found this observation ‘fragmented’ once they got closer to “ground level” (p.377). Similarly, Sager (2015) analysed the various rationalities influencing compact city policy in Norway. He found that alternative rationalities involving environmentalism and participatory governance *had* been (accurately) identified as being tangled up in neoliberal practice and ideology. However, he also found evidence that environmental demands had been influential in their own right. Sager (2015) has therefore questioned the hegemonic status of neoliberalism that is pre-subscribed to existing analyses and he argues that by failing to give analytic power to alternative ideologies “the critic has already taken a stand in the hegemony debate, regarding neoliberalism as dominant” (p.277).

A problem with reading for dominance over difference is that it can favour abstract theorising while sidelining empirical contributions. Geddes and Le Gales (2001) argue that the all-encompassing way in which neoliberalisation processes are interpreted can lead to fuzzy theorising lacking clear definition. Similarly, Weller and O’Neill (2014) have questioned the utility of such interpretations. They argue that:

The role of academic research is to explain the lived world and to develop abstractions to aid that explanation, rather than to design an abstraction (neoliberalism) and then fit the world to its contours (p.105).

Weller and O’Neill (2014) suggest, then, that by ascribing the observed reality to a pre-defined neoliberalisation diagnosis, “it is difficult to recognize emerging contradictions and counter tendencies” (p.106). Despite the continued recognition of neoliberalisation as a prominent explanatory force in urban studies, then, a growing number of scholars are calling for a wider lens of analysis that allows for the possibility of other structural, ideological and cultural forces meaningfully influencing urban morphology and policy design (Jessop, 2013; McGuirk, 2012; Parnell & Robinson, 2012; Sager, 2015; Yiftachel, 2016).

Authors from the global south have been leading the call to look for difference as well as dominance, and to recognise the multiple forces that simultaneously act to shape the city (Parnell & Robinson, 2012; Roy, 2014; Yiftachel, 2016). Roy (2014) calls for “new geographies of urban theory” that will lead to a critique of the ‘flat’ or homogenising nature of globalisation that is embedded in Euro-western critical theory. In doing so, she rejects the essentialism assumed in critical accounts and calls for a stronger “locatedness” of urban studies that sharpens the theoretical lens towards the particularities of cities. Similarly, Yiftachel (2016) has introduced the idea of ‘The Aleph’ (“the place of all places”) as a metaphorical lens for analysing the city as consisting of multiple trajectories, including the historical, political and cultural influences which have shaped its morphology and outcomes. Yiftachel (2016) emphasises the ‘relational’ co-production of the city and rejects the idea that neoliberalism is the only force of domination and resistance in a multi-faceted and complex city, such as Jerusalem, which has strong political, racial and religious historical trajectories that cannot (and should not) be minimised as subordinate to political-economic structuring.

### 3.3.2 Change

A key theoretical tension that emerges from these critiques revolves around interpretations of *structure versus agency* in the governance of modern society (Coburn, 2016; Huxley & Yiftachel, 2000; Springer, 2012). Scholars question if governments and individuals are beholden to political-economic structures or if they have ‘room to manoeuvre’ within these structural constraints. Political economy perspectives, such as critical theory, generally interpret the capacity of governments to meaningfully shape policy and outcomes as being *constrained* by normative and hegemonic neoliberal rationalities (Flew, 2014; K. Jacobs & Manzi, 2017).

Despite this, critical theorists *have* acknowledged that governments are actively involved in the roll-out of neoliberalism. Peck and Tickell (2002) describe neoliberal urbanism as essentially “state-led market fundamentalism” (p.388), and Brenner and Theodore (2002) have noted the “dramatic intensification of coercive, disciplinary forms of state intervention in order to impose market rule upon all aspects of social life” (p.352). From this perspective, the emerging governance arrangements for sustainable urban housing (particularly ULL partnerships) are interpreted as reflective of neoliberal rationalities. For example, Davies (2012) describes, ‘the cultivation of networks’ as reflective of the process of urban neoliberalisation, and the ‘entrepreneurial city’ has been largely shown to be a product of these processes (K. Davidson & Gleeson, 2014; Whitehead, 2013). Such accounts, however, seem to be at least one step removed from human agency. Individuals, and ‘the state’, are interpreted as mere ‘agents’ of neoliberalism (Davies, 2014b), or as ‘empty shells’ “that are colonized by ruling-class interests” (Flew, 2014). Governments are conceived mostly as passive recipients of globalising neoliberal rationalities.

Perhaps most importantly for this thesis, then, critical theory provides limited scope (or hope) for imagining pathways for change. With neoliberalisation interpreted as self-reinforcing and hegemonic, progressive change processes are largely conceptualised as either constitutive of such rationalities, or as “contestation” (Goodale & Postero, 2013; Leitner, Peck, & Sheppard, 2007). Change can occur slowly, through resistance, contestation and negotiation with neoliberal practice and ideology, however liberal-democratic societies seem beholden to this neoliberal force which will somehow, and eventually, constitute and reconstitute itself in context and assert itself, albeit in varied ways. Blok (2013) describes the pessimism inbuilt into these critical analyses when he says: “much contemporary urban studies is marked by a universalized imaginary of urban decline, splintering and discrimination – an orientation at odds with a widespread...sensitivity toward the contingency and ambivalence of any socio-technical transformation process” (p.8). In other words, the sense of inevitability produced by critical urban theory leaves one with little conception of how widespread change could occur, or how more positive outcomes could be sought.

### 3.3.3 The need for a balanced approach

The critiques described above (a tendency to a-priori assumptions, contextual explanations considered sub-ordinate to structural factors; and assumptions of lacking government capacity in policy-making), suggest that critical urban policy analysis requires a marrying of the micro (particularity of context) and the macro (structural) in critical urban analysis. This represents a similar dilemma to the schism in housing research. As outlined in Chapter 2, socio-technical transitions perspectives remain usefully optimistic of progressive change and provide an “alluring combination of agency, complexity, uncertainty and optimism” to sustainability researchers (Shove & Walker, 2007, p. 763). It was argued, though, that such accounts inadequately capture the political dimensions of policy goal formulation or the problem and solution narratives. Critiques of CUT accounts, on the other hand, suggest that the neoliberalisation diagnosis can go too far the other way, neglecting empirically-grounded explanations for policy outcomes. The following section presents a policy-centred lens, adopted in this thesis, which targets a middle ground approach to housing policy research, marrying consideration of both macro and micro factors.

## 3.4 A policy-centred lens

To address the issues outlined above, and the gaps identified in Chapter 2, a novel policy-centred lens is proposed for this research. The following discussion outlines three key components of the policy-centred lens from which this thesis will proceed. They include: critical reflection on policy ‘design’ that examines its content (in practice) and the factors that may have shaped its calibration; a focus on the socially constructed and shifting nature of policy problem interpretations; and a consideration of how the policy design and the problem constructions are *productive* in shaping ‘actually existing’ environmental and social housing outcomes. It is argued that this policy-centred approach may provide a more balanced lens that grants explanatory power to both local contextual factors *and* structural constraints, thus addressing the schism in housing research. In addition, it provides a critical lens on the political dimensions of policy *goals* as well as the means, which is currently lacking in analysis of greyfields housing interventions.

### 3.4.1 Policy design as noun

As a small sub-set of policy studies, policy design literature offers a vehicle for understanding the context in which policy choices are made (Bobrow & Dryzek, 1987; Howlett, 2009; Schneider & Sidney, 2009). A policy design approach asserts that optimal tools are not simply chosen from a buffet of options, but are influenced by a range of other factors, including prevailing governance norms and actor motivations (Howlett, 2014). Analysis conducted from this perspective focuses on policy formulation and implementation with the assumption that working backwards will reveal a multitude of long-term factors contributing to the logic of decision making (Sidney, 2007). Therefore, policy design approaches are focused on the content and the context of a policy environment.

‘Policy design’ is conceived in the literature in two ways; as noun (an existing package to be critically analysed) and as verb (the process of crafting policy) (Howlett & Lejano, 2012). Early policy design works addressed policy design predominantly as verb (Schneider & Sidney, 2009). That is, policy scholars sought to understand the process of instrument choice and the consequences of those choices to determine theoretical insights into how to effectively craft policy (Howlett, 2014). The cataloguing of policy instruments occurred at this time as analysts explored the parameters for producing complimentary policy mixes and designs. Howlett and Lejano (2012) point out that policy design studies have their roots in the ‘rational’ tradition of policy studies, and its use ‘as verb’ can be seen to reflect that. The idea that ‘good’ public policy can be consciously ‘designed’ is a fairly instrumentalist approach that has similarities to transitions perspectives (Schneider & Sidney, 2009).

The most relevant policy design theory for this thesis, though, is its use as ‘noun’. Several authors have described policy design as resembling ‘architecture’ (Bobrow, 2006; Schneider & Sidney, 2009). While a building can be architecturally ‘designed’, the process and content of design can be theoretically separated. This is said to be true for policy as well. Policy design scholars use the architecture of a given policy as a focus of analysis that illuminates underlying meaning, power distribution, and political trade-offs embedded within it (Bobrow & Dryzek, 1987; Schneider & Sidney, 2009). This is because, as Salamon (2002) has highlighted, “tool choices are not just technical decisions, rather, they are inherently political” (p.11).

Policy design theorists provide various tools for mapping out the policy-making context – the inherent ‘design’. For example, Howlett’s (2009) model of nested policy design conceptually separates the policy goals and means, and reflects on each at various levels of abstraction (p.73) (Figure 1.1). Similarly to the MLP framework from the socio-technical transitions literature, Howlett’s policy design mapping tool breaks down the policy-making environment to consider macro (structural) factors, such as governing norms and preferences; meso sector-specific logic and practice; and micro ‘operational’ considerations determine the ultimate calibration of policy targets and instruments (Howlett, 2009). Despite the resemblance to the MLP, there are a few differences that make this policy design lens relevant and useful for this research.

First, the analytical separation of the goals and means provides greater scope to consider the factors shaping problem construction and government logic and objectives in a given sector. This responds to calls housing research to pay more analytical attention to the policy goals and not just the means, as outlined in Chapter 2 (Bengtsson & Ruonavaara, 2010; K. Jacobs & Manzi, 2017). Second, the intended utility of the two frameworks are slightly different. The MLP is focused on institutional context mapping, which is used to determine how the existing bureaucratic, cultural, technological, and regulatory system can be reoriented towards (known) progressive ends. In contrast, Howlett’s (2009) policy design model is more concerned with understanding the *content* of the policy logic and practice, including the factors that have shaped the policy *choices*. Where the MLP is explicitly interested in finding barriers and opportunities for transitioning towards a sustainable future (in this case a compact urban form), the policy design lens is more interested in scrutinising the existing logic and practice of urban housing intervention. It is the latter approach that is suited to the purposes of this research which principally seeks to understand ‘what is going on here’ in the most recent iteration of urban consolidation policy implementation. While this research does have progressive urban change in mind, it will proceed with more caution about what constitutes a ‘progressive’ agenda than the linear (instrumentalist) approach of the socio-technical transitions literature.

Third, the MLP maps out the broader socio-technical system of practice, whereas a policy design approach is explicitly focused on government decision-making and intervention. As discussed earlier, critical urban theory can tend towards structural determinism in which governments have diminished capacity to govern as neoliberal rationalities have driven greater reliance on private and civil society networks (Rhodes, 2007). In emphasising the regime of housing practice, transitions theories similarly depict a normative relational and networked governance landscape.

While there is no doubt that, in modern liberal-democratic societies, governments have increasingly relied upon private and civil society networks to govern, policy design scholars in contrast interpret this state of affairs as an active choice of governments, rather than as a natural or inevitable mode of governance (Capano, Howlett, & Ramesh, 2015; Howlett, Koštro, & Poocharoen, 2015). Howlett, Kostro and Poocharoen (2015) argue that neoliberal outsourcing or networked or participatory governance should merely be understood as a type of government *policy tool*. Similarly, Flew (2014) has argued that a more sustainable use of the concept of neoliberalism would be to understand it as a “*technique of government* prevalent in Anglo-American economies” (p.15, emphasis added). These scholars argue, in line with others such as Pierre (2015), that the idea of joint governing is not new, and that it has been previously categorised and catalogued by policy theorists (for example: Hood, 1986).

A policy design lens therefore offers the possibility that governments are drawing variously on markets, hierarchies and networks to different degrees depending on a range of factors influencing the policy system (including macro, meso, and micro considerations) (Capano et al., 2015). This position is important for achieving a balanced approach in the structure/agency dilemma. By re-centring government capacity into critical policy analysis, it becomes possible to imagine current policy logic and practice as socially and politically constructed. This can overcome the tendency to consider the policy-making landscape as fixed (even though it may remain stable for some time), and crucially, opens up the possibility for change. By taking this position, it is not being argued that policy can be more effectively or consciously *designed*, but rather that critical examination reveals the *active* role governments are playing in decision making and, ultimately, in shaping (urban housing) policy outcomes. In doing so, this lens will also assist in overcoming the instrumentalism in the existing urban planning and housing literature on the greyfields, including in the socio-technical transitions perspectives.

### 3.4.2 A focus on goals and problematisations

Turnbull (2013) argues that the distinction between political science and critical policy studies is the latter's focus on problems and practice. Importantly for this thesis, studies from public policy pay particular attention to the way that policy problems are understood (Bacchi, 2009; Schneider & Sidney, 2009; Turnbull, 2013). Lascoumes and Le Gales (2007) argue that "every instrument constitutes a condensed form of knowledge about social control and ways of exercising it" (p.3). In this way, policy scholars commonly point out that problem interpretations, or 'problematisations', are visible in the words and actions of government around any given policy issue (Bacchi, 2009).

Key to such approaches is that the stated goals and actions of government are interrogated *in situ*, and from this, a different perspective on government intent and objectives can be illuminated. Using this lens, Bacchi (2012) suggests that researchers examine government logic and practice and ask "what is the problem represented to be?". This approach has the potential to generate different insights about why the 'design' of a policy may be sub-optimal, contradictory or ineffective, or why it may be producing outcomes which benefit and disadvantage various participants in different ways. This is because it encourages considerations of government intentionality based on policy outputs rather than what governments say they are *trying* to do. This is particularly important for this research, which seeks to overcome instrumentalist policy analysis that takes government goals and intent at face value.

In particular, policy scholars have drawn attention to the usefulness of analysing problematisations over a long time period (Kemeny, 2004; O'Neill, 2008; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). As Huxley (2013) argues:

A critical historicization of a concept, policy, or programme attempts to bring to light the convergence of assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of thinking that enable something in the world to be seen as a problem to which there are possible solutions (p.1528).

Historical analysis often draws attention to the parallels between shifting problem constructions and political-economic restructuring occurring at the same time. Despite this alignment though, such perspectives do not automatically assume that governments are beholden to these structural factors. Instead, Bacchi (2009) argues that "governments play a privileged role" in policy making because "their understandings 'stick' – their versions of the (policy) 'problem' are formed or constituted in the legislation (p.33).

A ‘long view’ (Flanagan & Jacobs, 2019) will be employed in this research to consider the shifting problem and solution narratives in relation to urban growth management. This will reinsert some local interpretive agency into the policy making process that critical theorists have inadequately acknowledged. It also responds to Jacobs (2015b) call for a more holistic understanding of housing policy that recognises government agency, and more importantly *rationality* in policy making, albeit in a context of multiple (structural) influences and conflicting goals. Similarly, Blanco, Griggs and Sullivan (2014) argue that the “the logic of the local remains divorced from (critical) accounts of local governance” (p.312). A historical analysis of (changing) problematisations reveals that “constructions, even strongly institutionalized ones, are inherently unstable and subject to change” (Schneider & Sidney, 2009, p. 106). As Jacobs and Manzi (2017) argue:

Policy makers now face a transformed political, institutional and socio-economic environment in which the opportunities to present a progressive reform agenda are increasingly constrained...however, amongst the lessons we can learn from a historical lens in critical policy analysis “is that a different housing agenda is not beyond our reach (p.30).

Therefore, a long view of urban growth management will reveal the various changes and continuities in housing policy norms over time, and will place the current logic and practice within that political-economic-historical context.

### 3.4.3 Revealing the productivity of problematisations

The third component of the policy-centred lens proposed for this thesis is that problem interpretations are not only revealing, they are *productive* in various ways. Policy scholars have highlighted the utility of problematisations. Schneider and Ingram (1993) have previously shown how different community groups are depicted in policy narratives in different ways, such as deserving or undeserving, and this framing legitimises particular types of policy responses. Others have shown how the framing of a problem influences the policy attention it does or doesn’t receive (Bacchi, 2009; Gibbs & Krueger, 2012; Hajer, 2002; Kingdon, 1984). These insights have demonstrated that policy discourse is not just a matter of political rhetoric, but that it meaningfully shapes the amount of attention and the calibration of solutions that a problem receives. Recognising and critically examining these processes is therefore crucial for reconsidering current and emerging government responses to particular issues, including in attempts to increase the supply and quality of medium density infill housing.



In analysing the productivity of problematisations this thesis can draw on a strand of critical literature that has interrogated the discourse and practice of urban sustainability (Bulkeley, 2006; K. Davidson & Gleeson, 2014; M. Davidson, 2010; Hajer, 1995; Harris & Moore, 2015; Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018; While et al., 2004). Such research has focused on the narratives that inform government action, and the implications of those narratives for policy outcomes. A key distinguishable feature of this strand of scholarship compared with critical theory is its focus on the *mediation* of multiple logics, including dilemmas, contradictions, and compromise, that is evident in urban intervention (While et al., 2004). For example, Bevir, Rhodes and Weller (2003) understand the logic and practice of urban intervention to be constitutive of “struggles over different ways of conceiving of and responding to constructed dilemmas” (pg. 18). Urban ‘sustainability’ has generally been interpreted by this strand of literature as an inherently *contested* concept (Guy & Marvin, 1999; Whitehead, 2003).

Scholars analysing policy in this way have drawn attention to the *productive ambiguity* of ‘sustainability’ in urban governance (M. Davidson, 2010; Gunder, 2006). Many have pointed to the illusive nature of sustainability which can simultaneously encompass everything and nothing at all (Brown, 2016; K. Davidson & Arman, 2014; M. Davidson, 2010). This ambiguity is lamented for its ability to be co-opted and its intent watered down into “light-green” versions of sustainability that fit incumbent interests (Faulconbridge, 2015; Harris & Moore, 2015). Davidson and Gleeson (2014), for example, refer to the ‘meme’ of sustainability which is “open to interpretation and manipulation” (p.187).

Some scholars have suggested that the utility of such ambiguity is in its ability to hold together disparate interests and logics within one semi-coherent narrative (Bulkeley, 2006; M. Davidson, 2010). From this perspective, the compact city model (Jokinen, Leino, Bäcklund, & Laine, 2018) and other emerging narratives such as the ‘smart city’ (C. Martin et al., 2019) have been interpreted as a ‘sustainability fix’ (While et al., 2004). This ‘fix’ can be understood as a sort of compromise, but also a point of reference for building agreement around action. The theorisation of the ‘sustainability fix’ is an adaptation of the concept of the “spatial fix” as developed by David Harvey (1982). The ‘spatial fix’ draws attention to the geographical manifestations of capitalism and the way that the processes of urban development are capable of absorbing new forms of capital accumulation in creatively contradictory ways. Key to this concept is that the narratives and practices on the ground provide the glue that is able to respond to the inherent crises of capitalism in a productive manner that enables the system to continue (Harvey, 1982).

Davidson (2010) argues that:

Sustainability has provided a quilting point that has enabled new social and urban policy-related partnerships and organizational agendas to be developed (p.390).

The compact city, from this perspective, reflects a compromise between environmentalist concerns (which these scholars grant meaningful analytical power), *and* economic growth objectives (informed by neoliberal rationalities) (While et al., 2004). Despite this creative compromise, however, the fix remains essentially productive in ensuring new avenues for capital accumulation.

An interpretation of urban sustainability governance as ‘quilting’ together diverse interests is supported by a small number of Australian studies which have explored contestation and consensus around urban consolidation policy ideas amongst key stakeholders. Taylor et al.(2014), for instance, have examined the various storylines, or rationalities, surrounding urban growth management in Brisbane, Australia. They found divergent storylines, which highlights contestation amongst policy actors, but also convergence around the “mechanics, instruments, and processes that underpin the implementation of the proposed policies” (p.17). They were able to identify a “discourse coalition” that supported particular policy and governance practices, despite the existence of competing rationalities (p.18). Similarly, Raynor et al.(2017) explored the various narratives and stories associated with urban consolidation amongst ‘city shapers’ in Queensland, Australia. They found the rationalities to be “multifaceted, complex, and based on conflicting perspectives”, and argued that the mediation of these narratives amongst city shapers has material outcomes and shapes urban planning interventions (p.18). Therefore, it is possible that the concept of the ‘fix’ may be a useful approach for examining the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention.

Conceptualising sustainability as a quilting point is useful for re-considering normative ‘best practice’ ideas and practices (S. Moore, 2013). Bulkeley (2006) has examined the productive role of ‘best practice’ which she argues “represents at once a political rationality and a governmental technology through which networks and coalitions seek to promote particular urban futures” (p.1029). Where Bulkeley’s work has drawn attention to the role of best practice ideas in promoting urban change, Moore (2013) has focused on how ‘best practice’ often functions to re-produce and maintain the status quo – albeit with ever-new packaging. Moore (2013) and MacLeod (2013) have both traced the resurgence of New Urbanist ideas in Canada and Scotland respectively. They found that urban entrepreneurs and ‘gurus’ were brought in to provide expertise for designing new developments based on New Urbanist principles, but that the advice was useful in advancing particular incumbent interests.

It is argued therefore, that conceptualising policy rationalities not only as socially constructed, but as productive in holding together various interests or advancing particular solutions, is a useful lens for this thesis. As was argued in Chapter 2, pragmatic policy research usually gets a head start in grappling with new trends, with critical scholarship following later. Long (2016) has therefore highlighted the importance of examining each phase of urban policy as it evolves. He argues:

Research is needed to understand the scope, prioritisation and efficacy of each ‘fix’ as it emerges, as well as to understand the political ideologies and rhetoric that legitimate its implementation (Long, 2016, p. 150).

Considering the productivity of problematisations therefore offers a mechanism for going beyond categorisation and theory-building towards a more constructive (and grounded) critical approach. Moore (2013) argues that:

We need to focus on the real world practices of new urbanism, and *not the global policy relevance of the movement*. In doing so, we will uncover how middle-way approaches are naturalised into our societal norms and necessarily delimit radical possibilities (S. Moore, 2013, p. 2156, emphasis added).

Wachsmuth and Angelo (2018) have distinguished between grey and green urban sustainability ideologies, each of which they have found to have produce particular tensions in their own right and when deployed together. The authors suggest that green sustainability ideas and practices treat the urban and the natural as distinct, and sustainability can be achieved by introducing apparently simple natural elements into cities (for example: green roofs, public open space, community gardens). On the other hand, grey versions of sustainability present particular built forms and technologies as inherently sustainable. This ideological construction presents the idea, in contrast to the green version, that sustainability is achieved via technical or physical solutions. From this perspective, the promotion of density as a sustainable urban form can be characterised as an example of grey sustainability logic. It is argued that the breakdown of the rationalities in this way can generate grounded, empirical insights that go beyond the categorisation of phenomena as neoliberal or not, while still maintaining a critical lens.

## 3.5 Chapter summary

This chapter has located the analytical and theoretical lens through which this research will proceed. First, the utility of CUT and the neoliberalisation diagnosis were considered in relation to their suitability for addressing the gaps identified in Chapter 2. Such perspectives offer immensely useful insights regarding the political and structural dimensions of policy logic and practice. It was argued, however, that there is a tendency towards structural determinism which minimises local explanatory factors and the possibility of imagining progressive change. To address these limitations, a novel policy-centred lens is adopted for this thesis. The key components of this lens were outlined and include: an analytical and empirical focus on mapping the policy design; interrogation of problematisations, including in their historical context; and critical reflection on the productivity of these problematisations. The following chapter will summarise the research questions as well as the philosophical and methodological approach taken in this project.

# Chapter 4 Research Approach

## 4.1 Chapter introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to reconsider the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention in the greyfields. To do so, the current government interventions are critically examined, with a particular focus on the political dimensions of the policy goals and the problem and solution narratives. This chapter outlines the specific research approach taken in this thesis including a brief summary of its philosophical positioning, followed by an overview of the methodological process. Table 4.1 provides a summary of the approach taken.

**Table 4.1: Summary of research approach**

Concept	Research approach
<i>Ontology</i>	Social constructionism
<i>Epistemology</i>	Interpretivist
<i>Methodology</i>	Qualitative/ Interpretive
<i>Methods</i>	Interviews, observation, text (action/ documents) analysis
<i>Data sources</i>	Industry events, stakeholder meetings, media, government action, interview transcripts

## 4.2 Social constructionism

The key philosophical position adopted in this thesis comes from the paradigm of social constructionism. Constructionists understand social reality as being accessed through language and discourse and emphasise a relational and interactive production of knowledge which is mediated through collective stories and explanations (K. Jacobs, Kemeny, & Manzi, 2004, p. 2). This position has been previously criticised for its relativism due to the emphasis on subjective meaning-making that rejects a material, objective reality (King, 2004; Somerville & Bengtsson, 2002). Such critiques, however, have primarily concerned a ‘strong’ constructivist position. This thesis adopts an ontology of weak social constructionism in line with Jacobs, Kemeny and Manzi (2004); Somerville & Bengtsson (2002); Bevir and Rhodes (2010) and Sayer (1997) who proceed on the basis that while *social* knowledge is mediated and constructed (in context), the existence of an objective material reality is maintained.

A social constructivist philosophical position was employed in this research for the following reasons. First, a constructivist perspective is considered particularly productive for a problem and politically-centred approach to policy analysis. This is because it “emphasises the socially constructed nature of knowledge and institutions, and the way in which knowledge often bears the mark of its social origins” (Sayer, 2000, p. 90). This philosophical position therefore aligns with a policy design approach that perceives value in examining the *content* of policy (including its logic and practice) to illuminate the underlying political, economic, historical, and cultural conditions in which it has evolved. In doing so, a constructivist approach engages more closely in ‘problem-questioning’ rather than ‘problem-solving’ (emphasis original, Bacchi, 2009, p. xvii). It has been chosen for this study as a way of pursuing new lines of questioning in response to the instrumentalism that exists in housing policy research (K. Jacobs, 2018, p. 176).

Second, social constructionism grants analytical power to local actors by conceiving of individuals as “meaning-making creatures” (Yanow, 1996, p. 5). Tacit policy knowledge evolves through “a process of interaction” (Yanow, 1996, p. 7) and is the product of “collective sense-making around specific issues” (Geels, 2010, p. 505). Key to this collective knowledge though is that it is *interpreted* by individuals with agency. In other words, social constructionists “pay heed to the individual accounts of actors involved in policy making” (K. Jacobs, 2018, p. 179). This position still enables this research to maintain balance in the agency/ structure dilemma outlined in Chapter 3. This is achieved via a “thin rationality” (Elster, 1983) perspective in which:

Individual actors are assumed to have some logical consistency in the pursuit of their goals, whereas the nature of those goals (the preferences of the actors, including the social norms they adhere to) is not assumed a priori by the researcher but is open to empirical investigation, where the social and institutional context is of crucial importance (Somerville & Bengtsson, 2002, p. 124).

In other words, the task of the researcher is to consider the multiple factors that shape policy decisions. As Bacchi (2009) argues:

The idea that capitalism or patriarchy explains everything we need to know about exploitation and oppression is rejected. Social relations are more complex than this. Hence, we need a close analysis of how problems are represented to identify places where it may be possible to intervene in order to reduce deleterious effects (p.45).

A social constructionist perspective additionally considers factors of institutional path dependency and ‘sedimentation’ of ways of acting and thinking about particular issues (Geels, 2010; Hajer, 1995; Somerville & Bengtsson, 2002). It therefore enables structural factors to be considered, while still enabling social complexity to be taken seriously (Bacchi, 2009).

Third, and relatedly, by emphasising the relational meaning-making processes of policy knowledge formation (negotiated by local interpretive actors), a social constructionist perspective provides space to consider *contestation* in policy-making. Yanow (2000) describes policy itself as being “multi-vocal – capable of carrying multiple meanings” (p.18). This seems pertinent to urban consolidation policy which has been found to have varying levels of support amongst city shapers (Raynor et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2014), and which several studies have found to be the compromised outcome of diverse interests; for example as an economic growth strategy that maintains property values for existing homeowners (K. Jacobs & Manzi, 2017).

The idea that policy design is ‘multi-vocal’ is a useful perspective from which to consider the *productivity* of policy narratives in maintaining public consensus around normative ‘best practice’. As Yanow (1996) points out:

Given human variety, creations of human activity may be interpreted differently by others. That means there is the possibility of multiple meanings, of varieties of interpretation. There are possibilities of miscommunication and or non-communication, of meanings that are shared and not shared, of meanings once shared that are later dismantled (p.7).

It is argued that examination of greyfield housing interventions with this in mind might yield insight into how the current logic and practice reflects the negotiated interests of multiple stakeholder groups (with access to power). This is because, as Bacchi (2009) explains:

Problematisations necessarily reduce complexity. That is, by positing an issue as a particular sort of issue, a range of factors must be simplified. Only part of the story is being told (p.xii).

Revealing the productive capacity of narratives, then, will illuminate the political dimensions of policy goals and problem and solution narratives that are currently neglected in urban planning and housing research on this topic.

## 4.3 Research questions

Based on the various gaps and issues with current research and practice identified in Chapters 2 and 3; and the choice of a social constructivist philosophical orientation described above, this research sets out to explore the following:

*Do we need to rethink the logic and practice of urban housing intervention in order to realise ‘actually existing’ sustainable and equitable outcomes?*

This will be answered via the following sub-questions:

1. What meanings and narratives inform current and emerging interventions?

2. What are the actual and potential implications of these meanings and narratives for urban housing outcomes? (material and social)
3. What is obscured, ignored, and/or privileged as a result of the way that problems and solutions in urban housing are interpreted?
4. Based on the answers to the above sub-questions, in what ways would the logic and practice of urban housing intervention need to be reconsidered for sustainable and equitable outcomes to be realised in practice?

## 4.4 Research objectives

In contrast to research which tests hypotheses and identifies causal relationships, this thesis proceeds with more exploratory and interpretive aims (Muganga, 2015; Yanow, 2000). Oliver (2012) describes the goals of interpretive research as essentially asking “what is going on here?” (p.409). In line with such an approach, this research primarily aims to build a “thick description” (Geertz, 2003) of ‘what is going on’ in the latest iteration of urban consolidation policy, with a specific focus on greyfields housing redevelopment in the Australian context. This responds to calls for more critical policy research to interrogate the ‘actually existing’ logic and practice of government intervention. Wagenaar (2007) argues:

The focus is almost always on the formation of governance: its categories, its standards of truth and authority, the seeming naturalness of institutions. Relatively little attention is paid to the actual implementation of government programs, to the technologies of the government in action, and to the effects of the mentalities and technologies once they are set to work in the various domains of civil society (p.132).

The aim of this research will therefore be to determine the extent to which the logic and practice of urban housing intervention may need to be *reconsidered*. Importantly, in the context of policy-making, in which policies can be ‘multi-vocal’, interpretive policy analysis can reveal multiplicity, contestation, and/or contradictory assumptions within the dominant policy narratives. In line with Yanow (1996), then, this study will “explicate for a purpose: to clarify for other parties so that they may have a better understanding of how their “authored” meanings are being (mis)understood” (p.54). By examining the policy design (ie, by answering sub-questions 1-3) this research will interrogate public narratives shaping government action (or inaction) and consider the material and social implications of such rationalities.



## 4.5 Research approach

The most common way that interpretive policy researchers access meaning in a policy setting is to focus on language or discourse. For this reason, housing research informed by social constructionism has traditionally been dominated by discourse analysis (K. Jacobs et al., 2004). As Bacchi (2009) highlights, though, policy narratives “exist in the real” (p.33). That is, they shape government intervention and ultimately produce social and material outcomes. Therefore, Lejano (2006) argues that we need to consider policy logic and practice themselves as phenomena. This is because *actions* are said to be the outcome of negotiated meaning (Yanow, 2000). In line with such thinking, this research will go beyond traditional discourse analysis and analyse the logic and practice of urban housing intervention in context as the phenomena or data to be studied. As set out in Chapter 3, this will be achieved using a policy design lens that targets the content of policy narratives and actions.

To build a ‘thick description’ of the logic and practice of urban housing intervention, a reflexive hermeneutic approach was taken which involves examining the various parts in order to gain an understanding of the whole picture (Muganga, 2015; Oliver, 2012; Sarantakos, 1993). In hermeneutic fashion, the ‘data’ was accessed iteratively and required regularly zooming into the detailed parts and zooming back out to progressively build an interpretation of the whole (policy design). Research conducted in this manner does not generate objective research ‘findings’. It is inherently subjective, and the researcher acknowledges that their values, experience, and knowledge will shape the way the context is understood. Therefore, the key to good interpretive research is for the researcher to be upfront and explicit about their role and values, and to reflect on their own position in relation to the research (Oliver, 2012). A brief introduction to the researcher’s own values and background is provided below.

### **Researcher values**

I grew up in the suburbs of outer Melbourne with one of those idyllic childhoods where we played in the cul-de-sac with all the kids in the street, baked mudpies, and roamed freely through an abundance of local parks. The houses being built today (for those on average incomes) just don’t align with my social or environmental values. The backyards and green spaces are gone! The houses are not designed for our climate! Houses are not being built to last!

Like many in my generation, I am struggling to envisage how I can afford to buy a home that I would want to live and raise a family in. While I’m not necessarily resistant to urban consolidation, I am informed by a good childhood living in the low density, quarter-acre-block suburbs. I’m also inclined to believe governments are capable and have a legitimate role in managing and directing inevitable urban growth in environmentally and socially sustainable ways. Therefore, my interest in exploring the role of government in shaping urban housing outcomes is clearly motivated by my material circumstances as well as my values which have been shaped by a middle class suburban upbringing.

## 4.6 Research methodology

Interpretive research generally involves one or more of the following methods: qualitative interviews, document analysis, and observation (K. Jacobs et al., 2004; Yanow, 2007b). This thesis has employed all three in an attempt to get a better understanding of the whole by considering the various parts of the story. The first stage of this project, in line with the hermeneutic approach, involved developing a 'pre-understanding' of the phenomena of interest (Oliver, 2012). This pre-understanding was built during the process of researching and writing the literature review, including through developing a historical account of the problem and solution narratives of urban consolidation policy in Australia over time (presented in Chapter 5). Pre-understanding has also been established through the researcher's immersion and familiarisation with the context of interest. This was established by engaging with housing debates in the media, attending relevant industry and public events, and staying abreast of policy and political changes in the field. The remaining methodological tools employed in this research project are summarised below.

### 4.6.1 WGV: symbolic artefact

To ensure this project was manageable, contextual grounding was required. Focusing generally on the emerging logic and practice of urban housing intervention, even specifically in the Australian context, did not provide the researcher with the rich, contextual detail that was sought. Therefore, the project required a more refined focal or launch point. In light of this, focussing on a particular case of urban housing intervention(s) was deemed a useful approach. For this project, the case study plays only a 'supportive role' for interpretation, enabling access to parts of the bigger story rather than seeking to understand its significance(or judging its effectiveness) in its own right (Butler, 1998).

The case study chosen was the White Gum Valley (WGV) greyfields precinct redevelopment in the Fremantle local government area, located in the wider metropolitan region of Perth in Western Australia. WGV has been billed as “innovation through demonstration” and has been delivered via a unique partnership involving local and state government agencies, various university bodies, as well as a variety of private developers, landscape architects, and consultants. The publicly owned site was formerly home to a primary school and is located in traditional low density suburbia on the edges of the City of Fremantle. The greater Perth planning framework has set a target of 47% infill development compared to suburban fringe expansion by 2030, with each local government expected to be moving substantially in that direction (Department of Planning Lands and Heritage, 2015). WGV is an area which is dominated by large blocks of land and in this context it has been of interest for medium density residential development. There continues to be strong resistance from communities to the infilling of traditional low density suburbs in Australian cities (Nematollahi et al., 2016; Ruming, 2014). Thus, the publically-owned site provided an opportunity for the government and industry to explore (and showcase) how ‘good’ (liveable, sustainable, modestly affordable, diverse) medium density housing could be produced in such a context.

Referred to as a ‘living laboratory’, the WGV precinct has been home to a variety of sustainability-related innovation projects including the:

- Baugruppen project: facilitation of owner-developer model for producing good quality medium density housing at cost price (the search for prospective participants is ongoing).
- Gen Y House: an architectural design competition for medium density housing on a small site suited to the needs of the next generation of home owners. The winner’s design was subsequently built and sold.
- SHAC housing: a partnership between a local artist group and a community housing provider to build ongoing affordable housing and studio space for the creatives that make Fremantle the cultural hub that it is. The community housing organisation own the housing, however the artists manage the properties through a cooperative structure, which is rare in Western Australia.
- Communal solar energy battery storage and metering project.
- Unique sump landscaping to create useable green space while still providing the necessary water management infrastructure.
- One Planet Living: the whole WGV project was certified as a One Planet Living certified development by the sustainability rating organisation Bioregional, which sets out ambitious social and environmental development benchmarks.
- University partnership through the Community Research Centre for Low Carbon Living (CRCLCL) and Curtin University Sustainability Policy Institute (CUSP) which has conducted and evaluated various projects within the precinct development.

WGV is viewed here as an “organizational artefact” or as a “concrete symbol representing policy and organisational values, beliefs and feelings” (Yanow, 1996, p. 9). For the purposes of this study, the logic and practice of the urban housing interventions at WGV are themselves considered phenomena. This approach is supported by Karvonen and Van Heur (2014) who have argued for a more critical analysis of living laboratories as technologies of government. They argue such “constructed spaces of innovation provide a fascinating lens through which to critique and reflect on the future of cities” (pg.389). Similarly, Evans and Karvonen (2011) argue that, “living laboratories exist as truth spots; visible arbiters of truth in their own right that have their own logic” (pp.10-11). It is therefore considered timely to apply a policy design lens to critically assess a ‘living laboratory’ greyfields project which has widely been regarded as an exemplar of sustainable development.

Bacchi (2009) describes a process of working backwards from policy outputs or government intervention to determine what the problem is represented to be. In line with this approach, the researcher gathered various policy documents and media statements to examine the language and stories surrounding the project. As a flagship sustainable infill housing development, there was considerable effort put into the online media, including video clips, brochures, and clear branding. The WGV media was managed by Landcorp, the (former) state government land development agency who led the precinct redevelopment. For example the (still progressing) baugruppen project has a slick online marketing brochure to encourage Perth citizens to buy-in. There was also a lot of media around the Gen Y House architectural design competition as this project was trying to showcase innovative housing design for the next generation of home owners.

It is understood that official media and policy documents can be rhetorical devices. The purpose of analysing the language and appearance of these documents is not necessarily to reveal deceptive or manipulative – ‘real’ or ‘hidden’ meanings – but to explore the various problem and solution narratives *as they are presented*. As Yanow (1996) explains, “policies and political actions are not either symbolic or substantive, they can be both at once” (p.12). Therefore, it is proposed that these official documents reveal the various narratives that shaped the (material) outcomes of the project. For example, the Gen Y House brochure lays out the guidelines for the architectural design competition and the key issues that need consideration. The winning design was eventually built and so the advertising surrounding the project can be seen to have shaped the entries received and the material outcomes that eventuated on the site. In hermeneutic fashion, then, the policy documents and media surrounding WGV offer one component in a bigger picture, and offer one lens through which to interpret or access the phenomena of interest.



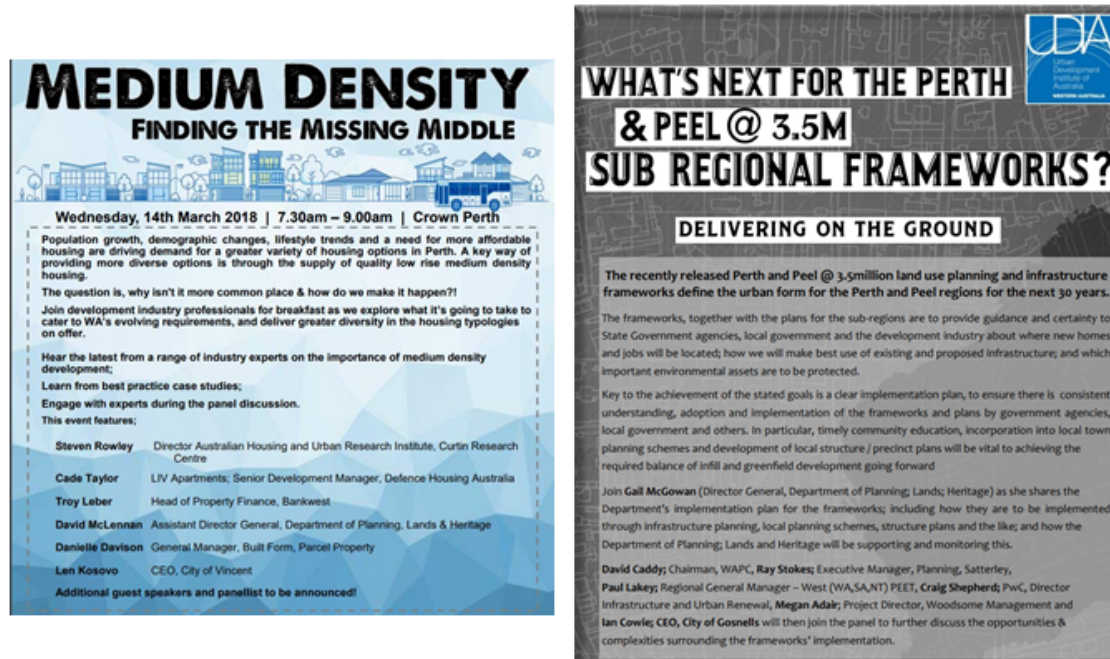
**Figure 4.1: Examples of government media sources**

## 4.6.2 Observation

The second strategy for accessing the logic and practice of urban housing intervention involved observing a small number of events and meetings in which the *interaction* of meanings was evident. The following events were attended and journaled:

- **2 x stakeholder meetings** regarding the baugruppen housing project. These meetings involved a range of government and non-government representatives, including stakeholders from the banking and legal sector. Their objective was to explore some of the barriers arising with the model (ie. with tenure, legal ownership, lending arrangements) and ways to overcome them to enable a test project. The researcher was invited to these meetings as an observer. The meetings were held on 16/08/16 and 23/08/2016.
- **WGV learnings workshop.** I assisted with the set up and facilitation of a stakeholder workshop. A PhD candidate from Curtin University provided an overview of the history and journey of the development and the participants workshopped ideas regarding what could be learned from this journey, with a view to replicate the sustainable precinct development elsewhere (in Perth) in the future. This workshop was held on 27/03/2018.

- **3 x industry events.** I attended three industry breakfast events run by the UDIA. These events were held at the convention centre in the grand ballroom, attracting a large crowd involving a mix of actors from the public and private sector. Due to the corporate nature of these events, they are generally attended by people in high profile and influential positions.
  - *Breakfast 1:* **Densifying the suburbs** 1/9/16.
  - *Breakfast 2:* **Medium density: finding the missing middle** 14/3/18.
  - *Breakfast 3:* **What's next for the Perth and Peel @ 3.5M frameworks?** Delivering on the ground 25/7/18.



**Figure 4.2: Industry breakfast flyers**

The approach taken in observing these various events responds to the call to move beyond discourse analysis in housing policy research towards methodologies that enable access to meaning-making interactions *in situ*. As Kemeny (2004) argues, while text analysis is important, it should be:

...understood as complementary to both direct and participant observation of interactional situations in which researchers take the actors definitions and observe how social problems are defined by various interest groups (Kemeny, 2004, p. 64).

In particular, observing the baugruppen stakeholder meetings and the WGV learning workshop provided an insight into the (sometimes contested) motivations shaping the precinct redevelopment and the common language and problem definitions that were drawn on in discussion. While these events were not highly confidential, they did represent closed door discussions about how to make the baugruppen model work and how to replicate the WGV precinct outcomes more generally.

The industry breakfasts on the other hand were more staged and “performative” (Hajer, 2005). They consisted of various presentations on the topic of the day, followed by a panel discussion featuring senior (generally well-known and connected) planning and development stakeholders in Perth. These events provided an opportunity to observe the collective meanings and language which were being drawn on to appeal to the diversity of private/ public stakeholders. In some ways, the observed responses *to* the official presentation amongst the crowd proved just as interesting as the way the problem and solution narratives were presented on stage.

### 4.6.3 Interviews

Interviews with stakeholders were undertaken to draw out additional useful insights into how some of the key narratives surrounding urban consolidation policy are understood first-hand. A relatively small number of qualitative interviews were conducted with senior stakeholder across various government and non-government agencies in Perth. Again, the purpose of the interviews was to understand collective meanings and policy problem and solution narratives *as they are understood by actors in the field* (Yanow, 1996). As Campbell et al.(2013) explain:

Planning is a largely pragmatic field where theoretical meaning is constructed through community engagement and professional practice, and definitions are inscribed in zoning codes, policies, plans and land use law (p.78).

In their study, Campbell, Tait and Watkins (2014) sought to understand the manifestation of understandings by “examining how these terms are used in public, government, in markets and in the daily practices of planners” (p.78). Similarly, this research sought out the mundane (the common stories and narratives) as key to the bigger story.

The choice of interview subjects reflected “theoretical sampling” (Oliver, 2012) and was purposive in nature. Individuals were sampled systematically to gain a range of ‘policy actor’ perspectives on urban consolidation interventions in Western Australia. Thus, senior stakeholders were contacted from across the relevant agencies involved in this policy area. Specific stakeholders were also pursued who had been involved in the WGV precinct development, or who were at the forefront of new interventions attempting to improve urban housing outcomes, such as the key actors involved in the formulation of the recent apartment guidelines (formally gazetted in May 2019). In this way, the researcher gained access to different ‘cuts’ of reality (Yiftachel, 2016) amongst key policy actors.

In the spirit of interpretive and hermeneutic analysis, the interviews were conducted in two stages (Yanow, 1996). Following on from the initial pre-understanding phase, an initial round of interviews were conducted. After reflecting on these interviews, as well as developments occurring in the urban housing policy sub-system, the researcher returned to the field to purposefully interview subjects that might shed light on ideas of interest, or from perspectives that the researcher deemed to be missing (eg. another local government voice from a region experiencing high levels of infill subdivision development). Therefore, the second stage of interviews provided a valuable opportunity to home in on ideas, questions, and narratives that were emerging.

A total of 12 interviews were conducted, involving 14 individuals (see Table 4.2 for overview of participants), and were approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00262, approval number: HURGS-19-14). While the number of interview participants is relatively small, the research does not rely on these responses to make generalisations, or to prove/ disprove a hypothesis. Instead, the interviews add another layer of interpretive data through which the bigger picture can be accessed. The interviews ‘resembled common conversation’ (Yanow, 2007b, p. 410), and lasted between 30 – 90 minutes. The researcher prompted the conversation towards various ideas of interest (such as the perceived role (appropriate or legitimate) of ‘x’ agency and government broadly in urban consolidation housing outcomes including: affordability, diversity, sustainability, innovation). In hermeneutic fashion, the interviewer sought to double back and follow up on ideas throughout the interview to clarify or confirm the actors own interpretation.

Interviews were held in a variety of locations, sometimes in participant offices, and other times in cafes. The participants were given the freedom to determine the location of the interview, although the interviews in offices were in some way optimal because the participant was embedded in their regular environment and appeared to be speaking along the ‘party line’. This party line, or *public* meaning, was a key point of interest and so this was a benefit of formal interview locations. At the same time, the more informal café location for some of the interviews provided some ‘off the cuff’ remarks that were also insightful in their own way.



**Table 4.2: Interview participants**




<b>Stage 1 (2016)</b>
Planner – local government #1
Senior development manager – state government #1 <i>(co-interviewed with senior development manager – state government #2 and #3)</i>
Senior development manager – state government #2
Senior development manager – state government # 3
Planner - local government #2
Member – state government planning commission
Planner – state government #3 <i>(co-interviewed with planner – state government #4)</i>
Planner – state government #4
Senior development manager – state government #4
Senior development manager – state government #5
Developer
<b>Stage 2 (2017/18)</b>
Senior development manager – state government #1 (re-interviewed)
Planning consultant
Director of Planning - local government
Mayor – local government

Interviews were all recorded using a recording app on the researchers own Apple iPhone, with a small plug-in microphone for improved sound quality. The interviews were transcribed by a third party online. The quality of these transcriptions was not 100%, however, the review and edit of the transcripts provided an opportunity to consider the themes and ideas emerging and still enabled the interviewer to be deeply immersed in the research content. The decision to record the interviews enabled the researcher to focus on listening to the participant and respond organically to their conversation without being impeded by excessive note-taking (Yanow, 2000). Extensive notes were taken immediately after the interviews in order to capture as much of the content (and vibe/ setting) as possible, however, the audio transcripts provided the opportunity to double back on the researchers own interpretations of the interviews. In some cases, the process of re-reading highlighted where the researcher had heard something that confirmed her biases, only to look back later and realise that this is not what the participant had been trying to convey.

## 4.7 Analysis

As is common in interpretive research, the analysis phase of this research project was not a distinct phase following the collection of data (Yanow, 2007a). Instead, the accessing and analysis of phenomena occurred in an iterative fashion, moving back and forth between researcher interpretation and the field. As Yanow (1996) explains, “in making meaning out of events observed and recorded, we bring into consideration whatever elements are at hand. For us to observe them, they must have what Vickers (1968) called “a foothold in the mind”” (p.43). With the interview transcripts, the relevant WGV media, the observation notes, and the actions of government in mind, the analysis involved attending to meaning and policy knowledge as they appear in context.

In terms of process, the researcher reviewed and reflected upon the various data sources carefully reading and re-reading the components until some initial themes or patterns became evident. In analysing the data, the researcher was particularly interested in the following:

-  Meanings (identified in naming, selecting, categorising, story-telling, metaphor)
-  Housing outcomes differing from stated intent
-  Contestation/ multi-meanings/ talking past one another (stories being held together but not actually coherent)

With initial themes emerging, the researcher moved iteratively between the ‘pre-understanding’ established via secondary literature and the information in front of her.

The insights gained from the empirical sources was organised and presented as ‘vignettes’. Vignettes consist of short stories or cases that illuminate particular ideas or themes. They have most commonly been considered a data *collection* tool, particularly in the health sciences, where interviewees are asked to reflect on or respond to hypothetical scenarios (Hughes & Huby, 2004; Jenkins, Bloor, Fischer, Berney, & Neale, 2010). Others though, have argued that vignettes can be a useful strategy for *organising* and presenting research findings (Langer, 2016; Reay, Zafar, Monteiro, & Glaser, 2019). Organising empirical data in this way provides a mechanism for including rich and nuanced details about several cases, while also allowing for common themes to emerge across them. The choice to use ‘vignettes’ rather than ‘case studies’ for analysing and presenting empirical stories has therefore been a deliberate one. Where the specifics of case studies are often analysed in rich detail with the goal of making comparisons and generalisations, vignettes are representative of parts of a bigger story. This approach is considered useful for presenting the various ideas and practice at WGV in depth, while also being able to zoom out and gain new insights about the broader system or narrative. As Langer (2016) points out, the process of ‘writing up’ the vignettes was generative, and was *part* of the analytical process, rather than being the mere recording of a pre-conducted analysis.

## 4.8 Limitations

The following section outlines some acknowledged limitations of this research, particularly in terms of its scope.

### 4.8.1 Generalisability

The highly contextualised, empirically-grounded approach taken in this thesis means the findings are not readily generalisable. One obvious limitation of the research then, is that its findings are very specific to the immediate context and do not translate easily to others. On the other hand, the narratives that inform urban consolidation policies do have parallels with other places, especially other Australian cities. In addition, the project aims to say something about the potential for reframing policy meanings and collective knowledge and in doing so will build on existing theoretical conceptualisations of this potentiality from an empirically grounded basis (Somerville & Bengtsson, 2002).

## 4.8.2 Breadth over depth

This research has focused quite broadly on the logic and practice of current urban housing interventions in relation to greyfields redevelopment. While a deep exploration of one particular WGV project or policy instrument could have illuminated a deeper understanding of the agency of actors and the specific institutional factors constraining their choices, the researcher has deliberately not done this. To avoid delving into the specificities at the expense of the macro and meso levels of abstraction, a more general exploration of the policy mix has been preferred. In that sense, the key limitation of this project is that some of the innovations and ideas explored in this thesis could have warranted an entire project of their own (for example, the role of policy entrepreneurs or lobbyists in sustainable housing governance partnerships). Despite this limitation, the greater breadth of the project allows for a broader examination of the stories and meanings that shape current government action and inaction in urban housing outcomes.

## 4.8.3 Proximity to policy decisions

The researcher has attempted to get close to the policy-making context of innovative urban housing governance in Perth. The information on which this project rests, however, is essentially made up of secondary accounts of meanings and stories, or on public statements. A limitation to this project then, is that it has not been privy to closed door discussion or been at the table for actual decision-making regarding government intervention. The implication is that the researcher has predominantly heard the public, perhaps sterile, versions of what motivates action, and has not been privy to the frank discussions that might reveal ulterior or additional priorities driving intervention. It is argued, however, that the *public* problem and solution narratives – even if they are merely rhetorical devices – are interesting in the way that they bridge diverse interests. In this way, they still tell us something about the particular policy pathways taken by governments.

## 4.9 Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined the philosophical and methodological approach taken in this research project. The research questions were outlined and the empirical data sources have been summarised. The following three chapters provide the core content and findings of this thesis. The first set of ‘findings’ (chapter 5) presents a ‘long view’ of urban growth management in Australia in which the evolution of urban consolidation problem and solution narratives is examined. The themes that arise in chapter 5 are used to put the current innovations (chapter 6) in their historical context. By doing so, chapter 7 is able to illustrate the way that new models rest on old assumptions and narratives.

# Chapter 5 History

## 5.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter uses secondary literature to trace the logic and practice of urban growth management and housing intervention in Australia throughout modern history. A key objective of this thesis is to examine the narratives underpinning the current Australian urban housing interventions. It is argued that this is difficult without a sound understanding of the evolution of current (common sense) policy knowledge. Conversely, planning policy literature that takes innovative models for granted has the tendency to obscure the historically layered and changing nature of problem narratives in urban housing policy by presenting problems as objectively ‘known’. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to review the evolution of urban consolidation knowledge until now, setting up the following chapter (Chapter 6) which will provide a deeper analysis of current trends and themes in urban housing policy knowledge (based on the case study, interviews and policy/media documents).

## 5.2 Growth management epochs

In the study of policy problematisations, a useful analytical strategy is identifying times and places where there have been important shifts in practice (Bacchi, 2012, p. 2). It is clear from reviewing the secondary literature that there have been particular eras of urban growth management and housing policy in Australia. The following have been identified as being significant for the construction of knowledge informing urban growth management and housing intervention:

1. Early growth management: decentralisation
2. Post-war boom: growth trumps growth management
3. 1970s-1990s: political-economic reconceptualisation of the city and housing
4. 1990s: sustainability-as-density, new urbanisms
5. 2000s: combatting community resistance
6. 2010s: a new ‘urbanology’? (Gleeson, 2012) (to be explored in Chapter 6)

It is important to note, before proceeding, that the devolution of housing and planning policy responsibilities to the states means that there can be no true national or unified ‘history’ of urban consolidation policy. This review has a particular focus on the particularities of the Western Australian planning system as this is the location in which the vignettes (presented in chapter 6) are situated. In saying that, many of the themes presented in this chapter were also evident across the country, especially those related to macroeconomic policy which is the purview of the federal government in Australia.

## 5.3 Settlement: dreams of land

Prior to reviewing the significant periods of urban growth *management*, this section provides some brief, but important, background to urban growth in Australia in the pre-planning era. The town planning movement emerged in Australia in the early 1900s, however, Australia’s urban settlements had experienced almost a century of growth and development by that time. Therefore, a political-economic system had already been established, and land was at its centre. The characteristics of the settler period of urban growth are therefore crucial to understanding the motivations for, and the limitations of, the planning discipline when it did eventually emerge.

### 5.3.1 Settlement goals

Land was the ultimate preoccupation in the early settler period of urbanisation in Australia as the population entered a race to gain squatters rights, and subsequent ownership of agricultural and resource-laden land (Bureau of Infrastructure Transport and Regional Economics (BITRE), 2014). While the earliest settlements were set up as penal colonies that then spread (eg. Sydney, Tasmania, Brisbane), some of Australia’s smallest cities, such as Adelaide, were wholly conceived as a strategy of land investment. For example, the settlement of Perth (the Swan River colony) in 1829 was a middle-class land investment venture from its very origin and conception (Sandercock, 2005; Stannage, 1979). James Stirling was instrumental in making the case for a private settlement on the west coast of Australia and was able to gain government approval for the venture provided that it did not require public capital investment (Cameron, 1981). Instead, the earliest settlers to Perth were granted land ownership in exchange for labour and capital that could be poured into improving the land. This condition meant that those attracted to the venture were men with existing capital, but not the high levels of wealth that would have already enabled a privileged life back in Britain (Cameron, 1981). Therefore, the earliest settlers to the eventual cities of Perth, and Adelaide, were middle-class men trying to obtain land ownership (and wealth) at a scale not possible in their homeland.

Also notable is the strong link that existed from early settlement (in Perth, but also elsewhere) between the government administration and the landed settlers (Cameron, 1981). From the earliest period of Perth's history, land owners were able to ensure their own private interests (and those of their land-owning class) were met through positions of authority and access to government decision making (Stannage, 1979). Demonstrating this preoccupation with land, Stirling's second-in-charge, John Septimus Roe was given the key role as Perth's first Surveyor-General, giving him the power to distribute and spatially define land titles (Cameron, 1981).

### 5.3.2 Settlement patterns

Sandercock (1975) argues that urbanisation occurred early and rapidly in Australia compared with many other parts of the world. The spatial outcomes of this urban growth, however, were more dispersed than concentrated, reflecting both socio-cultural preferences for private, separate dwellings, and the abundance of land 'available' in this new country (A. Davison, 2006; Graeme Davison, 2001; Dodson & Gleeson, 2007). As an early example, in the land grab associated with the settlement of the Swan River Colony, Stirling and Roe allocated themselves vast swathes of land in the Perth region, so much so that the functionality of the region was hindered by the dispersed nature of settlement (Stannage, 1979). Therefore, unlike the more compact European cities which were established prior to this era, Davison (Graeme Davison, 1993) argues that "it is significant that, from the outset, Australia's founders anticipated a sprawl of homes and gardens rather than a clumping of terraces and alleyways" (p.63).

Australia's first housing boom occurred in the mid to late 1800s. Sandercock (1975) captures well the way a land bonanza influenced the dispersed (and uncoordinated) nature of development in the early settler period before the town planning movement emerged:

Between 1860 and 1890 the building industry absorbed about one-third of total Australian investment, reaching a peak in the metropolitan building booms of the 1880s...In each city the building boom went far beyond the housing market and became an urban land boom, with suburban subdivisions and land speculation extending well ahead of building, and housing development racing ahead of the provision of other urban facilities, with the result that 'Australia towns and cities grew primarily as a sprawl of detached cottages with only primitive commercial, industrial and social equipment (p.8).

In this way, while early Australia may have been characterised by 'advanced urbanisation' rampant land speculation and a long economic (and housing) boom had generated dispersed and ad hoc urban growth patterns (Sandercock, 1975). By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this had resulted in the Australian *suburban* landscape being established prior to the city centres being developed (A. Davison, 2006; Frost & Dingle, 1995).

## 5.4 Early growth management

### 5.4.1 The emergence of a town planning movement

The town planning discipline emerged in Britain, at a time when the industrial revolution was reshaping cities across the world, especially in Europe (Hall, 2000). Rapid urbanisation was occurring as increasing numbers of labourers moved to cities, and the mode of production became much more centralised than in the pre-industrial era. The unprecedented rate and scale of urbanisation meant that urban centres were struggling to effectively manage this growth, and cities were dealing with problems of overcrowding, pollution, and disease (Freestone, 1986). In Australia, town planning ideas were largely imported from Britain, and later from the US (Hall, 2000). The movement emerged in a context in which the land boom of the 1800s had come to an end, and where Australian cities, like many modern urban centres around the world, were experiencing a range of issues (Sandercock, 1975).

There were two broad areas of concern that were reflected in town planning conversations at the time. First, and similarly to the British context, urban centres were viewed as unhygienic and increasingly socially (or morally) problematic (Graeme Davison, 2001). This concern focused on the over-crowded, slum-like working class housing in the urban areas, located near industrial labour sites. For this reason, the middle and upper classes had been locating in the ex-urban areas for decades, residing in larger allotments with gardens, reminiscent of English cottage lots (Graeme Davison, 1995).

The second concern focused on urban efficiency. At national town planning conferences held in 1914-1915 across Australia (Adelaide, Brisbane, Sydney), “the overall rhetoric...was of planning as a desirable activity for securing ‘efficiency’ in the national and imperial interest” (Freestone, 2010, p. 16). Ad hoc development, or sprawl, had largely been the result of rampant land speculation and had been reinforced by cultural preferences for both land ownership and ex-urban housing (Sandercock, 1975). This uncoordinated expansion was proving problematic, however, in terms of transportation, and the provision of infrastructure and services (Dodson, 2012).



Reflecting these key concerns, one of the first ideas to gain prominence in this planning movement was Ebenezer Howard's Garden City model (1902). The Garden City model envisaged a primary urban centre surrounded by concentric, subordinate, but predominantly self-sufficient, satellite garden cities (Aalen, 1992). The model embraced the suburban model of the detached house and the garden, and also valued green space (or greenbelts) between each garden city. In this way, it tackled uncoordinated sprawl through its radial city design, and it promoted the middle class ex-urban ideals of green space and social order through suburban housing (Freestone, 1982).

While the garden city did promote a village concept, with key services available within each city's boundaries, it also supported a key concern at the time regarding land use separation (Graeme Davison, 2001). The separation of industrial and residential land zoning was understood as a strategy of keeping the 'city beautiful' and not polluted by dirty employment centres (Aalen, 1992). A commercial suburban development built in the 1920s, advertised as "slumless, smokeless, publess" (Freestone, 1982, p. 27), captures well the middle-class desire to spatially disconnect from the industrial cityscape and its apparent social promiscuity.

## 5.4.2 Australian interpretations

While the original Garden City model contained spatial elements, it was more holistic than that, and also advocated for the self-sufficient garden cities to have communal land ownership, or leasehold arrangements, in which land value accruing would be invested back into the city (Freestone, 1986). Given the characteristics of Australia's 'privatised democracy' (A. Davison, 2006, p. 205), in which land speculation had already developed into a "national hobby" (Sandercock, 1975, p. 77), it is perhaps not surprising that the alternative tenure components of the Garden City ideal were never realised, while some of the spatial elements prevailed.

With the more social aspects of the Garden City model sidelined, the development of garden suburbs was interpreted and subsumed into the existing land development practices. A. Davison (2006) argues that it is "not hard to see why many garden suburb developments were designed to make a quick profit rather than to create (the) socialist utopia" that Howard had advocated (p.205). The original idea of green belts (to act as "lungs" for the city and preserve green space to break up suburban sprawl) was also weakened in the Australian context. Freestone (1986) notes that allocated green spaces and growth boundaries were under constant threat from those who interpreted them, not as environmental land to be protected from development, but as prospective land development opportunities that could be unlocked at a later date. The battle to save previously allocated green wedges and urban growth boundaries continues today, with the spaces being continually chipped away by housing supply pressures (Amati, 2008; Buxton & Goodman, 2008).

The historical work of Freestone (1982, 2010), which has documented the application of the garden city model in Australia, argues, therefore, that the model was never wholly or accurately applied in the Australian context. It did, however, have an important *rhetorical* role in early town planning language, providing “a vague symbol of urban reform” which emphasised particular problematisations of urban development (Freestone, 1982, p. 31). Freestone (1982) argues that “the garden city became the ideal against which the chaos of the Australian city stood condemned” (p.31); and emphasising the *moral* concerns associated with growth patterns at the time, the garden city ideal was used rhetorically “to highlight middle class concern with the crowding and confusion of the Australian city” (p.32). Therefore, the garden city both reflected, and was used rhetorically to support, urban growth problematisations of the time.

### 5.4.3 Urban morphology and the state

The period in which the town planning movement emerged can perhaps be considered the first iteration of urban growth management in Australia. The solutions applied by the government early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century reflect both the established political economy in Australia firmly oriented around private land ownership, as well as the urban problem narratives of the time. Sandercock (1975) has argued that “Australian cities were built by a partnership of public and private enterprise in which the public authorities provided the essential services and private businesses did the rest” (p.11). Town planning from the beginning has therefore been hamstrung by this established facilitative role for government. Freestone (2010) notes the difficulty planning advocates faced when trying to have their ideas acted on by government; and the watered down, commercial adaptation of the garden city model is illustrative of the limitations to the realisation of planning ideals. Therefore, Sandercock (1975) highlights the way that planning has, from its earliest roots, been based on the assumption that “physical arrangements, rather than economic or political change, could bring about the social reform that planners desired” (p.15). Favouring more feasible solutions then, planners have been constrained by an unwillingness to go beyond broad spatial plans and technical tinkering in the management of urban land development in Australia, and have been sidelined from the start as mere facilitators of private growth.

This isn't to suggest that government actions weren't instrumental in shaping urban morphology in Australia. While the early town planning movement was concerned with the issues of urban growth, government responses were largely piecemeal and directed at the micro (lot) scale, rather than at urban coordination (Dodson & Gleeson, 2007; Freestone, 2010). Reflecting concerns at the time, the focus of regulations was on ensuring the minimisation of health and fire risks, which were associated with overcrowding and high housing and population density. Therefore, minimum set-backs and lot sizes were a priority, and building codes sought compliance with health and safety requirements (for example: sanitation, light availability, fresh air).

Despite the micro focus, the early Town Planning Acts (for example: the Town Planning and Development Act 1928 (Perth) and the Town Planning Act 1919 (NSW)) did have broader spatial implications, particularly in two ways. First, the interest in garden cities and in reclaiming the slums led to minimum lot sizes being introduced which had the effect of *locking in* the prevailing low density, detached housing morphology (Sandercock, 1975). Second, the issues associated with the industrial city space meant that urban planners sought to separate land uses, creating residential only zones away from centres of manufacture and retail. These early concerns, then, institutionalised an urban morphology that today's town planning continues to come up against (Dodson & Gleeson, 2007).

Lastly, colonial and subsequent state governments facilitated (privately-led) suburban expansion through the provision of public services (for example: infrastructure, education, health services). Conversely, as the physical density restrictions were implemented, this service provision facilitated further residential suburbanisation (Gleeson & Low, 2000a). Therefore, in the first round of formal planning interventions in Australia, the government solution to the problem of 'uncoordinated' development (sprawl), in contrast to today, was decentralised urban morphology (Dodson & Gleeson, 2007).

## 5.5 The long post-war boom: active growth promotion

### 5.5.1 Post-war priorities

The Keynesian welfare state model was the dominant political paradigm influencing Western democracies in the post-war era (Berry, 1999; R. Forrest & Hirayama, 2015). This set of ideas considered national governments to have a crucial role in protecting social and environmental outcomes by regulating capitalist markets. Government policy reflecting this paradigm had a characteristically social-democratic intervention style, with a strong and comprehensive role for government perceived to be legitimate (Berry, 1999).

The focus of the post-war era was on economic reconstruction. Various ingredients were deemed necessary for such restructuring, including population growth, political stability, and stimulated economic activity (Dufty-Jones, 2018). Reflecting Keynesian thinking, government provision of safe and affordable housing was increasingly positioned as a strategy for achieving all three of these goals (Dalton, 2009). For example, fertility was thought to be promoted by family units having safe and affordable housing (Berry, 1999). Equitable access to decent housing was viewed as a stabiliser of democracy, limiting political discontent (R. Forrest & Hirayama, 2015). The need for ‘good quality’ housing was also a focus, as (inner city) housing stock had deteriorated after a period of wartime neglect (Berry, 1999). A persisting moral problematisation of run down inner city working class housing as ‘slums’ was also evident in the focus on urban renewal. Dufty-Jones (2018) has highlighted the physical-deterministic interpretation of housing during this time which viewed social issues as having environmental causes that could be remedied via housing’s material provision.

### 5.5.2 The housing project

A housing construction boom was driven and enabled by strong economic growth in the post-war era (Beer, 1993; Berry, 1999). While this growth made a housing construction boom possible, the Commonwealth government also viewed housing as a key *generator* of sustained economic activity in this period. The way that access to housing was facilitated by government during this time was explicitly “tenure-based” (Yates, 1997, p. 266). Efforts were aimed simultaneously at the financing of private home ownership, and the construction of public housing. In contrast, private rental as a tenure form received little policy attention or investment during this period (Beer, 1993).

The privileging of home ownership (and more specifically owner-occupation) is evident in the “new governance and finance arrangements” that were created to support it (Dodson & Gleeson, 2007, np). For instance, state banks were created to provide mortgages to the expanding middle classes and the federal tax regime facilitated and favoured homeownership as asset-based welfare; the 1960’s Home Savings Grant Scheme provided financial incentive for young people to buy or build their own home (Yates, 1997); and between 1945 and 1956, the Commonwealth government’s War Service Homes Division provided returning servicemen with housing loans, which accounted for 10% of new dwelling completions. It has been estimated that up to 30% of housing finance was directly provided by the Commonwealth at this time (Beer, 1993, p. 153).

In terms of housing construction, the state created housing departments to develop land and build houses, supply and manufacture building materials, and train a construction workforce. The scale of investment in social housing was unprecedented, however this too was directed at housing renewal (through construction), and oriented at eventual home ownership. For example, Commonwealth State Housing Agreements funded the construction of public housing which was then sold to eligible citizens at highly discounted rates with generous loan conditions. In these ways, the Commonwealth government sought to generate economic activity via mass construction of both public housing as well as housing for the middle classes. As Berry has described (1999):

Housing production was therefore cast as one element of a broad program of post-War reconstruction in which the new Keynesian economic policy tools were to be directed towards managing the *aggregate level of economic activity in the economy as a whole* (p.109, emphasis added).

In this way, urban growth was intimately tied to macroeconomic growth priorities during this period in a marriage of convenience that has persisted to this day (K. Jacobs & Manzi, 2017; Yates, 2001).

### 5.5.3 Implications of policy success

The federal government was a key player in supporting the emergence of housing construction and mortgage finance industries and the form in which they took. While there have been revolutionary changes to these industries, particularly in a modern world of globalised capital and neoliberal governance, Berry (1999) describes the way that the mass urban development of the post-war boom effectively locked in particular ways of doing things, representing an institutional path dependency that continues to influence housing outcomes today. He says:

As the links between suburban location, home ownership and fully detached housing strengthened, the risk management imperatives of land developers, house builders and financiers effectively excluded or, at least, marginalized alternative solutions (Berry, 1999, p. 110).

The mass construction of middle class homes, in this case, generated corporate and economic momentum around the delivery of low density, largely homogenous housing stock.

Lastly, the success of the housing project set up an industry and a cultural expectation that the modes of housing provision set up at this time could continue. By the peak in 1966, 71% of Australian households owned or were on their way to owning their own home (Beer, 1993). The mortgage-based Australian (suburban) dream was therefore established during the post-war era, becoming a realisable goal for the middle class (Sandercock, 1975). The way that relatively affordable housing was delivered, though, was by constructing new housing on the cheap land on the urban fringe. In other words, the pursuit of middle class home ownership can be seen to have manifested in the spread of the metropolitan area (Dodson, 2012). This highlights most clearly the constant tension in planning, not just between growth and housing affordability, but between growth *management* and affordability. Once the post-war housing boom reached its peak there were direct implications on housing affordability and access to the Australian suburban dream that had been established in this era.

## 5.5.4 Planning vs growth

A consensus around the importance of town planning was actually forged in the post-war reconstruction context (Freestone, 2010, p. 20). In Australia's three tiered system of government, the state level was established as the appropriate scale for planning institutions, with all states formalising state-based planning at this time. This eventuation enabled the introduction of metropolitan regional planning. Blueprint master planning reflected the strong legitimate role of government at the time. They were pragmatic and technical in style, and attempted to spatially direct urban population growth (MacCallum & Hopkins, 2011).

Urban growth management was understood to be important, however, planning solutions continued to be oriented around *decentralisation* (Dodson, 2012). The decentralisation of employment centres was a strong focus, and in a bid to address the increasingly dispersed urban morphology, the government directed infrastructure investment into the suburban landscape, creating big box retail and streamlined transport via freeways (Graeme Davison, 1993). In other words, planning solutions were oriented at the *improvement* of suburbia, and this increasingly occurred via accommodation of the automobile on which the population was increasingly dependent. The decentralisation of infrastructure delivery and employment, then, further embedded and enabled the low density morphology of Australia's metropolitan regions (A. Davison, 2006).

While planners in this era were able to intervene positively to improve the urban landscape and its functioning, they had virtually no impact on limiting or containing urban growth. The fact that planning had been institutionalised at the state level, and the housing project (with its macroeconomic growth objectives) was being driven at the level of the Commonwealth suggests that planning was severely constrained, and largely adopted a "pro-expansionist stance" itself (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2002, p. 305). As Beer (1993) describes:

Despite the advocacy of controlled urban development...most suburban growth took the form of barely-differentiated sprawl. A green Belt had been proposed for Sydney in the late 1940s but this proved to have virtually no effect. *Other pressures were too strong*, especially population growth and the commercial profitability of residential development (emphasis added, p.117).

In simple terms, it appears that during the post-war era, the pursuit of urban growth (based on reconstruction priorities and assumptions) trumped growth management in overall government focus and effort. In this context, while masterplans were created for the urban regions, the state planning institutions were operating in a sea of growth imperatives. These growth imperatives had actual spatial and urban growth management outcomes that persist today. Low density suburbia was locked in via its (government-funded) improvement and through accommodation of the automobile; a construction and finance industry of affordable middle class housing provision was established on the metropolitan fringes; and the proliferation of development generally led to a massive expansion of all metropolitan areas during this time.

## 5.6 The 70s- 90's: urban reinterpretations

### 5.6.1 Consequences

By the 1980s there was a growing recognition of a range of issues arising from the success of the home ownership project and the dispersed urban landscape it was generating (Frost & Dingle, 1995). The cost of infrastructure delivery was rising, with greenfield land developers leaving the government to foot the bill to service the ever-expanding suburban fringe. The rate of land consumption started to be seen as problematic in an environmental sense; and the spread of the suburban fringe housing contrasted the declining demand (and tax base) in the established inner areas (Caulfield, 1991; Dodson & Gleeson, 2007). Lastly, the oil crisis of the 1970s had shaken confidence in resilience of the automobile-dependent city (Newman & Kenworthy, 1989).

## 5.6.2 Global trends: urban repositioning

While urban planners respond in many ways to issues occurring on the ground, it is important to understand the global political-economic context in which these issues were understood. Cities were repositioned politically and economically during the 1980s. Where urban governance had once been a largely domestic affair, globalisation and the proliferation of neoliberal political ideology meant that urban governance was increasingly being considered from the perspective of global capital markets (Sandercock, 2005). In this context, cities became key sites for global consumption and investment, and were attempting to be competitive in international markets (F. Robinson & Shaw, 1994). To illustrate, in the late 1980s, a national tendering process saw South Australia almost develop a ‘multi-function polis’ site in inner Adelaide in partnership with the Japanese. This site was to provide a special economic zone that would attract international capital and flow of visitors with modern facilities for consumption and recreation (Haughton, 1994). The project ultimately fell over after much controversy; however, its pursuit represented a trend towards the internationalisation of capital on patterns of urban development, and a general acknowledgement by federal and state governments that cities represented sites of major economic growth potential (Parker, 1998).

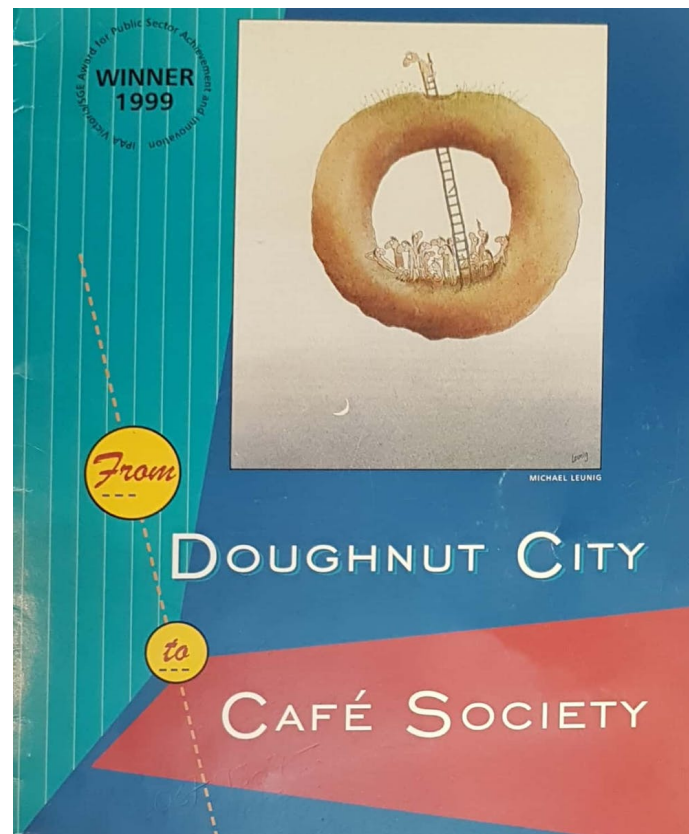
Politically, the rise of neoliberal ideas was influencing a push for deregulation, privatisation, and open markets; and governments around the world were creating greater opportunities for the private sector to move into roles previously considered the state’s domain. It has been argued that neoliberalism “established itself as the successor to the (modernist) ‘planning’ of the post-war period” (Gleeson & Low, 2000a, section 2.4). In this context, urban problems were increasingly understood as inefficiencies. In a retreat from the post-war-style role of government in provision, dispersed metropolitan regions were viewed as unduly expensive per capita to service and as functionally inefficient for the mobility of labour and capital throughout the city. Reflecting this shift in urban problem interpretation, the solutions switched to *recentralisation* in direct contrast to the decentralised solutions of the previous eras (Dodson, 2012). State governments progressively adopted urban consolidation as a key goal and it was formalised across the various metropolitan strategic plans. For example, the Western Australian state government adopted an explicit consolidation strategy for Perth in 1987 (MacCallum & Hopkins, 2011).



### 5.6.3 Tackling the doughnut city

The real focus of government effort during this time, though, was on the inner city regions of Australian capitals, and their 'revitalisation' (Forster, 2006). The perceived need for inner city renewal was not new in this era, however its problematisation shifted substantially. Where the inner city 'slums' had previously been problematised as a moral-political issue requiring attention for democratic and social stability, in the 1980s the decline of inner city housing was reinterpreted as indicative of a lack of private capital investment and consumption (A. Davison, 2006). This problematisation is evident in the idea of the 'doughnut city' that became popular amongst Australian planners in the 1980s (P. Martin, 2000). The 'doughnut city' is a metaphor which was applied originally to the US context (Harrison, 1973), and which depicts a declining urban centre surrounded by suburban vitality (Dodson & Gleeson, 2007). Figure 5.1 is a 1998 Victorian Department of Infrastructure report that promoted the activation of the urban core (Department of Infrastructure, 1998). The title provides an explicit articulation of policy problem (a 'doughnut' city), with the proposed solution (the café society) pointing to the way in which the doughnut city is deemed problematic (there is a dearth of opportunities for recreational consumption).

Solutions to this problem of decline therefore included: revitalisation of public urban space; regenerating the declining inner city housing stock by facilitating private apartment development; and increasing resident numbers in what had developed as business districts but were now ghost towns outside of traditional working hours (P. Martin, 2000). This indicates that the early planning problematisation of mixed land use as socially dysfunctional was starting to be reinterpreted as a solution for generating (economically) 'vibrant', activated urban areas (Collie, 2018). Thus there was an emerging government-led promotion of cosmopolitan lifestyles as good for society which could be achieved via urban recentralisation and mixed land use.



**Figure 5.1: From Doughnut City to Cafe Society** (Department of Infrastructure, 1998)

#### 5.6.4 Federal energy

This push for inner city renewal was not just a preoccupation of the state planning institutions. The *Building Better Cities* program in Australia (1991-1996), for instance, represented an unprecedented intervention into urban development from federal government. It provided funding and support for the revival of inner suburbia and the redevelopment of old industrial (brownfields) sites (Badcock, 1993). Robinson and Shaw (1994) describe the parallel trend in Britain:

In the 1980s the Big Idea in urban policy was undoubtedly private sector-led property development... The assumption was that such physical regeneration would stimulate wider economic and social benefits: the operation of "trickle down" would ensure that the rising economic tide would "lift all boats" (p.225).

The repositioning of cities therefore had implications for the interpretation of housing from a federal (macroeconomic) perspective. While the promotion of home ownership from a social-democratic perspective and the public ownership or regulation of housing finance had made sense (for economic activity generation) in the post-war period, in response to the wider trend of globalisation and internationalisation, the Hawke-Keating federal government set about opening Australia's economy to global capital flows.

Beer (1993) has argued that “the removal in the 1980s of many of the regulations and practices that gave housing its special status eroded the special position of home ownership within society” (p.154). While the importance of home *ownership* may have been downgraded during this time, it is argued that this is more reflective of a change in *how* housing was viewed as economically special; while it had previously been used to stimulate domestic economic activity, its importance shifts during this time towards its more exchange-oriented investment potential (R. Forrest & Hirayama, 2015). In this way, the political-economic restructuring of housing policy and urban development continued to promote economic growth, but it no longer did so through direct provision (Berry, 1999). The argument here is that urban growth management narratives, such as those seen in the doughnut city problematisation, were strongly implicated in the overall restructuring of housing policy that occurred during this time.

### 5.6.5 Urban growth management implications

Reflecting the key priorities of this era which were focused primarily on the inner urban areas, it is not surprising that the initial urban consolidation strategies “generally aimed to rationalise, rather than prevent or slow, the processes of suburbanisation” (Gleeson & Low, 2000a, section 2.3). While urban consolidation was formally adopted as a policy objective and strategy in the 1980s it was calibrated largely as a correction to the existing patterns (in the name of efficiency and balance), rather than as a full reformulation.

There was indeed government intervention during this time though. As was similar in the post-war period, the *actions* of both state and federal government were strongly aligned with the macroeconomic priorities and wisdom of the time. That meant government facilitation of private investment into Australian cities, through land remediation, rezoning, and direct investment into (inner city) infrastructure and ‘place-making’. As Robinson and Shaw (1994) describe: “these days...the partnership card must be played hard and played early” (p.224). This reliance on government partnership with the private sector to deliver urban goals has since become conventional wisdom in contemporary ‘regeneration’ or housing infill debates, but as is demonstrated here, it was not always so.

The key implications of the reinterpretation of problems and solutions at this time revolve around housing affordability and equality. Government intervention that primed previously degraded land for private development enabled capital to flow into the inner urban areas through housing investment. This influx of capital into previously run down areas led to an overall jump in real estate prices in the inner urban areas, and indeed, was a key objective and measure of success. The revitalisation of urban areas (which continues to this day), has been described as a gentrification strategy, with significant implications for housing affordability (Shaw, 2013). These implications are largely obscured by the narratives of policy success that revolve around the creation of now vibrant, cosmopolitan urban areas.

## 5.7 The 90's: new urbanisms

### 5.7.1 Global problems, solutions

Global warming was emerging as a key concern in the 1980s/90s. There was a growing recognition that this was being caused by humans (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 1990), and that the industrial revolution had led to major environmental problems that were worsening (Newman & Kenworthy, 1999). In response, multi-national agencies and political leaders were engaged in conversations deciding how to proceed. It was in this context that the *Our Common Future* report was created by the UN Brundtland Commission, introducing “sustainable development” as a framework to guide urbanisation (outlined in Chapter 2). In its firm orientation around *efficiency*, a sustainable development framework legitimises the continued pursuit of growth objectives, albeit with a shift in process. In other words, while the means of producing growth are improved, the goals do not require the same consideration. In this context, urban planning knowledge settled around *particular* ideas of environmental unsustainability, concentrating on the “links between urban consolidation and resource depletion, air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions” (Hillier, Yiftachel, & Betham, 1991, p. 79). Urban consolidation, from this perspective, was increasingly viewed as the most efficient urban form that would enable further development, while minimising these particular environmental issues.

As was outlined in Chapter 2, the framework of sustainable development is premised on the assumption of combined economic, environmental and social wins, dubbed the ‘triple bottom line’. Urban growth plans were, during the 1990s increasingly articulated in these terms. The Western Australian government’s Metroplan (1990) for Perth explicitly described the ‘triple bottom line’ wins that would be addressed through its growth management strategy (MacCallum & Hopkins, 2011). Reflecting the ongoing influence of neoliberalism, the assumption of triple wins meant that the government could merely *facilitate* ‘good’ intensified development to achieve urban consolidation goals, which would ultimately be delivered by the private sector. The overall imperative of ongoing growth, though, was key. MacCallum & Hopkins (2011) highlight the “remarkable degree” of consensus that was evident in the 1991 Perth Metroplan that economic (through urban) growth must continue (p.499). Therefore, while triple wins were assumed by the language of compact and sustainable development, the need for ongoing economic growth primarily underlined these objectives.

## 5.7.2 New Urbanisms

In this context of heightened (actual and rhetorical) environmental concerns, a range of urban planning ideas gained prominence. As Breheny (1992) has explained, urban academics emerging in this era of heightened environmental awareness sought to make a relevant contribution. One of the key models for ‘good’ urban development that arose in this context was ‘The New Urbanism’ (NU). A largely design-based movement, NU primarily focused on the connection between transport modes and land use planning. Advocating a neo-traditional style of development, it promoted walkable ‘urban villages’ through grid-like, interconnected streets; mixed and integrated land use; and localised services (especially retail). In a bid to achieve walkability, housing density was deemed a necessary factor for NU success, albeit in clustered villages or around transport nodes (Brain, 2005).

NU was explicitly linked to the quest for urban sustainability. Newman & Kenworthy’s (1989) *Cities and automobile use: an international sourcebook* made the case for NU-style development by arguing that low density cities were generating automobile dominance which produces a range of environmental issues, especially pollution, problematic carbon emissions, and excessive land consumption. The connection to sustainability led to a range of ‘new urbanisms’ with broadly similar ideas to the New Urbanism, including the ‘compact city’, ‘sustainable cities’, and in the US, ‘smart growth’. Reflecting the global sustainable development conversations of the time, the assumption of mutually achievable economic and environmental (and social) gains is evident in all of these narratives. Newman and Kenworthy (1996) frame the need for the compact city by equating automobile dependence with a range of environmental, economic, and social *problems* (Figure 5.2).

<b>Environmental</b>	<b>Economic</b>	<b>Social</b>
Oil vulnerability	External costs from accidents, pollution, health impacts . . .	Loss of street life
Photochemical smog	Congestion costs, despite endless road building	Loss of community
Lead, benzene . . .	High infrastructure costs in new sprawling suburbs	Loss of public safety
High greenhouse gas contributions	Loss of productive rural land	Isolation in remote suburbs
Urban sprawl	Loss of urban land to bitumen	Access problems for the carless and those with disabilities
Greater stormwater problems from extra hard surface	Loss of time due to sprawl, increasing distances	
Traffic problems – noise, severance		

**Figure 5.2: Problems of automobile dependence** (Newman & Kenworthy, 1996, p. 6).

### 5.7.3 A growing orthodoxy

The triple win assumptions of the new urbanisms reflected the political trends at the time; however, they can also be seen to have cemented existing urban consolidation policy goals as normatively ‘good’. Where urban consolidation policy previously seemed to be considered amongst more functional (for example: infrastructure costs) or economic concerns (for example: inner city renewal), the language change here to the normative “compact city” and “smart growth” indicates a shift in thinking that presents consolidated urban form as *optimal*; as a common sense policy goal that ticks all the boxes (Thomas & Cousins, 1996). In other words, the compact city as representative of ‘good’ urban form became planning ‘orthodoxy’ during this time (Randolph, 2006).

This appears to have had something to do with elevation of the *social* dimension of compact form during this time by academics and increasingly articulated by planners. While the problematisation of the doughnut city had already promoted urban cosmopolitanism in the pursuit of inner city housing revitalisation, the ‘liveability’ assumptions of compact urban form came to be more broadly applied across the residential urban landscape. Therefore, there was an increasing focus on housing urban populations via intensification of the existing metropolitan region (albeit at transport nodes/ corridors but with a wider spatial application than the CBD renewal phase). This was enabled by the increasingly negative social connotations associated with low density suburbia (sprawl) including: a lack of community; poor health outcomes; and a lack of vibrant street life (A. Davison, 2006).

In being directly oppositional to sprawl, the new urbanisms created a dichotomy of good versus bad urban form, with density as the core matter for consideration. Much like the early town planning interventions, which assumed that the social issues of the inner city could be solved by decreasing housing densities, the new orthodoxy assumed that a range of social issues could be influenced by *increasing* housing densities across the city (Dodson & Gleeson, 2007). The design-focused new urbanisms therefore focused on physical solutions to environmentally-determined problems, assuming that urban functionality and vibrancy can be achieved by applying optimal design fixes (Gunder, 2011). It has been argued that the dichotomy of sprawl versus the compact city places too much emphasis on urban form to the neglect of urban *processes* (Bruegmann, 2005; Neuman, 2005). In doing so, the socially constructed problematisation of sprawl and the inherently political goals of urban consolidation are unquestioned in favour of the pursuit of apparently straightforward technical and design solutions.

Another connotation of the idea of sprawl is that it indicates ad-hocery in the morphology of the city (Gillham, 2002). In the US, in which New Urbanism emerged, sprawl was understood as largely uncontrolled housing development occurring indifferently to government direction and which was inadequately serviced by infrastructure (Bruegmann, 2005). This conceptualisation of sprawl resonates with early 20th century planning concerns in Australia which revolved around coordinating and containing the urban development that was occurring as a consequence of rampant land speculation. The notion of sprawl as ad hoc in the Australian context, however, is somewhat disingenuous considering the clear role governments at all levels have had in shaping that system over a long time period (Dodson & Gleeson, 2007).

#### 5.7.4 The neoliberal (compact) city

The logic and practice of urban housing intervention at this time reflected the political-economic context in which neoliberal ideology was taking hold. While some scholars have viewed the new urbanisms as *constitutive* of neoliberal rationalities (Kenny & Zimmerman, 2004; N. Smith, 2002), others have argued that the compact city ideals that became orthodox at this time are reflective of real contestation and tension between environmentalism and neoliberalism (Gleeson & Low, 2000a; Sager, 2015). Gleeson and Low (2000a) do note, however, that while “each side has attempted to enlist the ideals of the other”...“this strategy has been most effectively employed by neo-liberals (section 5.2). The influence of neoliberal ideas can be illustrated by two key components of compact city policy, the goals of land use integration and housing diversity, which continue to persist to this day.

First, the new urbanisms emphasised the importance of co-locating higher density housing and public transport in a bid to reduce automobile dependence. In the political-economic context, though, state governments sought to achieve this outcome via partnership with the private sector. The role of planning in this scenario is in “steering not rowing” (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992) and focused on *facilitating* higher density housing through land rezoning and remediation. For example, Perth’s 1990 Metroplan explicitly endorsed a general framework for growth which articulated where higher density housing should be *spatially* realised, but did not envisage a further role for government in the material provision of that housing other than facilitation of private development. This meant that the material and spatial housing outcomes were largely dictated by developers.

One of the primary espoused benefits of the compact city model is to provide housing diversity that provides for changing and varied demographics. Key to this objective was the importance of housing *choice* (Yates, 2001). While the importance of housing diversity involves some demographic considerations, though, its rhetorical articulation as a policy objective very clearly reflects neoliberal thinking that was at its peak during the 1990s. Citizens who had once been planned *for* through master documents were repositioned at this time to become *consumers* of housing with their own agency. As MacCallum and Hopkins (2011) note of the Metroplan (1990) for Perth in comparison to an earlier strategy:

Stephenson–Hepburn's ideal-type citizen is here replaced by a fragmented, differentiated public, whose variety of desires and conditions constitute new market opportunities (p.499).

In this context, urban populations are fragmented consumers of housing with diverse needs, and housing diversity will therefore flow from government facilitating the realisation of these market opportunities.

In the spirit of the trickle-down effect, housing affordability was not actively pursued in its own right in the compact city policies of the 1990s (Yates, 2001). Instead, it was largely a tacked on bonus extra, assumed to flow from the increased housing diversity provided in an urban consolidation context. Smaller housing types, the rationality goes, will be available to those at the lower end of the market in a variety of locations (Yates, 2001). Second, the ability for older generations to downsize but to age in place will free up ‘over-consumption’ of housing and release it to new families (Lehmann, 2017). This is heavily based on assumptions of rational consumers and naturally adjusting markets that respond in a timely manner to demand. The notion of housing diversity as a proxy for affordability has been persistently sticky in the urban consolidation narrative and practice to this day (Gurran & Phibbs, 2013). In this way, the intensification of housing in the compact city was clearly understood through the prism of political-economic logic of the time, with much of this logic still prevalent in the urban consolidation policies today.



## 5.8 Late 90's – 00's: recentralisation

### 5.8.1 Parallel universes

Several scholars note a shift in urban development governance in Australia around the turn of the millennium (Gurran & Phibbs, 2013; McGuirk, 2005; Searle & Bunker, 2010). This shift involved a *recentralisation* of urban development decision making and a more overt approach by state governments in achieving the objectives of the compact city. Urban consolidation policies by this time were standard across Australia's metropolitan centres, however, the plans had not been generating outcomes at the pace or scale expected. In Melbourne, for instance, there was growing criticism that the metropolitan planning strategy outlining a corridor development pattern was not aligned with policy mechanisms that could actually see the plan realised (Buxton, Goodman, & Moloney, 2016; Williams, 1999). Critics noted the “parallel universe” (Forster, 2006, p. 179) between planners and the social, economic, and political realities in which urban development was occurring (Gleeson et al., 2010).

Searle and Bunker (2010) note that the new millennium was “marked by a burst of planning activity following a period of largely ineffective plans” (p.517). This planning activity involved a more integrated, whole-of-government approach to delivering the compact city, based on a continuation of planning orthodoxy embedded in the 1990s. The key goals of this planning activity were identified as being city competitiveness, increasing the pace of development, and ensuring ecologically sustainable development (Searle & Bunker, 2010). Two key policy problem narratives strengthened at this time relating to the production of urban housing: planning as red tape; and local ‘barriers’ holding back metropolitan strategies (Gurran & Phibbs, 2013; Steele, 2012).

### 5.8.2 Local planning ‘barriers’

A “crisis of supply” emerged as a new housing orthodoxy around the turn of the millennium in Australia (Gurran & Phibbs, 2013, p. 382). Studies from this time identified a range of both supply and demand-side factors contributing to a mismatch in housing stock compared with supply (Bunker et al., 2005). Gurran & Phibbs (2013) found, however, observed that over the following decade the supply-side factors were elevated in policy narratives while the demand-side solutions fell from (government) view. What their study identified, therefore, was that rather than the problem itself changing, the problematisation of this crisis of supply stabilised around particular factors to the neglect of others. Notably, the new policy narratives became increasingly aligned with the objectives of housing industry lobby groups (K. Jacobs, 2015b).

The supply-side factors elevated in the new housing policy orthodoxy focused on regulatory barriers that apparently restricted the ability of developers to provide adequate new dwelling stock. According to Searle and Bunker (2010), the principal goal from 2000 was reforming development control systems so they delivered results in a more efficient manner that aligned with *state* planning objectives. This involved the creation of special purpose agencies and development assessment mechanisms, both of which were designed with powers to override local planning frameworks in order to deliver on the state vision. Most states created special agencies that would oversee specific local redevelopment projects. Following previous success in the 1990s with the East Perth and Subiaco redevelopments, the Metropolitan Redevelopment Authority (MRA) was established in 2012 and was granted broad powers of land development and planning in strategic projects. In addition, Development Assessment Panels (DAPs) were created that consisted of a range of public and private stakeholders and were called upon to review high value development proposals according in the state (rather than local) government's interests.

### 5.8.3 Those pesky NIMBYs

The second 'problem' that was elevated through the crisis of supply narrative was focused at the local scale, on local communities and their elected councils. Despite its spruiked triple win credentials, urban consolidation (and particularly higher density housing) had been fiercely resisted on the ground. Locals concerns generally focus on a poor contextual fit (in terms of urban form); and/or anticipated problems with population growth at the micro scale including congestion, additional cars, rubbish, and noise (McCrea & Walters, 2012; Nematollahi et al., 2016). There was growing scepticism at the local community level towards governments and developers, who were seen to be making a quick buck to the detriment of their local community (Woodcock et al., 2011). Therefore, the broader community did not seem to share the optimism of the planners and academics promoting urban consolidation through the rhetoric of the new urbanisms.

In the 2000s, so called "Not-In-My-Back-Yard" (NIMBY) local development protesters were increasingly positioned as being selfish and obstructive to the greater good of (necessary) urban consolidation. Various scholars have argued that this NIMBY discourse was productive in obscuring the potentially valid concerns of residents directly impacted by decisions made at higher levels of government (Ruming, 2014; Whittemore & BenDor, 2019). In response, the recentralisation of development decision making, described above, is one 'solution' to the problem of local resistance, as the scale of planning governance was escalated in order to minimise the power of local governments.

Another solution to this problem of local resistance can be seen to be, conversely, community participation and consultation in urban plan making. The best example of this is Perth's *Dialogue with the City* which was a much lauded case of "deliberative democracy" in urban growth planning in the early 2000s (Hartz-Karp, 2005). It involved a large participatory event, with smaller inclusionary events in the lead-up, which engaged 1100 professional and non-professional stakeholders in a conversation about how to accommodate the future growth of Perth. A direct quote of a government speaker at the event highlights the strategic potential of consensus building that was offered by such an approach:

Like so many plans before ... nothing is likely to happen because the reality is, unless we can bring you, the community with us, we will not get the support from local government that we need to make meaningful, enduring change (MacTiernan quoted in: Maginn, 2007, p. 347).

This echoes the preoccupation at the time with ensuring the whole-of-government vision was realised. At the main event, four scenarios of future growth were all presented that focused on the spatial distribution of urban development. It has been argued that the orthodoxy of urban consolidation was extremely evident in the biased presentation of the options, which presented sprawl as inherently inconsistent with sustainable development (Maginn, 2007). Therefore, Maginn (2007) describes the exercise as:

...not so much shaped by genuine deliberative democracy but subtly manipulated by offering participants an illusion of choice and utilising a stealth discourse that espoused sustainability and new urbanism to steer them towards a preferred policy path (p.334).

In this way, this intervention represents another solution to the perceived problem of sluggish urban intensification, and *educates* the community through a seemingly deliberative process of plan making. The use of deliberative policy tools in Western Australia occurred in a context of broad academic interest in participatory planning as promising for generating a more equitable urban form (Hopkins, 2010). The Western Australian government's adoption here, though, seemingly reflects the trend towards recentralisation of planning governance and the problematisation of community resistance in the context of apparent housing supply crisis.

## 5.9 Discussion: themes and trends across epochs

This chapter has explored the shifting interpretations of urban problems that have been evident in Australian urban growth management narratives since the emergence of the town planning movement. It has considered the implications of these shifting rationales and actions for housing outcomes. By providing a deeper understanding of the evolutionary and layered policy knowledge in urban growth management, this chapter has provided a platform from which to examine contemporary interventions and their rationales.

This chapter, in its historical focus on shifting problem and solution interpretations over a long time period, has attempted to break free of the rationalist approach to urban growth management, with a broader (thesis) goal of reconsidering the narrative. Considering the orthodoxy of the compact city narrative since the 1990s, the need to deconstruct the policy knowledge informing urban consolidation interventions seems timely.

Table 5.1 provides a summary of the key problems and solutions of each era explored in this chapter. Following the table, a discussion of conclusions arising from the chapter is presented.

**Table 5.1: Summary of historical urban housing problems and solutions in Australia**

<b>Era</b>	<b>Key government solutions</b>	<b>Key problematisations</b>
<i>Early growth management</i>	Garden City: decentralised growth management  Health and safety minimum standards re: density	Urban slum, pollution, disease  Town planning remedies ad hoc development
<i>Post-war</i>	Home ownership (and housing construction) facilitation, including direct provision	Need to stimulate eco activity/ macroeconomic stabilisation; housing supply/ infrastructure requirements (pop'n explosion)
<i>1970s-90s</i>	Inner city revitalisation  Spatial recentralisation	Underperforming inner city areas re: competition  Tax revenue flight to the suburbs
<i>1990s</i>	Sustainability-through-density  New urbanisms: design solutions	Global warming  Sprawl, automobile dependence
<i>2000s</i>	Recentralisation of development approval process  Community engagement, education	Community resistance  Housing supply crisis  Planning red tape

## 5.9.1 Problematisations have changed

Strengthening the argument that policy problems are socially constructed, this chapter has demonstrated that problematisations of urban morphology and its implications have indeed changed over time. The clearest example of this is the changing problematisation of density (Dodson & Gleeson, 2007). Where high densities were originally deemed problematic from a social-moral perspective, since the 1980s they have increasingly been reinterpreted as necessary and desirable in *economic* terms. This reinterpretation has been bolstered by the academically-supported compact city narrative, which continues today to tangle these economic objectives with (particular) environmental and social imperatives.

## 5.9.2 Layered policy knowledge

While problematisations do change, what was very evident in this historical examination was that policy rationales are evolutionary and sticky. Rayner and Howlett (2009) have argued that policy sub-systems exhibit “a remarkable resilience of pre-existing policy elements, often leading to sub-optimal designs that incorporate incoherent goals or inconsistent means” (p.100). While their pursuit of ‘optimal’ policy integration and implementation is not shared, their description of contemporary policy design as being layered (sometimes incoherently) certainly rings true.

In every era explored in this chapter there were elements of the problem and solution narrative that resonated with practice today. For example, the government facilitation of housing construction finance in the post-war boom as a strategy for ensuring strong macroeconomic growth persists today as an imperative of policy (although the particular facilitative approaches may have shifted); and the perceived value of inner city regeneration based on global competitive city objectives continues today despite the ‘doughnut city’ metaphor no longer ringing true. In addition, institutional path dependency can be seen in the ongoing focus of state plans on urban form and spatial approaches to urban growth management. This understanding of contemporary policy knowledge as being layered is useful for unsettling common sense wisdom, especially when problem and solution narratives can be understood from within the context of their emergence. For example, the ongoing rationale of urban consolidation as providing housing diversity can now be understood from the context of heightened neoliberal rationality in which the population was reinterpreted as rational, fragmented housing *consumers*.

### 5.9.3 The role of government

MacCallum and Hopkins (2011) note that consecutive urban plans (in this case in Perth) present an ongoing “notion of history as agent-free” (p.496). The persistent focus on optimal urban form neglects a consideration of how, and more importantly *why*, we have the urban form and processes that we do. What has been clear throughout this chapter, though, is that despite this abstraction of agency, governments of all levels have been directly involved in generating the spatial and housing outcomes of housing in Australia. This influence has been in the outcomes of interventions as well as in the shaping of problem narratives and success stories.

In terms of intervention, the problematisation of density in the early planning era that resulted in density restrictions, and the subsequent provision of services to suburbia in the post war era, both contributed to locking in the already sprawling low density urban morphology that was unfolding. In addition, the creation of financial and governance instruments to support the rapid construction of homes in the post-war era was instrumental in creating the massive industry that continues to provide ‘affordable’ housing on the ever-expanding metropolitan fringe today.

In terms of problem construction, it was surprising to learn the consumption-oriented ‘café society’ was an explicit goal promoted by government. The doughnut city problematisation (and its associated narrative) has subsequently led to policy success being attributed to real estate prices increasing and urban vitality, obscuring the fact that this has come at the expense of those low income households who once resided there but who have since been priced out of the market. While it is not being argued that the government is manipulatively concocting problem stories and disseminating them down to the masses, it is suggested that the government plays a strong role in normalising particular interpretations of problems which, over time, become institutionalised and embedded as taken for granted knowledge.

### 5.9.4 Housing and macroeconomic growth

Something that emerged in writing this chapter is the close association between housing intervention rationales and macroeconomic growth imperatives at the federal scale. What had seemed puzzling was the sense that governments had been clearly active and influential in shaping our understanding of urban problems and urban morphology; however, on the other hand, planning, from its very origins in Australia, seemed to be hamstrung by, and at the mercy of, a political-economic system firmly oriented around land. As Sandercock (2005) has argued, when the town planning movement was carving out a role for itself in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was in a context in which “the horse had essentially already bolted” (p.315), in that the speculative land market had already established itself into the cultural, political, and economic imaginations of the nation.

This seemingly contradictory duality of power and constraint is somewhat explained by Australia's three scales of government and the fact that some of the most meaningful *housing* interventions generally occur at the federal level (for example: tax incentives, interest rates), whereas urban planning became institutionalised at the state level (with a local government role in implementation). Urban growth management is inextricably linked to housing outcomes, however housing is only partially influenced by such interventions. While housing outcomes, as described above, have been undoubtedly shaped by state planning interventions and ideas, the imperatives related to housing at any time seem to parallel the macroeconomic objectives.

Searle and Bunker (2010) highlight the context in which the recentralised and facilitative urban governance approach emerged in Australia. They point out that when Sydney made urban consolidation the “cornerstone” of their planning system (during the early 2000s) it was during a period of sluggish regional economic growth. Victoria, they note, also followed suit in a period of slow growth. In this context, as described above, the federal and state governments have focused on planning deregulation and recentralisation of the development approvals process away from local communities in a bid to ensure urban development would continue to produce its economic growth function.

In some ways then, the more overt intervention into housing to address supply issues has similarities to the post-war boom in which macroeconomic growth (and housing supply) objectives trumped growth management concerns. While the recent intervention logic is more deeply embedded *within* the urban growth management narratives, during both periods the key policy objective seems to have been securing macroeconomic growth through housing development. While the post-war housing boom spatially occurred on greenfields land, in both eras overt government intervention has been used to stimulate the construction of *new* housing. In addition, the pursuit of this new housing appears to have been more important during these times than the need for urban containment and consolidation *per se*<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, an important conclusion of this chapter is that housing interventions in a context of urban growth management are often tangled up with, and ultimately driven by, economic concerns that are rather disconnected from the rationalities of urban consolidation. This is an important consideration in the advocacy of compact city policy solutions.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, urban growth boundaries were implemented but quickly revised in Melbourne in the context of a crisis of supply – and especially in light of the reliable supply of ‘affordable’ housing being provided on the metropolitan fringe (Buxton & Goodman, 2008).

Lastly, the long-term connection between housing intervention and macroeconomic imperatives inadvertently critiques the strength of the claim that Australian urban planning has been progressively neoliberalised. While neoliberal rationalities clearly led to reinterpretations of urban problems and solutions in the 1990s, the facilitative role of government in supporting private housing development has a history that goes back much further than this time, leading to the question of how fundamentally government imperatives around housing and planning have really changed (Weller & O'Neill, 2014). Forrest and Hirayama (2015) provide an elegant analysis of the contemporary financialisation of the housing system as product of neoliberal rationalities; however they refer to this as representing a move away from the 'social project' of housing. They could be merely describing the Keynesian-style of policy making in the post-war era, however their wording makes it feel like something has been lost. Their characterisation of this shift in housing policy in the 1980s also aligns with Beer (1993) who argued that housing had lost its 'special status' in government policy. In contrast, this historical analysis has highlighted the way that housing policy has always reflected contextual economic priorities (albeit in shifting governing landscapes), and therefore, while the way it has been understood as special has shifted, its essential status as (economically) special has not. In other words, it appears more likely that the special status of housing in Keynesian era was not fundamentally motivated by social or environmental objectives, but was rather driven by economic imperatives.

## 5.9.5 Chapter summary

This chapter has provided a historical perspective to urban growth problem and solution narratives in Australia. The illustration of problematisations as evolutionary and changing over time was deemed an essential platform from which to examine contemporary rationalities. The following chapter will explore the problematisations embedded in a contemporary 'cutting edge' logic and practice of urban housing intervention. What this chapter has illuminated is the very real implications that problem and solution narratives have on housing materiality and urban morphology. It is also clear that these narratives are inherently political, however, by drawing attention to their socially constructed nature rather than as objectively known facts, space is created for their reconsideration.

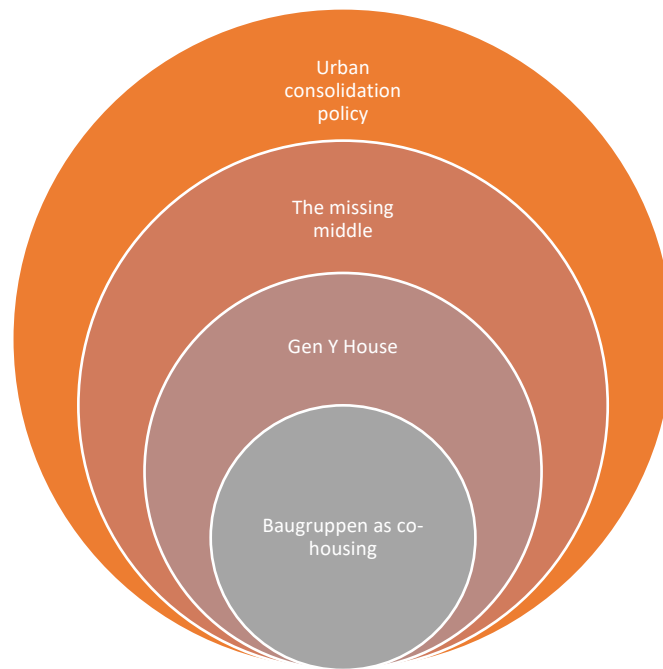


# Chapter 6      WGV vignettes

## 6.1      Chapter introduction

This chapter examines the WGV flagship precinct redevelopment as a way of accessing the latest iteration of urban consolidation logic and practice. As a project marketed as highly sustainable and innovative, the interventions offer an insight into the emerging governance practices and narratives in this space. This chapter presents the interpretive results that emerged from the interview transcripts, observation, WGV marketing materials, and general media as part of the data collection for this research. The data has been organised into three ‘vignettes’, each representing a particular project or idea shaping the WGV project.

As it turns out, the vignettes offer a nested analysis of the logic and practice of current urban housing intervention in the greyfields (Figure 6.1). In Chapter 5, the history of urban growth management was explored, with urban consolidation identified as an ongoing policy goal since the 1980s. Chapter 5 also explored the shifting nature of the problematisations, solutions, and narratives that have maintained this policy goal over time. In Vignette 1, the missing middle metaphor is identified as reflective of the next iteration of urban consolidation narratives. Vignette 2 examines the Gen Y House as a missing middle demonstration with additional social and cultural components. At the end of the line, in Vignette 3, is the baugruppen project, a government and university-led (proposed) cooperative development project that introduces a novel arrangement for housing provision in Australia. When viewed in the context of the previous vignettes it raises some key questions around the government’s role in such a space, as well as some potential equity and material implications for further analysis.



**Figure 6.1: Nested vignettes**

## 6.2 WGV precinct: overview

As was outlined in Chapter 4, WGV is a 2.2ha residential infill site located in White Gum Valley in Fremantle, Western Australia. Led by the state government land development agency (formally known as) Landcorp, WGV is considered a flagship greyfields precinct-scale redevelopment project. The precinct consists of four multi-residential sites, one affordable housing development for local artists, as well as 23 detached residential sites, and will eventually accommodate up to 100 dwellings and around 250 people (Byrne et al., 2019, p. 4) (see Figure 6.2). The project has been driven by a charter of sustainability, and has featured a range of technological and design innovations in energy, water and waste efficiency as well as in housing procurement and design (Wiktorowicz et al., 2018). At the time of writing (late 2020), the majority of the development on site has been completed, including the Gen Y demonstration house. The lots remaining are predominantly those allocated to private single dwellings, although the allotment set aside for the baugruppen cooperative demonstration also remains empty, with the project yet to be realised.



**Figure 6.2: Artist impression of the WGV precinct (Development WA, 2020)**

## 6.3 VIGNETTE 1: The missing middle as policy metaphor

*"I attended a planning seminar with my business partner and a client when I heard a term I have not previously heard in the context of housing. I don't generally take notes during conferences but instantly emailed myself as a reminder. I liked this term so much. It was short and catchy. I wanted to know more. The term was "the missing middle"....*

*...On return to my computer, I spent the evening interrogating what the missing middle is. I can report 'the missing middle' is my favourite planning term in near 30 years in planning...It might be a new term to me but it is not a new problem." (local planner's blog: Broughton, 2017).*

### 6.3.1 The missing middle and this research

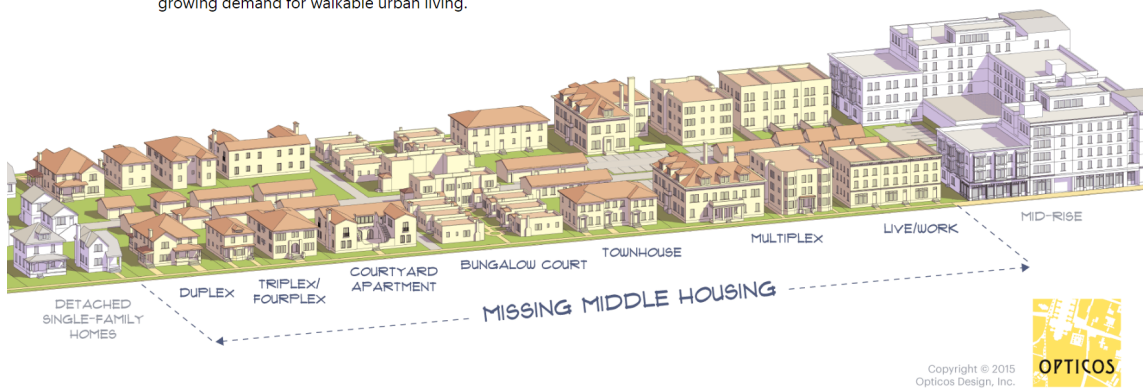
Kemeny (2004) states that “social constructionism can be used to critically interrogate contemporary policy metaphors that have captured the attention of housing researchers and policy makers in Australia” (p.73). WGV has been marketed as addressing the “missing middle” of urban housing. The term has recently been embraced by local planners, developers, and academics (Byrne et al., 2019; Wiktorowicz et al., 2018). As such, it became a focal point of analysis during this research project. Specifically, the term missing middle emerged from the interviews with stakeholders, media statements, and WGV documents as a key problematisation being articulated in relation to higher density housing governance in Australia at this time. For example, in the first interview conducted with a group of Landcorp staff the term missing middle was volunteered three times. It was reiterated again in a follow-up interview with one of those staff members. Later in the research journey, an industry breakfast was held at the Crown Ballroom in Perth titled “Medium Density: Finding the Missing Middle”, which was well attended by local and state government agencies, development lobby groups, the real estate sector, and private planning consultancy firms. The term has also appeared in various government and industry media statements in WA (and across Australia) over the last couple of years. Its emergence in Stage 1 of the interviews allowed for the idea to be revisited in Stage 2 by posing the question to interview participants about what the missing middle meant to them in their institutional work setting.

### 6.3.2 Origins and meaning

The “missing middle” as a metaphor has been utilised across different policy contexts, referred to variously as: a tier of governance in the UK (Pugalis & Townsend, 2013); mid-size firms in developing countries (Hsieh & Olken, 2014) and youth transitions to adulthood (Roberts, 2011). Its current usage in an urban development context refers to housing typologies; specifically, low-rise, multi-unit dwellings that fall somewhere between detached family homes, and mid-high rise apartment buildings in scale (Figure 6.3) (Opticos Design, 2020). The metaphor argues that these types of housing typologies are missing in cities, contributing to ongoing urban sprawl. It contends that greater provision of such *medium* density housing, especially if it well-designed and well-located near transport and commercial amenity, will enable the necessary shift towards (sustainable) compact living by providing more diverse housing options across a metropolitan region.

This version of the missing middle as policy metaphor has been attributed to Dan Parolek of Opticos Design Inc. (Opticos), an urban design consultancy firm in the US. Dan Parolek first used the term publicly in 2010. Since that time, Opticos have created and maintained a website specifically featuring discussion of this metaphor (<https://missingmiddlehousing.com>).

**Missing Middle Housing** is a range of multi-unit or clustered housing types—compatible in scale with detached single-family homes—that help meet the growing demand for walkable urban living.



**Figure 6.3: Missing middle housing** (Opticos Design, 2020)

### 6.3.3 New urbanism

The missing middle metaphor is closely aligned with New Urbanism, with various cross-referencing occurring in the US between the proponents of NU and Opticos. The use and language of the missing middle metaphor can be interpreted as an extension of New Urbanism in several ways. First, NU solutions are generally oriented around dwelling design and density – and the metaphor is a continuation of this narrative. Second, the curation of ‘walkable’ neighbourhoods is key to NU. The importance of a walkable neighbourhood is articulated via an appeal for cosmopolitan living, with an emphasis on *commercial* amenity. For example:

Many people of all ages would like to live in vibrant neighborhoods, downtowns, and Main Streets—places where jobs and shops lie within walking distance—but right now those places are in short supply. missing middle Housing provides more housing choices. And when we have more choices, we create living, thriving neighborhoods for people and businesses.

Lynn Richards, President and CEO of the Congress for the New Urbanism (quoted by: Opticos Design, 2020)

Third, various authors have noted the evangelistic approach taken to advance New Urbanist principles, especially in their mobility across the world into numerous (distinct) urban contexts (MacLeod, 2013; S. Moore, 2013; N. Smith, 2002). Gleeson (2012) has identified a growing trend of populist urbanism, or what they term the ‘new urbanology’. Davidson and Gleeson (2014) note that as urbanism has become trendy; guru-like urban specialists have sprouted across the (developed) world; and there has been an increased interest in city morphology and development from science and economic quarters. MacLeod (2013), for instance, documents the high-end, fly-in consultancy provided by Andres Duany (a key New Urbanist figure) to city officials in the Scottish Highlands during the planning phase of a proposed urban development.



The marketing and use of the missing middle metaphor fits into this trend towards urbanology. The Opticos Design website describes “missing middle housing” as “transformative” and a “new *movement* for housing choice” (emphasis added, Opticos Design, 2020), which draws attention to the potential of the ‘concept’ to influence urban housing policy in the US and beyond. The metaphor has since been referenced by well-known urban populist Richard Florida, who has identified the persistently low density suburbs as representing both urban problem, and potential solution (Florida, 2018). He suggests the vast, established suburbs could absorb much of the required growth through only modest densification with missing middle typologies. Thus, the Opticos website provides a range of resources for addressing this missing middle, including advice for municipal government officials wanting to enable more of this housing through regulatory reform. Its proponents clearly position themselves as experts who are available for consultancy and training opportunities.

### 6.3.4 Australian landing: missing middle as travelling metaphor

After its emergence and growth in the US, the missing middle metaphor term appears to have landed in Australia around 2016 with the New South Wales (NSW) state government adopting the language for an architectural design competition (Government Architect of NSW, 2017). The ‘Missing Middle Design Competition’ sought innovative low-rise medium density housing designs from local architects, with cash prizes and publicity on offer for the winners, who were announced in April 2017. The missing middle as interpreted by the NSW government (Figure 6.4) was presented very similarly to the Opticos description, as shown in Figure 6.3. From around 2016, the missing middle is also referenced across several different media and industry platforms in Australia. A 2017 PriceWaterhouseCoopers report titled ‘*A place for everyone: tackling Sydney’s affordable housing crisis*’ references the need to address the missing middle (PWC, 2017), and it also features in architecture and urban development media from around this time (for example: Cumming, 2017; Jewell, 2016).



**Figure 6.4: Missing middle housing** (Government Architect of NSW, 2017)

Following the successful architectural design competition in NSW, which received 111 entrants and extensive media coverage, similar competitions were initiated in the capital cities of Queensland (Department of Housing and Public Works, 2019), and Western Australia, including the Gen Y House in WGV (Development WA, 2017). These government-led architectural competitions were articulated using the missing middle metaphor and emphasised the importance of innovation in typology; good design; and increasing low-rise, medium density housing typologies in the existing urban region. Similarly, the South Australian state government refers to the missing middle in ‘The 30-year plan for Adelaide’, in which they use it as shorthand for increasing housing choice and diverse dwelling typologies (Department of Planning Transport and Infrastructure, 2017).

The allure of the metaphor has not yet diminished. In fact, a medium density housing code being developed by the NSW Government has, until recently, been referred to as the “missing middle code” (Urban Taskforce Australia, 2020) and it continues to be referenced by the media, industry, and even academics. Therefore it is now intimately connected to the broader conversation and government rationales in urban consolidation policy. The following section unpacks this metaphor further, examining why it has proven so popular, how it has been interpreted in the Perth context, and its productive characteristics. The analysis draws on the interview transcripts, the WGV media, and observations made at the industry breakfast.

## 6.3.5 What is missing and where?

### 6.3.5.1 Under-development – medium density housing

Key to this policy metaphor is its articulation that something is ‘missing’. Specifically it presents an urban reality in which there is an absence of medium density housing being produced. The Opticos website explains:

We call them (medium density building typologies) “Missing” because they have typically been illegal to build since the mid-1940s and “Middle” because they sit in the middle of a spectrum between detached single-family homes and mid-rise to high-rise apartment buildings, in terms of form and scale, as well as number of units and often, affordability (Opticos Design, 2020).

In Australia a similar argument is made that there are institutional constraints in place that hold back the development of medium density typologies. For example a planning consultant stated:

So I think the missing middle is about the gap of housing that’s some lots less than 400sqm and even maybe, medium density walk-ups on common land - two three storeys that just aren’t accommodated - it’s complex housing, which is why it hasn’t been dealt with very well (Planning consultant).

Describing something as missing is not merely a descriptive exercise. As defined in the dictionary, the adjective also presents a value judgement that something is “not present or included *when expected or supposed to be*” (emphasis added, Oxford Languages, 2020). A speaker at the industry breakfast, a local academic, explicitly argued that the missing middle addresses the problem of “under-development” of certain types of housing. The metaphor therefore has an implicit call to action to address what is ‘missing’ and encourages urgent government action to facilitate more medium density housing development.

### 6.3.5.2 Under-development – in the suburbs

While the missing middle metaphor may be focused on housing typologies, though, it has a clear spatial component in its call to action. The WGV precinct is premised on providing a demonstration of suburban densification (done well). This spatiality flows from its position within the urban consolidation policy story. While earlier iterations of urban consolidation were targeted first in the brownfields (old industrial urban sites, such as ports), and then in designated activity centres, researchers and policy-makers alike are now searching for mechanisms to intensify the metropolitan region more broadly. This application of the missing middle is not a uniquely Australian interpretation of the metaphor. Richard Florida (popular American urbanist) describes the missing middle as representing “density’s next frontier: the suburbs” (Florida, 2018). Therefore, the metaphor should be specifically understood as a call to action targeted at the existing metropolitan region – and more broadly than just in activity centres or major redevelopment sites.

### 6.3.5.3 Design

By problematising the situation as a lack of particular housing typologies, the metaphor centres the discussion on urban housing *design* and physical built form. In the tradition of New Urbanism, feature articles and missing middle resources (ie. those on the Opticos website) are almost always accompanied by pictures of architecturally pleasing designs depicting dreamy settings of lush urban landscapes, natural materials, and blue skies (Figure 6.5). In Australia, government adoption of the metaphor has been supported by similar architectural visions (Figure 6.5). Two interrelated problems are articulated in missing middle discussions that relate to design: poor outcomes arising from amateur development; and a lack of regulatory design guidance for medium density projects.





**Figure 6.5: Public missing middle housing examples (picture sources<sup>3</sup>)**

Missing middle housing is said to provide choice and diversity for people over different life stages. Proponents sometimes present this as an opportunity for families to flexibly create their own modern living arrangements. For example:

So, I think that, you know, providing that middle range of opportunities--smaller blocks of land--carry four, or six, or eight units in a modest kind of building, then you get the family members getting together with a bit of money to do something (Senior development manager- state government #1).

Despite this occasional rhetorical argument for grass-roots urban development, however, there is a certain degree of consensus around the problematisation of amateur development being generated by ‘mum and dad’ developers in the suburbs. Piecemeal development by amateur developers was presented at the industry breakfast as a key problem that the missing middle aims to solve. The man seated next to the researcher at the event described such development as the unappealing “vegemite spread” approach to urban intensification. Similar observations were echoed in the broader conversation of urban consolidation. For example:

I think that’s a real problem of what we call the micro-developers, and we got a lot of that up in the City of Stirling. They’ve got a kind of blanket r-code zoning going across the whole area, so it encourages individual landowners.....some developers are starting to move into that space now so we’re getting a better outcome (Member – state government planning commission).

<sup>3</sup>

Top left & top right: Australian depictions of missing middle housing (Government Architect of NSW, 2017)  
Bottom left: US depiction of missing middle housing (Opticos Design, 2020)  
Bottom right: Canadian depiction of missing middle housing (Bashir, 2018)

Our mum and dad developers are busy creating grouped dwelling developments, creating complex internal road networks to whet the appetite of our apparent obsession with having two car side by side garages with direct access to the dwelling. The piecemeal development we are approving today is prejudicing future development opportunities allowing incompatible infill through often clunky planning controls which are fixated upon deemed to comply outcomes (Local planner: Hemsley, 2016).

There seems to be broad agreement about one thing. We need more *good quality* medium density housing to be produced in Australian cities. Planners in particular, regard the missing middle conversation as crucial for lifting the regulatory and design standards. A local planner's blog states:

While the planning sector (particularly in Western Australia) has spent a significant amount of time preparing design guidelines, planning controls and a host of other regulatory controls for single housing and multiple dwellings, we have taken our eyes off duplex, triplex, fourplex, terrace housing, grouped housing, and small apartment complexes, 'The Missing Middle' (Broughton, 2017).

And a planning consultant suggested there is a lack of design guidance for developers attempting to deliver medium density housing:

It's coming up on many projects as being a failure of government, that there's not a medium density code – they've advertised an apartment code – which doesn't deal with medium density...and they've...made minor changes to the R-codes but still...there's this *great* big hole (emphasis original, planning consultant).

The solutions that flow from these problem interpretations are design-centred. For instance, the goal of 'finding' the missing middle has driven architectural competitions and flagship demonstration projects (such as WGV) across the country; and design guidelines for medium density housing are being developed by state governments to encourage and require particular design outcomes. Kemeny (2004) reminds us that examination of policy metaphors can reveal a preference for particular social relations and forms of knowledge, and in doing so, achieve their effects in policy practices. In this case, the prevalence of design and built form typology in the problematisation of urban housing favours solutions involving the architectural and developer community. These stakeholders are invited to present innovative and beautiful medium density products which can be showcased as answers to the current gap in the housing market.

Similarly, the problematisation of amateur piecemeal development points to a preference for solutions involving the more established development industry. The argument presented is that amateur and small-scale developers contribute poor quality products in direct contrast to the beautiful designs presented as missing middle housing.

I mean ideally what we'd like to see is instead of lot by lot development, you obviously like to see developers going in and buying up...swathes of land and doing a proper structure planning exercise and having the resources to deliver a good product. That's the sort of preference out there (Member – state government planning commission).

What we're seeing now is I guess larger developers coming in and proposing for amalgamation of two, three, or four blocks and then putting larger scale apartments on those locations and over the 5 to 10 years, that's going to be much more predominant I think...and we've changed the planning framework to allow it to happen in the areas we want it to happen (Director of planning – local government).

In this context, then, larger, more experienced, and more professional developers are required to rectify the situation.

**Table 6.1: Summary of missing middle problematisations and solutions**

Problematisations	Solutions flowing from problematisations
Under-development of medium density typologies	Increased construction of medium density housing. Flexible regulations, showcasing good design (demonstration and architectural competitions).
Spatial component – this housing is missing in low density, suburbia.	Boost medium density typologies produced in the suburbs – focused on areas of traditional low density.
Piecemeal development – battle-ax subdivision by mums and dads.	Developer-led suburban redevelopment, rather than amateur or small-scale developers. Land amalgamation, precinct development.

### 6.3.6 Productivity of the metaphor

This analysis has identified three key ways in which the missing middle metaphor is productive as a socially constructed concept. First, it reframes the urban consolidation pitch. High quality design conversations skirt around the need for broader discussion about urban intensification in the suburbs. Second, it paves the way for large-scale developers to produce more of this product. The focus on design enables the parameters of what is in and out (good/ bad) to be stretched, facilitating precedents which make it difficult for the community to mount opposition to further development. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it avoids a conversation about the current drivers of sub-optimal design. Its problem and solution narratives assume that design will trickle down from flagship projects once knowledge is gained in the industry and the community sees what is possible. This ignores current perverse incentives in the policy and planning context (especially economic ones) and therefore fails to meaningfully address them.

### 6.3.6.1 Re-framing and avoiding dissent

The missing middle metaphor, focusing as it does on design and built form housing typologies, appears to be an effective device for *reframing* urban consolidation goals, and minimising dissent against its pursuit in the suburbs. Analysis of interview transcripts, media, and the researcher's observations, suggested a desire amongst 'city shapers' (Raynor et al., 2017) to articulate urban consolidation policy in more palatable terms, and to sell density through improved built form outcomes. As one government planning professional stated:

We have an interest in making sure that consolidation is done well, whatever that means (Member- state government planning commission).

The marketing of WGV by its university research partner (CRCLCL) provides an example of this by choosing the tagline 'Density by Design' for its mini video series showcasing appealing medium density developments across Australia. The desire for re-framing was also apparent in the interviews in which the terms "urban consolidation" and "density" were viewed negatively by some, who had a preference for words associated with 'design' and 'choice' and 'diversity' – key ideas associated with the missing middle concept. For this planner, the new state government design guidelines are:

...going beyond that label of density which in a way is very divisive and is about numbers (Planner – state government #3).

And a local planner volunteered his dislike for the term 'urban consolidation' numerous times.

I think rather than the urban consolidation we tend to sort of see it like a housing choice turn and certainly the fabric of built form within Perth (Planner – local government #2).

So, I see it not necessarily urban consolidation because it's not really a nice term but I see it as this notion of creating greater housing choice and greater housing variety and having a whole mix of people living in one area at the one time (Planner – local government #2).

The sense across many of the interviews was that the language of housing 'choice' and 'diversity' were in favour, and this language was reflected at industry events, and in the media surrounding missing middle housing and WGV.

The metaphor, though, in its primary focus on design and typologies, does not make its spatial aspect explicit. This ambiguity provided some minor (though important) differences in how the missing middle was interpreted. For example a local mayor described his understanding of its spatial application as applying to the "broader catchment" and *not* at urban and transit centres:

So I would say within 40 meters of train station is probably not perfect. I mean it's like they shouldn't be town houses, they should be quite dense. But then in that broader catchment and along the transit corridor, I think that is where it actually applies (Mayor – local government).

On the other hand, a director of planning (local government) had understood the missing middle to apply *to* the centres and corridors:

Interviewee: I think we've actually sorted out what the missing middle means which means for us, making sure the actual missing part is filled in with good quality intense development along our centres and corridors.

Interviewer: OK, so the missing part is the corridors?

Interviewee: Yeh, we can accommodate all of Perth's growth. Just dealing with that you get along any other corridors and they're so underutilised. And it's the same as what Rob Adams did in Melbourne, with his concept of urban development there. Basically if you actually just addressed your corridors and not with any great intensity with three or four storeys...

While both of these interviewees associate missing middle housing with corridor development, the first acknowledges the need for missing middle housing across the "broader catchment" and suggests that in centres the density should be higher again. The second, instead, seems to suggest that the missing middle housing is only appropriate for centres and corridors. He later adds:

We had a really bad experience previously where the state had introduced new multiple dwelling codes. And we were getting multiple dwellings in the middle of suburbia. And we told them this is a real problem and they wouldn't believe us. It took us about 3 or 4 years of just hard lobbying to understand (Director of Planning – local government).

An aversion to density across the suburban landscape was also echoed by another local government planner who was questioning the new design guidelines under development:

I think I was quite concerned about this notion of having these detached apartments set in low density areas sort of thing. For the visual spectrum of design we should have either...very...leafy green areas which the green elements set the context, set the character, or we should have really urban spaces (Planner – local government #2).

This planner's description of what he thinks is *problematic* (typologies in between low and high density) is very similar to what the metaphor argues we need more of. It is interesting to note, that, despite not using the term explicitly, he adopts the metaphor's language about the need for more 'choice', 'diversity' and good design while also questioning the appropriateness of medium density apartments in the traditional suburbs. What this demonstrates is how the slightly ambiguous, but positively associated, metaphor obscures its spatial component and enables a perception of equivalence amongst stakeholders who may not actually agree in real terms.

The pursuit of urban consolidation has long-faced resistance at the local level, however, in previous iterations of its implementation it has been pursued in brownfield sites, activity centres, and along arterial corridors. This (planned) clustered spatiality of urban intensification fits with the cosmopolitan and mobility aspects of the new urbanisms, however, it has also been a *politically* feasible approach to urban growth management. As described in Chapter 5: History, homeowners are a politically powerful force in Australia, and policy has long-favoured this constituency. It is argued here, then, that part of this metaphor's productivity lies in its emphasis on design which takes the focus off its proposed spatial application (ie. the broader suburban catchment).

As demonstrated, the missing middle metaphor is well received and even applied by stakeholders who *simultaneously* have reservations about facilitating density across the suburban region. As such, the metaphor is productive as it bypasses or ignores meaningful conversation (especially with the community and local governments who represent them) about what density in the suburbs means, and refocuses the gaze on best practice design. In other words, the metaphor directs listeners to ask “what” should/ could be built rather than “if” it should occur at all. The metaphor thus displays the “depoliticizing consensus-inducing tendencies inherent in policy transfer and mobility” that have been observed elsewhere in the adaptation of new urbanist ideas (MacLeod, 2013, p. 2199).

### 6.3.6.2 Definition stretching and facilitation

The missing middle metaphor doesn't only enable avoidance of conversations about the implications of density in the suburbs though. The activities carried out in its name also *facilitate* the development of such an eventuation. This is, of course, its very purpose. The WGV demonstration precinct sits within a low density suburban neighbourhood that, although close to Fremantle city, is not in an urbanised location, nor walkable to primary public transport amenity. It is these very characteristics that make its density achievements noteworthy and which set a precedent for future developments to follow.

For developers, then, the call to action implicit in the missing middle metaphor is an opportunity to expand their operations beyond the city into the broader metropolitan area. As a key stakeholder in the WGV project shared:

I think the missing middle that we were talking about before, I think that's gonna (sic) become even more important because I think there is a bit of a glut with the apartment stuff, and even the big developers now are very shy of buying large sites because of the investment (Senior development manager – state government #1).

In this context, developers are turning to the smaller projects across the metropolitan region due to new market realities. For example, at the missing middle industry breakfast, a developer presented his recently completed, mid-rise ‘liveable’ apartment development in Claremont (a traditionally low density, high-value suburb) called ‘The Pocket’ (see Figure 6.7 below). In an article written about this development, it states:

The 1, 2 and 3 bedroom apartments were designed...as an exemplar of ‘liveable density’ *paving the way for future multi-res developments*” (emphasis added, Retreat Design, 2020).

Once again, the reframing of density around good design is apparent, with the developers understanding clearly the implications for their own commercial interests. The missing middle metaphor enables projects to be marketed along new urbanist principles, providing legitimacy to both the project and the developer:

Fini Development’s Tony Fini said he hoped Mode would be the *catalyst* for further medium-density housing projects addressing Perth’s missing middle.

“The benefits of medium-density development such as Mode are substantial, including more homes on less land, increased sustainability thanks to a smaller urban footprint, and options for buyers to stay close to family, friends and an established community network,” he said (emphasis added, No author, 2018).

Such exemplars therefore ‘pave the way’ for more of this type of development. One potential implication could be a stretching of the metaphor to include higher densities than it suggests. ‘The Pocket’ is 3-6 storeys on a large piece of land with 1, 2, 3 bedroom apartments. During a panel discussion this project was questioned by some as to whether it should really be considered missing middle housing. If we look at the Opticos or NSW government definitions, this type of apartment building would fall outside the scope of missing middle housing.

In the presentation, it was clear that what was deemed innovative and notable in this project, and why it had been included in the missing middle breakfast, was two-fold: its architectural design credentials; and its location in a traditionally low-density suburban location. In other words, the product itself (1, 2, 3 bedroom apartments) is not particularly innovative, but the marketing of the project as missing middle provides the gloss that legitimises a project that might otherwise have been resisted by communities. Therefore, even though the missing middle is explicitly oriented around typologies, the design and locational aspects enable the stretching of the definition to higher densities than initially espoused. Its rhetorical appeal may, then, merely facilitate the development of business as usual apartment developments in ever more suburban locations.





**Figure 6.6: 'The Pocket' development in Claremont, WA** (Retreat Design, 2020)

### 6.3.6.3 Rhetoric vs reality: the drivers of sub-optimality.

Perhaps its most productive characteristic though, is the way the missing middle metaphor obscures a range of *current* factors contributing to sub-optimality in higher density built form in Australia. Missing middle housing typologies (as depicted in the NSW and Opticos figures) are not exactly missing in Perth. In fact, regarding infill subdivision in his electorate, one local planner stated:

It's pretty much run its course (Director of planning – local government).

The story surrounding the metaphor, however, is that the 'missing' product requires 'finding' through design innovation and demonstration. This is evident in the government interventions inspired by the metaphor and is interpreted by tracing such actions back to question 'what is the problem represented to be?' (Bacchi, 2012). The problem, as suggested by the actions, is not enough innovation and not enough design knowledge in the industry. This is illustrated by the tagline for WGV, which is 'innovation through demonstration'. The implication is that once good design is seen; once it is demonstrated to the community and the industry; it will be adopted into common practice. One planner argued:

Then, probably, that practice might spread to elsewhere in the market because then, if you're building in proximity to one of those then you've got to kind of compete on quality (Planner – state government #3).



The logic follows that the community will start demanding good design and the industry will start supplying it; in other words, demonstration projects will produce *trickle-down design* benefits for the emerging built fabric.

This logic, however, ignores a range of issues that likely contribute to poor outcomes such as the pursuit of higher yields on smaller sites to make a development feasible; the cost-savings available to developers and builders who cut corners or exploit compliance loopholes; and the tax structures in Australia that stimulate housing production for exchange rather than use purposes. Perhaps a more effective government approach would be to shift the focus away from high end demonstration projects, and towards examination of existing mediocre medium density products and consideration of the factors that contributed to those outcomes (see Figure 6.7 below for some ‘actually existing’ local examples). This is obviously a more difficult approach which would inconveniently point to systemic flaws in the system of housing provision that the state and local governments may not have the capacity or willingness to address.

The most meaningful intervention that addresses the missing middle may be in the creation of new building design codes for medium density housing. These will enable regulators to demand a higher quality product using an established and common framework. For example, design standards may be able to prevent the complete loss of permeable green space from infill development (as seen in the examples in Figure 7). The missing middle metaphor, though, in its call to action, generates action predominantly in the *facilitation* rather than the *restriction* of particular built form outcomes. As one interviewee explained:

What we’re trying to do – because obviously winding people’s development potential back is really difficult as well -.....is to get the State...to have a really good look at the design codes (Director of planning – local government).

In a context in which infill development has already proliferated it may be difficult to enact development conditionality. In Perth, the medium density guidelines, we are assured, are coming, however the apartment and precinct codes have been prioritised and they are likely to be a few years away yet. Therefore, it is likely that growth in the production of missing middle housing (facilitated via the metaphor’s productive capacity) will continue prior to the introduction of regulatory controls that would ensure we achieve the high-quality outcomes alluded to.



**Figure 6.7: Missing middle realities, Perth WA (Author's own images)**

As shown earlier, small-scale infill development is problematised as too being piecemeal and amateur to produce good design outcomes. The implication is that larger, more professional developers will inevitably produce better outcomes. One planner explained:

But there are several developers that really want to do the right thing and I think are trying to. For them it's not just about selling off the development, it's about probably building their brand at the same time and making sure that when you think of their brand there's a certain level of quality attributed to it. I think that's a good example of the market sort of working in a way (Planner – state government #4).

Current perverse incentives driving sub-optimality, however, are not necessarily addressed by the professionalisation of infill development. Instead, the problem and solution narrative of the metaphor advances the idea that the market will deliver triple bottom line wins in the same way that the new urbanisms have always done.

It is worth considering the potential impacts (both good *and* bad) of a more professionalised infill development industry. While larger developers may have the financial and knowledge capacity to deliver well-designed products, they are also more politically powerful and their proximity to regulators means they have strong lobbying power to influence policy in their interests. On one hand, the amalgamation of lots for medium density infill development would have some advantages in terms of enhancing economic feasibility of projects and optimising plot ratios. At the same time, if lot amalgamation were to become widespread this would substantially change the character (look and feel) of established suburbia. It is not being argued one way or another whether lot amalgamation by large developers is good or bad. What is important, however, is the way the missing middle metaphor bypasses the discussion of potential positive *and* negative consequences that arise from that reality. It does this through its depiction of amateur development as problematic, and professional development as the solution.

## 6.4 VIGNETTE 2: Gen Y House

### 6.4.1 Gen Y House and this research

The ‘Gen Y House’, located in WGV, is the material outcome of an architectural design competition held by the state land development agency, Landcorp, in 2013. The compact 250sqm block was one of the last to be allocated in the WGV precinct (Landcorp, 2016). It was considered a relatively low value site due to its small size; its corner position at the entrance to the flagship precinct which created particular design constraints; and its position adjacent to an (initially) unattractive, gated sump<sup>4</sup>.

The competition invited ‘Gen Y architects’ aged 37 and under to:

...investigate the specific living requirements of ‘Gen Y’ and submit a concept design for a flexible, cost effective and sustainable dwelling...suited to the needs of the next generation of home buyers (Gen Y House brochure: Landcorp, 2016).

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<sup>4</sup> The unattractive sump has since been regenerated and turned into a permeable green space as part of the WGV redevelopment, thereby improving the value of the land.

The applicants were condensed into a few finalists, and a panel of judges anonymously judged the winner to be David Barr Architects. The winning design comprised of three interlocking, one bedroom apartments that resemble a single family home on the outside (Figure 6.8). The three apartments operate under strata title, meaning that each home is individually owned but the complex is managed via a body corporate. Landcorp was unable, due to discrimination laws, to place conditions on whom the properties were sold to. From anecdotal evidence, one of the dwellings did indeed sell to a Gen Y purchaser, however the second and third did not. The completed Gen Y House received a huge amount of media and interest. For instance, while tours were initially conducted by senior Landcorp staff, as demand grew they required a separate dedicated staff member just to manage the tours and demonstration of the innovative development (interviewee responses).



**Figure 6.8: Gen Y House - completed in WGV (Development WA, 2017)**

The Gen Y house provides insight into the narratives that surround government action (and the boundaries of that action). There is widespread recognition that the next generation are struggling to become home owners. The Gen Y house provides an illustrative case of the social aspects of the current urban consolidation narrative. It has been considered a flagship missing middle demonstration. As we saw in Vignette 1, there is a growing strategy of selling density through discussion of better design. The Gen Y house builds on this, but enables us to examine the social and cultural sell a little closer.

## 6.4.2 Gen Y House: outlining the narrative

A demonstration project by its very definition has a message to convey. Therefore, the following section examines the story through which the Gen Y House project was conceived and then marketed. Fincher (2007) describes narratives as having three distinct features:

First and most importantly, narratives make a story from the events being commented upon, with a beginning and an end, and a set of reasons and circumstances that guide the story from its beginning to its end.

Secondly, within the story formed by the narrative, the narrator's preferred view of institutional roles and the distribution of power in the situation is presented as 'natural' and 'logical', and as a widely shared set of beliefs about that set of circumstances.

Thirdly, the narrative constructs a moral judgement about the situation, seeing certain actions and events as desirable and others as undesirable (Fincher, 2007, p. 632).

This narrative structure was evident in the rationales surrounding the Gen Y House project and has therefore been utilised in the analysis that follows. This approach provided an initial framework for analysing the way the problems and solutions are framed in this case.

**Characteristic #1: Narratives make a story from the events being commented on, with a beginning and an end, and a set of reasons and circumstances that guide the story.**

### *Housing demand and demographics*

The narrative setting for the Gen Y house project is a context of shifting demographics and emergent lifestyles, particularly amongst the next generation of home owners: Gen Y. The argument is that young people are living more flexible, cosmopolitan lives and they are living with fewer people per dwelling:

The apartments reflect changing Australian demographics and a future in which single person households make up the fastest growing household type" (Gen Y House brochure: Landcorp, 2016).

If you think about people's hopes and aspirations and what they want, they often want what is a choice and maybe something that fits with their life, their lifestyle (Planner – state government #4).

In this context of shifting demand the supply of new housing requires better alignment.

### *Gen Y and Affordability*

The story also revolves around affordability, with home ownership becoming increasingly difficult for young people to achieve. As a key stakeholder in the project stated:

I suppose the motivation was a lot of people were talking about housing affordability and how difficult it was particularly for Gen Y who at the time were really struggling to get into the market (Senior development manager – state government #1)

The problematisation of affordability for Gen Y in this demonstration project reflects the logic of the ‘property ladder’ narrative. The built form outcome of the project was described in the following way:

It’s very much seen as a stepping stone. So it’s not meant to be something that you stay in very long. So you might go in, buy it, and stay there for five years. Five or six years enough to get you established to start paying off a bit of the mortgage. And then you would look to expand. (Senior development manager – state government #1).

In other words, the three one-bedroom apartments that formed the completed project were just a starting point for young people, and were not designed to be a forever home. The ‘property ladder’ is a key metaphor in the cultural imagination of Australia. It presents a reality in which people expand their wealth through housing over their lifetime. Aspiring home owners are expected to start with something modest; they may renovate an old home or simply purchase and hold a property until it can be sold for more than they bought it. Predicated on consistent housing inflation, a household’s wealth will grow as they move ‘up the ladder’ via the ownership of bigger, better, or additional properties. In Australia, the importance of moving up the property ladder throughout your working life is understood as a key mechanism for securing a comfortable retirement. Crucially, in order to get ‘onto’ the property ladder, one only needs to *own* property – not necessarily be deriving utility from it as a place of residence. From this perspective, affordable housing is that which enables young people to get on to the first rung of the property ladder (from which point they will be on their way to wealth accumulation via property ownership). The Gen Y House as a ‘stepping stone’ is very much aligned with such thinking.

#### *Enter urban consolidation: the solution*

So, as the story goes, housing demand is shifting towards a preference for smaller, more cosmopolitan dwellings, and the bottom rung of property ladder is becoming increasingly out of financial reach for the next generation. It is in this set of circumstances that urban consolidation, and more specifically *smaller dwellings*, are viewed as the solution. These interconnected logics are visible here:

Medium density housing not only provides more affordable options for buyers, it also addresses a growing need to suit a broadening range of household demographics and lifestyles (President: local urban development industry organisation in R. Kelly, 2017).

The conversation around affordability was just starting so it was how do we accommodate a range of different individual needs? (Senior development manager – state government #1).

Therefore, according to the narrative supporting the Gen Y House competition, the facilitation of smaller dwellings in urban locations provides first home owners with more affordable options to get started on their housing journey by bringing the first rung of the property ladder down to their reach.

**Characteristic #2: Within the story formed by the narrative, the narrator's preferred view of institutional roles and the distribution of power in the situation is presented as 'natural' and 'logical' and as a widely shared set of beliefs about that set of circumstances.**

Based on the story outlined above, the key role for governments in this space is to facilitate and enable the production of new housing which is smaller (and therefore cheaper) and is located within the metropolitan region. This logic was apparent in the interviews conducted, and is common across the industry and institutional housing sector. It is via this story that the provision of housing 'diversity' and 'choice' becomes the solution. For example:

From local government:

Interviewer: In terms of affordability, can the local government do much in terms of housing affordability?

Interviewee: Yeah, I guess it comes back to for us having a variety or a good range of different housing choices, hopefully to some degree, assisting in affordability so that people who don't necessarily need to outlay capital to afford a large home on a block have the opportunity of accessing an apartment...For us that's our response to housing affordability, ensuring we've got a strong supply (Planner- local government #2).

From industry:

Affordability remains a critical issue for Perth. One of the avenues for providing more affordable housing options is increasing choice through a diversity of medium density development (President: local urban development industry organisation in R. Kelly, 2017).

From state government:

Interviewer: how do you try and pull that...market back from being sort of million dollar housing in such a high value area like Subiaco?

Interviewee: Yeah, so we have also diversity requirements that a certain amount of developments have got to be studios, single bedroom (Senior development manager – state government #4).

This preferred role of government indicates a perceived distribution of power favouring market forces. To support this power distribution, the (familiar) story surrounding the Gen Y housing project rests on the assumption that government capacity to address housing affordability for the next generation is *constrained* and that indirect levers are the only options available. For example:

So the *only* way that you can really provide choice for people is to give them that opportunity to kind of go into something small and then gradually work their way up (emphasis added, senior development manager – state government #1).

Affordability in urban locations:

Yeah, but it is difficult to you know, if what's the land value is the land value, you can't really change that (Senior development manager – state government #4).

This was the case even with stakeholders who didn't buy the idea that affordability would automatically flow from the provision of medium density housing options:

The argument that they often put up is “well if you do consolidation, you do density, therefore you're getting...the cost per housing unit is less”. But that's sort of not quite true. It might be cheaper, although it's arguable ‘cause you're going up and all that kind of stuff. It might be cheaper to build a housing unit if you've got density but the market takes over. There's high demand for living in these areas and therefore the profit margins are gonna (sic) be quite considerable. So are you going to require that private developers don't have the same profit margin? (Member – state government planning commission).

Therefore, the lack of capacity to meaningful influence the market is depicted as natural and logical, with governments assumed to have their hands tied.

**Characteristic #3: The narrative constructs a moral judgement about the situation, seeing certain actions and events as desirable and others as undesirable.**

The Gen Y House narrative has a clear moral claim that fits with the broader story about the need to intensify the metropolitan region and curb suburban sprawl. Gen Y, as the next generation of home owners are, according to this story, *obliged* to accept a smaller dwelling than their parents perhaps had. In exchange, urbanites will receive “amenity” and community. This trade-off is framed as necessary for the good of the wider community. As a key stakeholder involved in the project described:

It was about demonstrating that if you want to encourage people to live on a smaller block, *in a more efficient way in a smaller home*, then you have to give them amenity (emphasis added, senior development manager – state government #1).

So in the design brief basically what we said to them was...they had to think about what their generation needs and affordability was also a driver. But it was also about well in terms of lifestyle, what is that generation looking for? *Are they prepared to compromise space for quality or accessibility to amenities* and things like that? (emphasis added, senior development manager – state government #1)

Note that both of these statements are loaded in that they point to the correct ‘choice’ that Gen Y should make. The correct choice is compromised space, which is a more “efficient” way of living in a growing city. The broader push for medium density housing is articulated with a similar moral framing:



A lot of the key to successful infill is to change people's – it's more than just the behaviour. It's the entire lifestyle about how they live and how they get around so they're not reliant on a car. They don't necessarily need a car (Director of planning – local government).

Therefore, the Gen Y House narrative, and the urban growth narrative more broadly, constructs a moral argument that smaller housing is a more efficient and sustainable way to live in the modern city.

The moral argument of the Gen Y House narrative, though, is not just concerned with sustainable growth management of the city. As publicly stated by the winning architect of the Gen Y House competition:

**What do you think is the main or most difficult challenge of designing for Gen Y?**

Affordability is the main challenge. It is the dilemma for Generation Ys because they want everything up front. But the reality is that you can't. You can only get what you can afford and therefore it is about making something smaller and more affordable that also capitalises on the needs and wants of Generation Y (Landcorp, 2018).

The desire for home ownership and affordable housing is also invoked here in moral terms. The implication of the winning architect's statement is that Gen Y are expecting too much, too soon. Thus, we see the normalised logic of the property ladder drawn on again. In this case, Gen Y should accept smaller housing not only because it is necessary for the sustainable growth of the city, but because they should work their way up the ladder incrementally and not 'expect' to live in a larger house until they have earned it. This is also supported by the description of the built form outcomes as merely a 'stepping stone'.

## 6.4.3 Implications of the Gen Y narrative

### 6.4.3.1 Selling or telling?

During the interviews, various government stakeholders described their role in the governance of urban consolidation as needing to 'sell' density. This is logical considering the long history of suburban home ownership and the great Australian dream of owning a house on a 'quarter acre block' (in reality the size of lots has been shrinking for years, and the 'quarter acre block' cultural ideal is more reflective of ambitions for a detached house on private land). In this context, government-led demonstration projects, such as WGV, are showcasing what is possible to the *community* and not just to the development industry. As one state government planner explained:

At the local scale I think that's where we're working pretty hard to try and get people to feel comfortable and change.

On the whole it's gonna (sic) take a few good examples out there for them (the community) to really see it. It's like winning hearts and minds. It's like as soon as you

start to do that and people think, “oh wow, that apartment down the road, did you see that? It looks quite good. You know, we’re about to retire soon. Should we go to the home open night”? It’s trying to change that mindset (Planner – state government #4).

The need to convince the community of the benefit of density is also evident in the public political narrative. For example:

Ms Saffioti <then WA state minister of planning and transport> said she wanted to see density debates handled better, with a more active role for the State Government in convincing the public of the need for higher housing density. “It is about making sure people are more aware of what is happening in their community, how it can benefit them in the longer term and how we can support businesses by having more people live close to them” she said (Argese, 2017).

In other words, governments see part of their role as selling a new version of the Australian dream: one which includes the normalisation of smaller urban dwellings. The demonstration of good architectural design, as in the promotion of the missing middle more broadly, is a key marketing tool that enables governments to sell this new housing dream (reality?). For example, regarding the Gen Y project it was explained:

We were very keen to show that you can do small stuff well (Senior development manager – state government #1).

This idea was also articulated at the state government level:

That’s really what they’ve been trying to drive. It’s not just about making apartments attractive so that the community accepts them all, which is an important part but it’s also yeah, about the liveability, what it’s like to... we’re basically making a policy decision that we want a large portion of our population to live in apartments, so therefore we have to make them liveable (Senior development manager – state government #4).

Therefore, the built form outcomes at WGV, including the Gen Y House, have been promoted as examples of what is possible in smaller living spaces if they are well-considered and well-designed.

The selling of density, though, presents an inconsistency in the narrative (outlined earlier) which suggests that these new housing typologies are *in demand* due to changing demographics and life journeys. The assertion that diverse housing typologies are increasingly in demand is often presented alongside discussion around the necessity of selling the benefits of density to the community. For example, the brochure for the missing middle industry breakfast stated:

Population growth, demographic changes, lifestyle trends and a need for more affordable housing are *driving demand* for a greater variety of housing options in Perth (Urban Development Institute of Australia (UDIA), 2018).

However, in a panel discussion at the same breakfast a developer of a flagship ‘liveable’ mid-rise apartment development explained how important ‘hand-holding’ had been in encouraging people to purchase the units. As an observer, it is difficult to determine, then, if housing demand is actually changing or whether housing stakeholders think it “*ought* to be changing” (Forster, 2006, p.176, emphasis original). Similarly, while the Gen Y House project promotes optionality and greater ‘choice’ for young people, the choice implied to be correct is a higher density unit. This obligation is framed as the most sustainable choice for the wider community via a more ‘efficient’ housing footprint but also as the most reasonable choice for those with relatively low economic capacity.

#### 6.4.3.2 Social or economic demand?

In 2011, the Grattan Institute released the findings of a study conducted in Melbourne that examined housing preferences and their correlation with the supply of various housing typologies across the metropolitan region (Frances-Kelly, 2011). The researchers not only asked about primary preferences, which largely reflected the cultural norms of low density suburban living, but asked participants to determine their preferences controlling for cost and location. The study identified typologies such as semi-attached townhouses and walk-up terraces as *under-supplied* relative to demand. On the other hand, small and high-rise units, and low density detached dwellings, were found to be *over-supplied* relative to demand (taking trade-offs into account). The same research was subsequently conducted in Perth, which showed similar results (State of Western Australia, 2013)

The findings of the *Housing We’d Choose* studies were widely circulated and publicised by state government agencies. In the discussion about urban growth management and housing intensification it provided a promising pathway forward via (palatable) medium density (not detached dwellings and not high rise apartments) housing in urban areas serviced by public transport and amenity. An important aspect to these findings though, which is often left out of the narrative supporting medium density housing, is that the housing in high demand was that which could house *families*. That is, many Australians were willing to trade off space for affordability and location benefits, but this meant trading down the traditional four bedroom, two bathroom (4x2) dwelling with theatre room for a semi-attached and well located 3x2 or 3x1 home.

It is not disputed that Australian household sizes have been shrinking on average. It is worth considering, though, the potential preferences and needs of Gen Y as first home buyers. Research into this cohort found that Gen Y has faced more uncertainty in their career and family pathways than generations before them (Wyn et al., 2017). An increasingly competitive job market has meant younger people have spent longer at university gaining the ever higher qualifications required for entry level jobs. Cultural norms have also shifted, with younger generations spending their earnings in their 20s travelling the world rather than settling down. A combination of factors then (practical and cultural and economic) means first home buyers in Australia are now on average aged 34 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2017).

Now consider the choice of winning design, and the built form outcome, of the Gen Y House architectural competition held by the government. The winning design featured three one-bedroom apartments on a single lot. These apartments were sold for approximately \$400,000, which is roughly comparable to the cost of a new 4x2 single detached dwelling on the urban fringes. If most first home buyers are aged in their early to mid-30s, a single bedroom home does not provide much flexibility. As a senior stakeholder involved in the project argued, it is merely designed to be a “stepping stone” for “five years”. Even for this period of time, though, a one-bedroom unit is prohibitive for many people. To illustrate, a second bedroom (even for a single or couple occupying one room) can provide a separate space for working-from-home; for family or friends to stay; for storage; or for renting out for additional income in line with the ‘sharing economy’ that Gen Y have embraced. Importantly, for a single or couple in their early to mid-30s, a one-bedroom unit offers no possibility of accommodating an expanding family at a time when they may be considering doing so. Being forced to wait patiently for five years could biologically push the boundaries towards having children at all.

As was shown earlier, the preferred government role in the narrative supporting the Gen Y House project is to provide ‘diversity requirements’, and to facilitate more medium density housing as a strategy for addressing housing unaffordability for the next generation. When considering the actual housing needs of the next generation this doesn’t seem very sustainable. If this lever remains the only one perceived to be available to governments then generations in the future will be forced to reside in ever smaller dwellings regardless of their lifestyle requirements. Rather than meeting real housing demand, then, the long term outcome of this approach is more likely an allocation of housing typology or dwelling size based on economic capacity than on the everyday needs of diverse households. As summarised by Forster (2006):

Mainstream households still express a long-term preference for low-density housing... The question...is whether planning and housing policies will deny them that preference on both environmental and economic grounds (p.176).

The Gen Y House project suggests that housing policies may not be just denying future generations their ‘preference’ but it may deny them the housing *needed*. One bedroom apartments may assist Gen Y to get onto the property ladder, but this is very different to assisting Gen Y to access housing that meets their needs across their life course.

### 6.4.3.3 The beneficiaries

The Gen Y House project objectives were specifically marketed as finding and showcasing housing solutions for the next generation of first home buyers. As Frank Marra (Landcorp CEO) stated in 2017:

The aim was to encourage more sustainable and affordable living opportunities for first homebuyers (quoted in Argese, 2017) .

The project also offered Gen Yers the chance to design built form outcomes (‘solutions’) that would suit their modern lifestyles and values. As a key stakeholder involved in the project explained:

So let’s aim it at Gen Y but let’s also aim it at Gen Y architects so that they can think about their own generation. So part of that motivation for me anyway was wanting to encourage young designers to think about that predicament of their generation and...come up with solutions. (Senior development manager – state government #1).

Specifically, the architectural competition sought entries which demonstrated “flexible, cost effective and sustainable dwellings” and which also “test(ed) the new provisions of the R-codes and explore(d) alternative living arrangements” (Gen Y House brochure: Landcorp, 2016).

Therefore, the key beneficiaries of this government intervention were marketed as, and intended as, the next generation of home buyers.

It is worth examining, then, the key innovations that were demonstrated from this project and to consider if these do, in fact, benefit this demographic. The sustainability features of the finished product are notable. In particular, the apartments were designed for passive heating and cooling; they are well-lit with natural light; and they were designed in a considered way to maximise the utility of the smaller spaces. Such features will directly benefit the occupants of the homes and the showcasing of the design will hopefully mean that the intersections of affordability and sustainability can be harnessed by the development industry more broadly in the future.

Apart from the sustainability and design aspects though, the key innovations marketed through the demonstration project were two-fold: three units were accommodated within the local zoning requirements when the standard approach would have yielded a maximum of two dwellings; and the finished product showcased “density by stealth”, meaning that its exterior footprint looked similar to a traditional low density suburban house (Landcorp, 2016). That is, the Gen Y House provides an example for increasing dwelling density of established low density suburbia without disturbing the character, look, and feel of the suburbs. As marketed:

It is the efficient use of the suburban block that the potential for increased density can be found. This increased density is not at the expense of the liveability for inhabitants or neighbours (Gen Y House brochure: Landcorp, 2016).

The innovative interlocking design enabled regulatory compliance by taking advantage of a loophole in the codes. As was explained by the key stakeholder in the Gen Y House project, while most of the entrants had accommodated two dwellings, the judges had particularly valued the higher yield in David Barr’s design, and this was a key factor in his being chosen as the winner.

The promotion of the Gen Y House as “density by stealth” indicates a desire to appease existing landowners as medium density housing becomes increasingly common across suburbia. If the demonstration project is successful in disseminating its innovations, though, this built product also offers new opportunities for existing landowners. While Gen Y may be provided with smaller, more diverse first home options, the primary economic gains will flow to those land holders who are now able, if they wish, to subdivide their property to produce a higher dwelling (and profit) yield.

In this way, the Gen Y House project demonstrates innovations that promote a continuation of business-as-usual housing systems, albeit with some design and sustainability improvements. While more affordable options may be created in the immediate sense, the subdivision of land into smaller dwellings does not address intergenerational inequality in the housing system; in fact it will likely exacerbate it. In the longer term there will be no further opportunities for subdivision meaning that the wealth accumulation that was possible for the previous generation will not be open future generations. In the meantime, value continues to be embedded in *land*, and those who currently own land (owners of detached housing) retain the ability to accumulate property wealth, while the next generations face ever diminishing returns.

The narrative that supports a project like Gen Y House can be seen to obscure the fundamental economic and structural inequality that is supported by taxation and incentives for housing investment. Granted, there are some limits to what the state and local governments can do to reorient the federal taxation system, however, the idea that Gen Y can design their own way out of their predicament ignores the very real structural issues limiting their ability to enter into home ownership.

In 2006, Randolph predicted that:

The future rollout of metropolitan housing will be driven not by the perceptions and demands of households looking for homes to buy and live in, but on the perceptions and behaviour of residential investors. This will mark a major shift in the basis on which Australian cities have grown, with much of the new growth mediated through investors rather than demand from owner occupiers (p.482).

The provision of ever smaller housing units as a ‘stepping stone’ in the journey to full or family-sized dwellings continues to skew housing demand (and therefore provision) towards its exchange and wealth accumulation value, rather than its use value. This approach has very real social, economic, and environmental implications that governments should consider.

## 6.5 VIGNETTE 3: baugruppen: government-led co-housing

### 6.5.1 Baugruppen and this research

Interest in cooperative and co-housing arrangements has grown substantially in Australia over the last four years (McGee et al., 2017; Palmer, 2018; Sharam et al., 2015). In 2016, the final lot in the WGV precinct was announced as a cooperative housing (baugruppen) trial site. The proposed baugruppen project at WGV had not been announced in 2014 when this research project commenced, however the key ‘architect’ of the concept in WA (Geoffrey London – former VIC/WA state government architect, university professor) had been actively promoting the idea amongst his networks for some time. In the early stages of this research journey the researcher assisted Geoffrey to develop materials for a proposed stakeholder workshop (which ultimately did not go ahead – although similar events did subsequently occur) and I attended various community meetings marketing the idea (including the one filmed and available on the official ‘Baugruppe at WGV’ website<sup>5</sup>). Once support had been secured by Landcorp for the project to go ahead at WGV, the researcher was invited to a series of stakeholder meetings in which the various details of the arrangement were tackled, including financing and legal issues. Finally, some key stakeholders involved in the project were interviewed for this research.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.baugruppen.com.au/about.html>

## 6.5.2 Baugruppen: the concept

Baugruppen, translated as ‘building groups’ is a German housing model which is used across various European cities (Ring, 2014; Scheller & Thörn, 2018). It refers to a mechanism for multi-unit residential development in which intended occupants form a cooperative, pool their resources, and initiate a project. In Europe, some groups continue to operate as a cooperative post-construction; however this is optional (Ring, 2014). The model enables members the opportunity to shape the design of their own home within a multi-unit development, a mechanism which is currently missing from housing provision in Australia and has been referred to as ‘Sector 4’ (Dolin, London, & McQuoid, 1992) (Table 6.2).

**Table 6.2: 'Sector 4' housing development**

<b>SECTOR 1 ✓</b>  Household purchases an existing detached single house	<b>SECTOR 2 ✓</b>  Household initiates construction (and shapes design brief) for a detached, single house
<b>SECTOR 3 ✓</b>  Household purchases an existing/ newly constructed multi-residential unit	<b>SECTOR 4 ×</b>  Initiate construction (and shapes design brief) for a multi-residential unit

The benefits of a baugruppen approach to housing include:

- Cost savings compared with the developer-driven model of provision as the project is built at cost without the need for marketing and profit margins.
- Demand-driven: built form outcomes directly meet the needs of inhabitants. Projects can cater for diverse and unique needs (such as art studios; pets; young families; the aged; permaculture).
- The production of owner occupied higher density dwellings: meeting occupant needs and preferences can counter investor-driven built form outcomes.
- Providing certainty to lenders as buyers are already engaged. No pre-sales required.

(Ring, 2014; Sharam, 2020)



### 6.5.3 The WGV baugruppen project

In a partnership involving Landcorp and the University of Western Australia, a baugruppen is currently being attempted in the WGV precinct. Landcorp has held the last lot on the site to provide an opportunity for a group to form. As this is a new concept in the Australian housing landscape, the project partners have been navigating the various challenges that need to be overcome to make it work in the Australian context. In particular, gaining the confidence of banks to provide lending for an innovative project has been difficult, and there are a range of legal clarifications required to ensure financial security for all parties involved.

To be a participant in this baugruppen, 30% equity is required from each household. The architect engaged, Michael Patroni of Space Agency, has developed a ‘stacked house’ concept plan which provides various module options for participants who will ultimately choose which modules they would like and customise them to their needs (within the basic constraints of the design) (see Figure 6.9) (Baugruppe, 2020). The unit options include: 1 bedroom; 1 bedroom + study; 2 bedroom, 2 bathroom; 3 bedroom, 2 bathroom. All modules incorporate strong sustainability features (as required in the WGV precinct), limited shared walls (due to stacked house approach), abundant natural light; and private outdoor space. The architects have also designed shared space in the project, however the use and design of this space will be determined later by the participants. The project has been designed to accommodate up to 17 households. In this case, the baugruppen model has been proposed as a ‘terminating’ cooperative, that is, the participants form a cooperative purely for purposes of buying and developing the land, with the cooperative structure replaced by a traditional strata ownership model upon project completion.



**Figure 6.9: Baugruppen at WGV: concept design (featuring 'stacked house' approach) by Space Agency (Baugruppe, 2020).**

As of late 2020, the project partners have been attempting to form the participant group for three years. It has now almost reached the number of participants required for the development to go ahead (the official website currently states that there is one place remaining<sup>6</sup>). Difficulties in securing participant numbers has been anecdotally attributed to the high upfront equity required; the downturn in the residential (and especially the apartment) market in Perth; and project uncertainty due to the lack of Australian precedent. As a result, a local real estate agency was engaged to assist in selling the project to prospective participants. From the researcher's own conversations with this real estate agent it was apparent that they faced difficulties in communicating and selling the foreign concept to the community. In particular, the fact that the model provides opportunities to *choose* various components of the project was often interpreted as being a cause for uncertainty. For example, prospective participants wanted to know how much strata fees would cost, despite the fact this would be determined later once the group decides what the shared amenities they would like to have.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.baugruppen.com.au/home.html>

The difficulty of finding participants has ultimately led Landcorp to commit to buying five of the units. The key Landcorp stakeholder in the project has stated that this commitment is not a mechanism for underwriting the project and they will act as if they are participants in the group decisions. There is a desire to sell the eventual units as affordable Keystart<sup>7</sup> dwellings, however Landcorp has reserved the right to sell at market price or at cost (including land holding costs) upon project completion. Due to the extended period that Landcorp has now held the land, the agency may have difficulty justifying further costs associated with providing a subsidy.

## 6.5.4 Project context: feasibility and appeal for government involvement

This section will unpack some of the primary factors that enabled the baugruppen – a unique and unusual concept for the Perth context – to be supported by the state government.

### 6.5.4.1 A champion

The realisation of the baugruppen model has been a lifetime pursuit for a local architecture professor, who has driven the interest and action towards this demonstration project in WGV (Holland-McNair, 2019). Geoffrey London first tested the idea in 1991 when he co-developed a project in Fremantle, Western Australia (Palmer, 2018). The built form outcomes of the project have stood the test of time as good quality architecture. While a range of inefficiencies and complexities of this initial project have always seemed surmountable to this local architect, he has been keen to make another attempt throughout his working life<sup>8</sup>.

Geoffrey London is an architect by trade. He has been the State Government Architect in two states and is a distinguished professor at the University of Western Australia. He is therefore well connected politically and in the housing industry and has credibility and sway in these circles. The government involvement in this demonstration project in WGV would not have occurred without the influence of this champion. A senior development manager recalls first meeting with Geoffrey about the potential for baugruppen trial project in 2012:

We had a chat around our boardroom table with a few people and it looked really exciting...I looked back through the records and we actually put something up to the execs saying we should do something in this White Gum Valley. And then somehow or other it just got forgotten because now the focus is on...we wanted to do a maisonette demonstration there. And also, <a colleague> was working on the concept of doing a Gen Y typology sort of...and then the whole architect design competition came about and we completely forgot about doing baugruppen for a while.

And then he came back to us this year, early this year <2016> and visited so we said “hey, we’ve got a site we haven’t sold yet” - an apartment site. So it was the perfect fit really (Senior development manager – state government #3).

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<sup>7</sup> A state government affordable home loan/ shared equity program

<sup>8</sup> These insights were gleaned from the researcher’s attendance at a number of community presentations by Geoffrey London.

Geoffrey has dedicated hours of his own time to researching the idea (he took a sabbatical to interview baugruppen stakeholders in Berlin), and it was by being armed with research and knowledge that he was able to successfully pitch the idea to state government development executives. His previous experience and existing networks provided him with access to political power, and credibility to influence it.

#### 6.5.4.2 Policy ‘fit’ – government motivations

An idea, though, needs more than a champion to generate government action. Policy theorists highlight the usefulness of examining the policy or institutional ‘fit’ in which an idea gains support (Howlett & Lejano, 2012), and the ‘window’ of opportunity where problem and solution narratives align with contextual factors to stimulate government action (Kingdon, 1984). In the case of the proposed baugruppen in WGV, the idea can be seen to have resonated within the already examined narratives of the missing middle and the Gen Y House. As a senior stakeholder in the project explained:

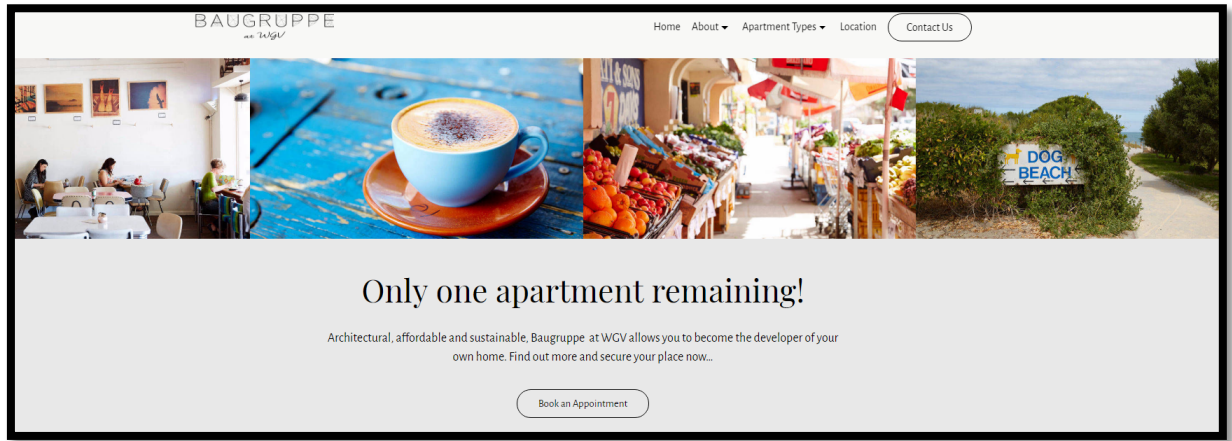
And so, I think that missing middle is really important in that respect, providing that choice in that area and baugruppen really addresses that need to be involved in the design, to feel like it's your own home. You know, it's much more likely to have people who are gonna (sic) live in it involved in it (Senior development manager – state government #1).

Specifically, the project resonated with the government objective of facilitating greater diversity and housing choice in the Perth housing market:

The benefit of the baugruppen is the diversity or the design aspect (Senior development manager – state government #1).

OK, so we had an objective obviously to have more diverse housing typologies, more diverse sizes of apartments. We have 1,2,3 bedrooms, 2x1's, 2x2's 3x2's suiting a whole range of people from downsizers to families, people who want to work from home (Senior development manager – state government #3).

The alignment with urban consolidation narratives is also evident in the marketing of the project. To illustrate, figure 6.10 shows the banner pictured on the home page of the official baugruppen website.



**Figure 6.10: Baugruppe at WGV website homepage (Baugruppe, 2020)**

The marketers have chosen to associate the project with the *lifestyle* benefits of the project, continuing the idea that more compact urban living comes with greater (cosmopolitan) amenity, such as cafes and organic vegetable markets.

As also described, the project fits with the current interest in providing ‘good’ density. Specifically, it aligns with the architecture focus in urban consolidation policy and narrative. In 2016 a local university funded Kristian Ring (a German architect and promoter of the baugruppen concept, and author of a key text used to communicate the benefits ‘*Self-Made City*’ (Ring, 2014)), to visit Perth to provide various opportunities for guest lectures, community and industry events to promote the idea. Kristian Ring’s book provides many *design* examples of built form outcomes of baugruppen projects in Berlin. She introduces the ‘stacked house’ approach to multi-unit design, which enables comfortable family living (including multiple bedrooms) with abundant light by stacking the traditional (albeit more compact) house vertically and minimising shared walls. Therefore, the key actors involved in the promotion of the baugruppen project come from an architectural background and believe that the reintroduction of architectural design into multi-residential development in Australia could ameliorate or at least improve on sub-optimality in the housing currently supplied. This idea has resonated across state governments in Australia as evidenced by the abundance of demonstration projects and architectural competitions.

### 6.5.4.3 Unique land arrangements

Even with a champion and an alignment of government objectives, however, the realisation of a baugruppen demonstration project required one crucial ingredient: land. Securing an appropriate piece of land (in terms of planning regulations) and financing that land collectively is a complex and difficult process for any group pursuing a cooperative arrangement similar to the baugruppen. WGV offered a unique land arrangement. The development sits on a former school site which was owned by the Department of Education until it was purchased by the state government land development agency in 2008. The planning process for the now flagship precinct was unusually long and the objectives for the site changed significantly in the years after its purchase<sup>9</sup>. An initial concept design presented traditional low density suburbia, however, following community consultation and backing by the progressive local government it was decided that the site could act as a test-bed for how to do medium density development in the suburbs well. This extensive period of collaboration across government provided the time to negotiate a range of innovations that were not initially included (such as the certification as a One Planet Living development). It is therefore credited by many stakeholders as one of the primary reasons the project was able to achieve such high sustainability and design standards (this was articulated in the WGV learnings workshop).

The specific lot assigned to the baugruppen demonstration also had some unique conditions. In this flagship medium density precinct there were already two developments being constructed which needed to sell to market. As a senior government stakeholder explained:

So then there was the argument that we had an apartment site that we didn't want to sell straight-away anyway because we already had two private developers building apartments. So we had York Property who were building Evermore apartments and we had Contempo who were building Thrive development at WGV. So there were two medium-sized apartment buildings already going in. And they had to sell. Obviously they had to pre-sell to the same market. It was actually ideal to put something on the last lot, Lot 2 that was something a bit different (Senior development manager – state government #3).

According to the state government land development agency, then, it was actually *preferable* for them to hold this lot to ensure the viability of the private developments occurring concurrently on the other lots. The rare opportunity for land to be held for the period of group formation was therefore key to its appeal and viability from the perspective of the government agency.

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<sup>9</sup> The history of the WGV project development was gleaned from community and academic events attended by the researcher, including a workshop that considered the lessons learned from the process.

## 6.5.5 Considering government intention and potential outcomes

### 6.5.5.1 Replicability

The Landcorp website describes the baugruppen demonstration at WGV as a “replicable” development that provides a pathway for other groups to realise similar projects. It states:

Working with the University of Western Australia, we will document the process as the Baugruppe(n) Demonstration Project develops, to provide a guide for other groups (Baugruppe, 2020).

The idea, as understood at the stakeholder meetings and information sessions, is that the baugruppen partners have the time and networking resources to break down some of the barriers that regularly face community members who wish to pursue alternative housing arrangements. For example, the team has been successful in gaining the support of a commercial bank that is prepared to provide the unconventional loan arrangements required. Therefore, the demonstration may be able to document legal and financial arrangements to point aspiring cooperative developers in the right direction.

The potential for grass-roots, community groups to truly replicate this project, though, will be dependent on whether the *opportunities* and *advantages* provided to this particular project will be afforded to others. As was described earlier, it is important to recognise the uniqueness of the land arrangements for this demonstration project. The government holding of land assets is unconventional in the Australian context. As one local planner stated:

If you want to put restrictions on, then don't sell the land. City of <local government name removed> should be developing it itself. Do you know what I mean? We can't have it both ways.

and a state government development agency worker suggested that:

A lot of it is community driven where maybe there is no specific role for a big agency like <state land development agency> (Senior development manager – state government #4).

Such views suggest that conditional land sales would be rare. Regarding potential subsidies to housing cooperatives, this too seems unlikely. Western Australian state government policy (Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage), for instance, declares that:

State owned land is disposed where it is surplus to government requirements and has the potential to be utilised in private ownership at highest and best use in the interest of the State.

Where land is sold, Government seeks optimal benefit on disposal in terms of both financial return and development outcomes (Department of Planning Lands and Heritage, 2020).

Note that the guidelines require financial return *and* development outcome, not one or the other. The perception that subsidising land is inappropriate and unlikely was also articulated at the local government level:

We actually develop our land and sell it to the private market. We use that money that we get to develop other community-based infrastructure as well as entry to other land development opportunities. If I was asked: is it appropriate for the city to discount its land? I'd say: probably not. The market Australia's based on is sort of a free market principles (sic) (Planner – local government #2).

Researchers have previously found that the most effective way governments can facilitate such models is by holding or subsidising land (Crabtree, 2018; Sharam, 2020). In this WGV case, the government has held the land for a full two years as the participant group is formed. The guide for future residents, however, will be related to financial and legal arrangements, managing competing design expectations amongst participants, and architectural suggestions for long-term multi-residential development. There is no suggestion that this *land arrangement* will be replicated by government, thereby limiting its replicability.

### 6.5.5.2 Beneficiaries

One of the primary purported benefits of the baugruppen model is that it can deliver relative affordability. That is, it can enable a 25-40% saving compared to the traditional developer model (Sharam, 2020). For this initial project though, 30% equity is required from participants. With the 1-bedroom module starting from approximately \$400,000, this will require a minimum upfront contribution of \$130,000 even for the most affordable option. Therefore, this current demonstration project cannot be considered affordable. This affordability issue was apparent in the stakeholder meetings. When it became clear that the minimum equity contribution was likely to be at least 30%, a stakeholder from the state Housing Department (whose main role is affordable and social housing management) asked: “*hang on, what problem are we actually trying to solve here?*”. While the potential affordability gains promised by the model had brought multiple parties to the table hopeful for meaningful government intervention, it became clear that this model would produce *cost effective*, rather than truly affordable, housing.



In the case of the WGV baugruppen, government resources are being targeted to secure (better quality, needs-based) housing for households who arguably already have the capacity to purchase high quality housing independently. This raises some questions about the legitimate role of government in this space. Government stakeholders, for example, should take heed of emerging critiques regarding the social equity implications of baugruppen housing in Germany (Chiodelli & Baglione, 2014; Droste, 2015). These are suggesting that it is generally taken up by middle class households with high intellectual and financial capacity, and, if government action is not targeted accurately it can produce social segregation and exclusion.

The baugruppen partners have now been recruiting participants for two years, and even after this amount of time Landcorp has been forced to step in and purchase five of the dwellings to get it over the line. It is interesting to note, however, that the recruitment of participants has bubbled alongside the attempt and failure (or ongoing battle) of various other grassroots co-housing and cooperative ventures in Perth<sup>10</sup>. These projects have anecdotally faced issues with excessive planning approval delays, as well as difficulties in both finding and holding appropriate land. There is seemingly some niche demand for such projects in Perth; however the WGV baugruppen project has had difficulty attracting this demand. In this context, perhaps a more fruitful role of government could have been to assist an *existing* (preferably low income or particular cohort, such as a seniors group) to realise an alternative arrangement by project managing (and documenting) the various challenges they faced in the general market. This approach could more directly pave the way for replicability *and* the beneficiaries of the project would be more closely aligned with the social and economic selling points of the arrangement.

## 6.6 Chapter summary

This chapter has presented three vignettes that delve into the rationales and implications of government intervention into urban housing in Perth. The three cases (vignettes) have been intended to have been read and understood as reflective of the next stage in urban growth management in Australia. It flows on directly from Chapter 5. The following chapter will discuss the themes that cut across the three vignettes. It will then position these findings within the existing urban planning and housing literature as set out in Chapters 2 and 3.

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<sup>10</sup> see: <https://greenfabric.com.au/our-projects/> for details of previous failed and successful projects.



# Chapter 7 Discussion

## 7.1 Chapter introduction

The preceding chapters examined the most recent urban housing interventions focused on medium density greyfields redevelopment. Using the WGV precinct as a mechanism for accessing current intervention logic and practice in this space, the vignettes explored the policy design *in situ*, the way that problems and solutions were understood, and the implications of these problematisations in relation to the social and environmental housing outcomes. This chapter summarises the key insights revealed by the three vignettes and reflects on their significance in relation to the literature presented in Chapter 2 and 3. First, the features of the ‘policy design’ (i.e. the logic and practice of urban housing intervention) are outlined. Second, in response to the question ‘what is going on here’, an argument is put forward that the missing middle (and current trends) represent a new sustainability ‘fix’ that effectively holds together competing interests in a way that maintains, and advances, the status quo. The implications of this diagnosis are then presented. This chapter argues that researchers interested in greyfields redevelopment need to more closely scrutinise the intentions and actions of government to determine whether the actual logic and practice aligns with rhetorical goals. The findings suggest that the current logic and practice risks de-railing the progressive potential of innovations. Therefore, progressive researchers and housing advocates may benefit from re-orienting the goals of transition to more abstract values, rather than instrumental solutions.

## 7.2 Policy design: summary of approach

This study has applied a novel policy-centred lens to the logic and practice of urban housing intervention. Drawing on policy design theories and using a social constructionist perspective, the lens consisted of three components: mapping the policy design; examining the problem and solution narratives informing current interventions; and reflecting on the implications of these narratives. The housing innovations at the WGV were analysed *in situ*, with the problem definition (or ‘problematisations’) interpreted based on what was actually implemented, rather than what was rhetorically promised. This provided the space to critically reflect on the objectives of government and the political dimensions of policy *goals* (as well as the means).

Policy design theorists have argued that mapping the ‘architecture’ of the logic and practice of government practice is a useful exercise for accessing the political dimensions of policy goal formulation, and for providing greater insight into how problems and solutions are interpreted in current urban housing interventions (Bobrow, 2006; Schneider & Sidney, 2009). As was emphasised in Chapter 3, policy design for this thesis has only been utilised from the perspective of design as noun. It is not assumed that policy is designed or crafted in a rational-instrumental manner, but rather the outputs (logic and practice) illuminate various tensions and ideas. Howlett’s (2009) nested model of policy design has proved useful predominantly in imagining policy as possessing an ‘architecture’ and in its analytical separation of the policy goals (logic) and the means (practice). This thesis has relied on a more social constructionist approach in reflecting on the policy design than depicted in Howlett’s model. The research process of this study has involved a greater focus on the problem narratives and the implications of those narratives than Howlett’s emphasis on categorising the tools and ideas evident.

### 7.3 The logic and practice of current urban housing intervention

The following section highlights some significant characteristics of the logic and practice of current urban housing intervention (the policy design) that were illuminated by the three vignettes. As will be shown, the rhetorical objectives of the WGV project do not align with the actions and problematisations evident in the vignettes. These findings unsettle some of the assumptions in the urban planning and housing literature and suggest a more cautious and critical research approach is required in relation to greyfields redevelopment and government intervention.

#### *Demonstration: material outcomes*

WGV has been lauded as an exemplar, sustainable greyfields precinct. With the tagline “innovation through demonstration”, this government-led redevelopment project aimed to showcase the potential of medium density built form in a traditional, low density, suburban neighbourhood. As was outlined in Chapter 2, *precinct-scale* development has been increasingly viewed as good practice in greyfields redevelopment (Murray et al., 2015; Thomson et al., 2019), and the WGV project, with its One Planet Living accreditation, has been held up by urban sustainability researchers as a promising example of the benefits of this approach (Byrne et al., 2019; Wiktorowicz et al., 2018). It is worth considering, though, *who* the project was demonstrating to, and *what* was being demonstrated. Reflecting on these questions has provided fresh insight into the intervention objectives and the likely outcomes if the project is ‘successful’.

WGV demonstrates the value of a strong government role in coordinating redevelopment projects for achieving above average sustainability outcomes. This supports the many researchers who have argued that the social and environmental benefits of urban consolidation require direct government intervention (S. Campbell, 2016; Dodson, 2012; van den Nouwelant et al., 2015). The vignettes, though, do not suggest that the state government was demonstrating the potential of this approach *to itself*. Instead, the logic was that each of the various innovations (housing/ technological) would be tested and showcased at the ‘living laboratory’, and that by demonstrating their feasibility and potential, they would be translated into mainstream development practice. From this perspective, WGV resembles an exhibition of products, models, and ideas, in which housing consumers and the development industry are able to purchase or adopt the ones that appeal. The implication of this is that, even though WGV is presented as a good example of government-led, precinct-scale development, the outcome sought (and likely) is a flow of these products incrementally into existing practice. In other words, the replicable innovation is not the precinct itself, but the individual housing and technological models demonstrated within it.

Analysis of the particular housing innovations indicates that, if they were to translate into mainstream practice, it would represent a shift *away* from what many consider best practice (precincts, TOD, mixed use development). As was illustrated in Vignette 2, the key demonstration at Gen Y House involved overcoming local planning loopholes to increase yield to three (instead of two) dwellings on a *single lot*. Promoted as density by stealth, the Gen Y house project is intended to showcase a replicable model for subtly achieving suburban intensification. The findings therefore suggest that, if successful, mainstreaming of the Gen Y House typology would generate further micro land fragmentation, and undermine the future potential of coordinated at-scale redevelopment.

It is also possible that this fragmentation will occur without meaningfully increasing population densities. While an existing family home on a suburban lot could have housed a family of 4-5, the three units will house a maximum of 6 (3 couples) though this is likely to be less. In other words, replication of the model on suburban lots represents a similar incremental and small-scale subdivision that is currently *lamented* by researchers and planners alike. In addition, one of the key innovative features of the flagship WGV precinct is its location *within* low density suburbia, which is not currently connected to primary public transit. As was illustrated by Vignette 1, the missing middle explicitly problematises a lack of medium density housing in established suburbia. In light of the incremental innovation approach being taken, addressing the missing middle is likely to “roll on” (Crommelin et al., 2017) in a fairly *disjointed* and piecemeal manner, and not in line with the ‘good practice’ compact city espoused.

These characteristics of the current policy design suggest that, in practice, the process and outcomes of suburban intensification will be more complex than is currently acknowledged by medium density housing advocates (scholars and policy makers alike). There has been broad agreement amongst urban researchers and policy makers that the liveability of our cities requires a shift from low density, detached housing towards a more compact urban built form (Frank et al., 2019; Lehmann, 2017; Newton & Glackin, 2014; Wegmann, 2020). As shown though, the facilitation of rather low densities across the suburbs is quite a departure from the transit-oriented development approach that has rhetorically been supported over several decades. Instead, the findings suggest that the on-the-ground reality arising from the current urban housing intervention logic and practice will more closely resemble what Charmes and Keil (2015) have described as “post-suburbanisation”:

It does not affect all suburbs, and resistance to change is strong, but the changes are significant in many places. It is important to state that we are not talking here about a distinct typology – suburbs versus post-suburbs – but rather a historical change in direction: a process of de-densification (classical suburbanism) is partly converted, inverted or subverted into a process that involves densification, complexification, and diversification of the suburbanisation process ( p.581).

While urban planning researchers have previously argued that the messy realities of urban development are not adequately acknowledged in urban consolidation policy (Dodson, 2012; Ford & March, 2012; Forster, 2006), they have less commonly acknowledged these messy realities as resulting explicitly from the government intervention logic and practice. This implies that government objectives and practices in the greyfields require closer scrutiny (this argument is expanded later in this chapter).

#### *Demonstration: affordability outcomes*

Improving housing affordability was woven into the public rationales observed across all three vignettes. For example, the delivery of the missing middle is deemed necessary for improving housing affordability via the provision of diverse (smaller) building typologies. The Gen Y House was explicitly rationalised as providing housing ‘choice’ (and thereby affordability) for the next generation of homeowners. Finally, the baugruppen demonstration is marketed as providing more *cost-effective* multi-residential housing that delivers improved design outcomes without additional cost. Despite these public narratives though, the vignettes suggest that housing affordability is unlikely to flow from the mainstreaming of these innovations, and that, if successful, they may actually exacerbate inequality.

As was evident in Vignette 2, the only ‘solution’ to unaffordability provided here is the provision of smaller housing units, which generates ever-diminishing returns for the next generation(s) of home owners. At the same time, the key beneficiaries of the Gen Y House are likely to be existing land owners whose suburban land now has additional redevelopment (and capital gain) potential. The showcasing of architectural design at the WGV precinct, and the introduction of a new project management role for architects in the baugruppen project, also indicates that it was these new urban elites, and not the next generation, that would be beneficiaries of the successful mainstreaming of innovations.

The limited affordability and equity outcomes of urban consolidation policies have previously been documented by urban planning scholars (Beer et al., 2006; McKenzie et al., 2013; Yates, 2001). Randolph warned in 2006 that infill policies, calibrated as they were at the time, would likely generate social segregation due to the over-representation of investors in the sector and the over-reliance on the private sectors to deliver urban policy objectives. The findings are consistent with these predictions, however, they additionally illustrate how social segregation is generated by treating housing ‘diversity’ as a proxy for affordability. For example, the property ladder logic evident in the affordability narratives at WGV suggests a growing alignment of housing ‘choice’ with economic capacity. Even if all ‘diverse’ affordable units were sold to first home buyers, the current innovations seem to contribute to the exacerbation of social and material segregation based on economic segregation. As implied by this logic, if you are lucky enough to reach the top of the ‘property ladder’ you can own a house and yard even if that is superfluous to your needs, whereas a young family should accept the housing that they can afford even if it doesn’t really meet their practical, material, or near-term aspirational needs.

## 7.4 The missing middle: a new sustainability fix?

Based on critical examination of the current policy design, this thesis argues that the logic and practice of the missing middle is reflective of an emergent sustainability ‘fix’. As was outlined in Chapter 3, a ‘sustainability fix’ is a semi-stable narrative that effectively holds together divergent interests and ideas in way that enables the status quo to be maintained (While et al., 2004). In line with the emphasis on policy design, a ‘fix’ is interpreted as the mediated outcome (the ‘architecture’) of contested interests and contextual pressures. This is a compromise of sorts, however a ‘fix’ usefully draws attention to the way that apparent compromises are often old ideas merely repackaged in ways that maintain (and advance) longstanding objectives and interests.

One of the key justifications for the diagnosis of ‘fix’ is that the narrative of the missing middle appeared to be holding together divergent interpretations about the problems and solutions in the greyfields. In particular, instances of cross-talk were observed where stakeholders perceived agreement, while actually referring to different things. For example, in Vignette 1 a fairly typical-looking 4-6 storey apartment development was spruiked as a missing middle exemplar at an industry breakfast, despite the descriptions of the missing middle at the same event reflecting much lower density typologies. Similarly, while there was apparent enthusiasm for the new focus on the missing middle from stakeholders in the interviews and across the WGV media, there were contradictory interpretations of its spatial application amongst government stakeholders. For example, one interviewee referred to the need for missing middle housing *along* corridors and in key activity centres, while another interpreted missing middle housing as applying *beyond* these sites which would be better suited to high densities built form.

In another contradiction that suggests a ‘fix’ at play, the Gen Y House vignette illuminated cross-talk amongst stakeholders in which medium density housing was both *in demand* (requiring a supply solution) while simultaneously requiring careful ‘hand holding’ of potential buyers to make the sell. Despite the rhetorical marketing suggesting that young people are demanding a more cosmopolitan lifestyle and medium density is lacking compared to demand, the entire WGV precinct effort appeared to be geared towards *generating* demand by demonstrating ‘liveable’ designs. This apparent contradiction seemed to raise no questions, with the ‘fix’ effectively holding together two counter narratives.

These examples of cross-talk suggest that the missing middle metaphor is an effective concept for creating a perception of shared interests and concerns. In this case, the key *consensus* point in the current logic and practice is centred on the idea of ‘density by design’. In Vignette 1 we saw how the design focus in the industry narrative around the missing middle enabled fairly typical (albeit well-designed) apartments to be legitimised in traditionally low density suburbs. Similarly, the Gen Y House and baugruppen demonstrations presented design solutions to problems of unaffordability and lack of housing diversity. As was argued in Chapter 2, urban planning and housing researchers have mostly viewed the design focus in the latest logic and practice of urban housing intervention as an acknowledgement of previous failings or as the maturing of urban consolidation implementation. However, analysis of the policy design suggests that this design emphasis was predominantly a strategy for facilitating the development of more housing. As is argued below, the showcasing of architectural design appears to be a current *solution* that addresses the problem of under-development, rather than a commitment to improved design.



The repackaging of density by design demonstrates the characteristics of a ‘sustainability fix’ in the way that it responds to (but doesn’t necessarily resolve) various contextual pressures (While et al., 2004, p. 551). As While, Jonas & Gibbs (2004) explain:

...the notion of an *urban* sustainability fix draws attention to the particular dilemmas urban regimes in different cities currently face in balancing economic, social, and environmental demands (emphasis original, p.551).

First, the current shift in spatial focus to the suburbs, and emphasis on subtle designs, can be understood as a response to contextual apartment market pressures. In 2016/17 when the majority of the empirical observations for this research were made, the Western Australian housing market had been negatively impacted by the end of the mining boom (Rowley & James, 2017; Shepherd, 2016). Apartment development had accelerated during the boom in response to population growth and increased demand for accommodation suitable for FIFO<sup>11</sup> workers. After a peak in 2014, however, housing economists warned of a looming oversupply of units and a slowing market for higher density housing as the price of free-standing homes eased (Jasper, 2016). As a bank Chief Economist stated in 2019 in a news article about the Perth apartment market:

We're now well into our deepest and most prolonged downturn in dwelling construction since at least the early 1980s, and of course that means some of the oversupply has been absorbed by lesser new supply (Langford, quoted in: Piesse, 2019).

Therefore, the emergence of the new ‘fix’ (including the design and spatial features) coincides with an economic downturn in Western Australia, as well as a looming oversupply of apartments across Australia’s cities.

Second, during this period there has been growing criticism of the high density apartment construction industry, particularly in Sydney, with various academics and commentators warning of systemic issues in the regulation of high rise buildings (Easthope & Randolph, 2016; Nicholls, O’Neill, & Selvaratnam, 2019). This culminated recently (2019/20), when the residents of two separate towers were unexpectedly forced from their units as literal cracks emerged in the structural elements of the buildings (Crommelin, Randolph, Easthope, & Loosemore, 2019). Many had been warning of this eventuation for years, as an era of self-regulation had eroded the robust regulatory frameworks that had previously existed (for example: Easthope et al., 2012). These events received a lot of media attention, creating uncertainty in the value of high rise units more generally.

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<sup>11</sup> FIFO is an acronym for “Fly-in, Fly-out”. FIFO work refers to working a long distance from an employee’s place of residence using a roster of, for example, two weeks straight followed by a week or two off. An influx of people living in Perth and working FIFO rosters increased demand for small, affordable, ‘lock-up-and-leave’ type accommodation. This demand equated to units – with a preference for basic, no-fuss, one-bedroom dwellings.

In the context of a slowing apartment market and concerns around the *quality* (read: value) of existing higher density products, the emergent focus on *medium* density products with new spatial application provides an opportunity for developers to *pivot* away from a problematic or lagging market into fresh new market segments. Analysis of the policy design provided some insight into how these pressures for new urban economic growth are being resolved. For example, a toning down of density (through low to mid rise typologies) was observed, including an emphasis on design innovation that promised to improve the outcomes for neighbourhoods. The tagline for the Gen Y House ‘density by stealth’ suggests that the ‘density by design’ marketing was aimed at appeasing the existing suburban community concerns that higher density housing will change the look and feel of their area.

There was also evidence that stakeholders were seeking to re-frame or re-package urban intensification objectives (density & development). This was indicated by the way that interviewees emphasised the importance of winning the community’s hearts and minds, and *selling* the benefits of (good) density. Others suggested that the very terms ‘urban consolidation’ & ‘density’ were being avoided in favour of ‘housing diversity’ and ‘liveability’. In this context, the pursuit of the missing middle can be interpreted as a way of meeting pressure to facilitate new markets of capital for developers (in a context of bad press, ongoing community resistance, and a downturn in the traditional higher density housing market) via the re-packaging and marketing of density.

## 7.5 Productive mechanisms of the fix

Beyond the consensus around design, the vignettes also highlight some specific mechanisms that illustrate *how* the fix effectively holds together the various interests and dilemmas outlined above. Three such mechanisms were identified and are outlined below.

### *Future-oriented solutions*

First, the problematisation of under-development appears to be productive in the way that it legitimises and mobilises solutions that are *future-oriented*. This is because it emphasises a lack of medium density housing in the suburbs, and in doing so suggests that this can be remedied with new designs, innovative housing models, and facilitative planning regulations. The use of demonstration projects at WGV is reflective of this logic, as it responds to the ‘problem’ of a lack of real life examples, and a lack of skills and experience in delivering high quality medium density housing. The future orientation of the rationalities and solutions seen at WGV is productive in that it actively decentres considerations about if and why sub-optimal medium density built form outcomes are *currently* being generated by focussing on what is lacking, and mobilising energy around innovation. Even existing poor quality urban housing could, through the current framing, be rationalised as arising from a lack of experience with this type of product, rather than systemic issues or profit-driven incentives that are likely to be driving impacting mediocre built form outcomes.

Similarly, the idea that there is a current lack of medium density product provides a renewed ability for the government and industry to sell good quality medium density housing without the baggage of poor historical outcomes. As was outlined earlier in this chapter, the ability to ‘pivot’ towards new products and spatiality is not *only* an attempt to locate new opportunities for capital accumulation, it is *also* the mediated response to a growing number of issues in the current higher density development market. This productive mechanism of the new ‘fix’ demonstrates the persistence of a trend noted previously by MacCallum and Hopkins (2011) in which Perth’s official planning documents present a “notion of history as agent-free” (p.496). The findings indicate that this continues to be an extremely effective mechanism for progressing existing goals while never having to tackle issues with ‘actually existing’ housing outcomes. It is also an effective approach that glosses over the active role that governments have played in producing them.

### *Moral imperatives*

As was illuminated in Vignette 2, the marketing of the Gen Y House project was suggestive in relation to the housing ‘choices’ the next generation *should* make. For example, in the calls for the next generation to accept more energy & space “efficient” homes there is a sense that the achievement of sustainable urban growth rests on their shoulders, and that they should accept smaller housing for the greater good of the city. Similarly, the idea that young people should be patient and “work their way up the property ladder” admonishes the next generation for seeking housing that suits their material needs unless it fits their (minimal) budget. This finding is a good example of the way that “the discursive construction of social issues does the job of selling *as well as* telling” (emphasis added, Kemeny, 2004, p. 79).

These moral arguments provide an insight into the *utility* of well-worn urban sustainability logics (sustainability-as-density, sustainability-as-development) which appear to act as a sort of boundary controller that can be drawn upon to urge those who may not agree with (or benefit from!) urban intensification to cooperate for the greater good. These moral arguments use urban sustainability narratives to set up the legitimacy of ‘solutions’ that are oriented around new supply and smaller dwellings. As was revealed in the analysis though, the real beneficiaries of such solutions are generally those with existing capital, while the outcomes for the next generation are ‘progressively’ eroded. The moral imperative observed in the Gen Y House narratives aligns with previous findings by Moore (2013) who, in examining urban governance in Toronto, noted:

The abstraction of New Urbanist principles into ‘best practice’ must therefore be understood as the *discursive process of stabilising social actions and conduct necessary to reproduce the values and norms of the most powerful* alignments of development interests which have (thus far) won out in the cultural struggle for typification of ‘the way things are done’ (emphasis added, p.15).

The findings above provide an example of this discursive process at work in another context. It provides an account of *persuasion* in most recent urban housing intervention narratives in Australia that has previously been noted by MacCallum & Hopkins (2011), Forster (2006), and Randolph (2006).

#### *Indirect sustainability logics*

The third mechanism through which the current ‘fix’ appears to hold is through the *indirect* nature of the sustainability logics that form the basis of the current rationalities. The WGV precinct achieved several notable improvements on business-as-usual development and incorporated a range of new technologies and design innovations that could be considered welcome additions to future mainstream housing construction. For example, the experimentation with micro-grids, grey water infrastructure, and the solar passive design housing requirements are all notable and worthwhile. As explained in Chapter 4, this thesis has been less interested in these technological energy, water, and waste-related sustainability innovations. Instead, the analysis has focused on the more abstract *housing* innovations including the pursuit of medium density typologies, the concept of the missing middle, the use of demonstration projects, and the heightened emphasis on design and architecture.

While the environmental credentials of renewable energy, water efficiencies, and solar passive design are fairly straightforward, the ‘sustainability’ credentials of the housing innovations examined in this thesis are arguably more complicated. For example, housing diversity is a key objective of the interventions at WGV and is increasingly the rhetorical motivation for ‘finding’ the missing middle. As part of the re-framing of urban consolidation goals, enhancing housing diversity promises many of the same things as the ‘sustainable’ compact city model including: cosmopolitanism, affordable housing options, smaller (more efficient) dwelling typologies; and economies-of-scale that make public transit viable. The pursuit of housing diversity, though, remains an indirect intervention that relies on the increase in densities and a new supply of diverse dwellings to achieve such outcomes. What these interventions do *not* do is directly provide new transport infrastructure, develop localised retail, or construct housing that will remain affordable in perpetuity for future generations. Despite years of critique from scholars noting the actual sub-optimal outcomes achieved via urban intensification processes, the WGV ‘solutions’ rest on existing logics that suggest that environmental and social outcomes *flow naturally* from density and development without actually ensuring it occurs. In other words, the current policy logic assumes that the social and environmental benefits of urban intensification will ‘trickle down’ via the new supply of higher density housing products.

The legitimisation of these indirect interventions is arguably only possible due to two established urban planning orthodoxies - ‘sustainability-as-density’ (Quastel et al., 2012) and ‘sustainability-as-development’, which have persisted in urban growth logics throughout Australia’s history. The acceptance of ‘under-development’ as a key problematisation in the greyfields fundamentally rests on each of these established sustainability logics. For example, the need to intensify the city is based on the idea that density is the key independent variable determining social, environmental, and economic urban housing outcomes (Dodson & Gleeson, 2007). As was illustrated in Chapter 5, ‘density’ has at various times been considered the problem and the solution, however, the reliance on density to achieve urban housing objectives has been consistent. The vignettes highlight the way that medium density housing has become the latest housing typology to be lauded as a solution to unsustainable urban growth.

The problematisation of under-development also reflects the persistent calibration of urban housing interventions in favour of housing production. While the terms ‘urban consolidation’ and ‘compact city’ suggests a form of constraint, urban housing interventions have consistently focused on new housing supply, at higher densities, within the existing city boundaries. This continues to be reflected at WGV which is primarily oriented around facilitating an increase in the supply of medium density infill housing.

The twin sustainability logics resemble what Wachsmuth and Angelo (2018) describe as grey sustainability logic. Whereas green sustainability ideologies are derived from nature (for example, creating public green space), grey ideologies are found in particular physical built form or technological outcomes (such as in higher density development). Grey sustainability rationalities are characterised by complexity and the favouring of experts. As Wachsmuth and Angelo (2018) explain, grey sustainability's "illusion of transparency privileges the ability of thought, language, and design to transform society" and represents a "technocratic imaginary that informs planning" (p.1043). This can be seen at WGV where the innovations favoured are delivered by sustainability experts from universities and by architects specialising in design.

This theoretical separation of green and grey sustainability knowledge provides a useful lens for considering *how* such ideas perform important "work" (Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018, p. 1056) (Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2016, p.1056). Across the vignettes, the grey sustainability logics (as density, as development) appeared to be useful "intuitive signifier(s)" (p.1052) of other goals without having to explicitly promise their delivery. For example, where 'diversity' is assumed to translate to 'affordability' then the achievement of housing diversity is able to gain a tick for affordable housing outcomes, but it escapes the claim of affordability directly, thus the project does not need to prove it was (meaningfully) provided. This example demonstrates the process identified by Davidson (2010) who found that these technocratic sustainability logics are effective in creating a "chain of equivalences" in which "signification essentially shifts along the signifying chain" (p.400). The productive capacity of this is captured well by Charmes & Keil (2015) who argue that the:

...gravitas gained by sustainable development ideology contributes to silencing debates on political and social issues. Sustainability itself becomes the *stand-in* for better (sub)urbanization and is not usually exposed to critical scrutiny (emphasis added, Charmes & Keil, 2015).

The missing middle 'fix' can therefore be seen to be 'held together' via indirect sustainability logics that are productive in avoiding the measurement of 'actually existing' social and environmental objectives.

## 7.6 Responding to existing greyfields research

The discussion below outlines three key ways in which this project has responded to the existing urban planning and housing literature on greyfields redevelopment. First, a descriptive overview of the most recent phase of urban growth management in Australia has been provided. Second, the findings draw attention to the active ways that governments have contributed (and continue to contribute) to the mediocre and inequitable urban housing outcomes that are lamented by researchers and policy makers alike. This finding unsettles the common diagnosis of urban implementation failure and reinserts government agency in the production of urban housing outcomes. Finally, it is argued that the policy-centred lens employed in this project provides a viable approach for overcoming the ‘schism’ in housing research.

### *A new iteration of urban growth management*

So far this chapter has proposed that the missing middle, and the interventions seen at WGV, resemble an emergent urban housing ‘fix’ in Australia. The mechanisms through which the fix is successfully being held together, identified above, indicate that the policy design is not merely the outcome of a happy *compromise* amongst competing interests. Rather, the logic and practice of the missing middle fix appears to be a productive (albeit temporary) resolve that *maintains* existing interests and objectives in new ways. This diagnosis supports previous conclusions made by Hurley, Taylor and Dodson (2017) who found that:

Each iteration of consolidation policy prompts innovative responses from both communities and developers, and, in turn, policy reforms seek to appease both interests while delivering on urban policy objectives (p.130).

In line with this conclusion, the current fix is interpreted as a creative response especially to pressures on the apartment market and persistent community resistance to urban intensification. Therefore, the new logic and practice associated with the missing middle appeared to be playing an active role in repackaging existing objectives and enabling the continuation of the status quo.

These findings contribute to the urban planning and housing research by illuminating the characteristics of the most recent ‘iteration’ of urban consolidation policy in Australia. Specifically, the empirically-grounded insights presented in the vignettes build on previous urban planning research in Australia that has traced the various stages of urban growth planning governance (Bunker & Searle, 2009; Gleeson & Low, 2000a; Gurran & Phibbs, 2013; Hurley et al., 2017; MacCallum & Hopkins, 2011; McGuirk, 2005; Sandercock, 2005). Chapter 5 drew on this rich historical scholarship to identify continuities and changes in the logic and practice of urban housing intervention over the years. In the most recent phase, key objectives persist while new features emerge. It was shown that the current housing innovations continue to be driven by the overarching goal of economic growth via housing development, and these objectives continue to trump social and environmental objectives unless they directly impact that growth. This finding is consistent with others who have found a similar prioritisation in Australia housing policy objectives over time (K. Jacobs, 2015a; Weller & O’Neill, 2014).

At the same time, the historical analysis reminds us that the way that housing problems have been rationalised *has* changed over the years. In the new fix, the *missing* product is now deemed to be the more subtle *medium density* typologies and these are ‘under-developed’ across suburbia – not just along corridors or in designated activity centres as has previously been articulated. These rationalities reinvigorate the old new urbanisms that put forward architectural design solutions, although they are more recently practiced via university partnerships, flagship demonstrations, and ‘living laboratory’ arrangements. The observation of these features supports what Gleeson described in 2012 as an emergent ‘new urbanology’ in which scientific approaches were infiltrating urban scholarship and glitzy, populist urbanism was gaining prominence in policy circles. The “new urban epoch”, he argued, “is marked by the simultaneous blooming and withering of old and new urbanisms” (Gleeson, 2012, p. 934). The findings support that assessment, and provide some tangible examples of these trends in the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention.



### *Government agency*

Analysis of the policy design *in situ* has indicated that governments actively contribute to the mediocre and inequitable housing outcomes arising in a context of urban consolidation. These findings unsettle the common diagnosis of implementation failure in empirical accounts of urban consolidation practices. As argued in Chapter 2, much of this research continues to assume that urban consolidation goals remain intact, but that the implementation process has ineffective or inadequate. Despite rhetorical support for TOD and precinct-scale development, the vignettes demonstrated that the current approach is moving *away* from such ideals. While WGV is considered an exemplar greyfields precinct, the demonstration site was revealed to be more of an exhibition of separate ideas for the development market, rather than a demonstration of the need for direct government oversight. If the individual innovations, such as new subtle housing designs, were to be translated into mainstream practice, as is the goal, this would produce much of the same piecemeal and fragmented intensification that is currently lamented.

The existing diagnoses of implementation failure are therefore limiting the ability for researchers and practitioners to grapple with the challenges that will arise through the partial and complex intensification of the suburban realm. Recognition of the actually existing logic and practice of urban housing intervention may provide the scope to imagine and advocate for multiple sustainable and equitable (sub)urban futures, rather than applying one lever – intensification – across the entire metropolitan region. The findings have therefore revealed some of the complexities and contradictions of the goals of transitioning from the “suburban” to the “urban” (Newton & Glackin, 2014) which, it is argued, require future research attention in Australian urban planning and housing scholarship.

Similarly, urban planning and housing researchers have commonly taken the affordability ‘goals’ of urban consolidation at face value. However, analysis of the policy design indicates that urban housing interventions (including the Gen Y House project) are *not* actively addressing a policy problem of housing unaffordability, but are instead aimed at tackling the ‘problem’ of under-development. The key implication of this is that the housing ‘solutions’ are principally aimed at facilitating the production of *more* medium density infill housing, and not at improving affordability. These findings align with previous research by Gurran and Phibbs (2015) which revealed that the majority of ‘affordable housing interventions’ represent mere “busywork” that distracts away from meaningful engagement with deeper structural issues. This research has therefore respond to the call by Jacobs (2015a) for urban housing researchers to consider policy *goals* in a more critical light and to move away from the belief that governments move rationally and logically towards evidence-based practices.

### *Overcoming the schism*

The policy-centred lens employed in this project has provided a useful approach for overcoming the schism in housing policy research. Chapter 3 provided an overview of critical urban theory as the dominant lens through which urban development has been critically assessed. This thesis did not set out to disprove the neoliberalisation diagnosis, but rather suggested that a more policy-centred lens of analysis might prove to be more *fruitful* for examining the logic, practice and ‘actually existing’ outcomes of urban housing interventions. The conclusion in this chapter that the missing middle reflects a new sustainability fix *is* consistent with critical urban theory that emphasises neoliberalism’s tendencies for “creative destruction” and replication (Harvey, 2006).

This thesis argues, however, that the policy-centred analysis was useful for providing insights about the particular mediation of dilemmas in context. For example, the local apartment market slump and ongoing community resistance were both able to be identified and given explanatory power by conceiving of the current logic and practice as an emergent fix. Therefore, it is being argued that the concept of a sustainability ‘fix’ is a useful, empirical theoretical insight which does not read for dominance over difference, enables contextual elements to be given real analytical meaning, and also accounts for structural constraints. In addition, the emphasis on continuity and change has appreciated the broader historical, political, and cultural trajectories in interpreting the current policy design. By focussing on the basis of the problems and solutions narratives and exploring their productivity, this study provides a nuanced picture of ‘what is going on here’ which could be utilised for future urban policy research.

## 7.7 Implications for a sustainable and equitable urban housing transition

The findings presented in this chapter have relevance for scholars and activists seeking a transition to more sustainable and equitable cities (including in relation to housing). As was outlined in Chapters 2 and 3, ‘sustainability’ has long been criticised as being a slippery or ambiguous concept in policy-making which is vulnerable to being watered down or exploited. One of the conversations in the literature on urban housing innovations centres on the extent to which progressive niches are effectively translated into the socio-technical system. Many transitions scholars have demonstrated the disappointing impact of sustainable niches innovations in sparking transformation. Therefore, some have argued that in order to be successful, niches need to be “intermediately” positioned (not too radical) to have traction in mainstream practice. As Crabtree (2018) describes, though, in practice this approach can more closely resemble “spreading out” than “scaling up” (pp.28-29) with progressive *potential* being either watered down or co-opted by commercial interests. Therefore, existing research suggests that political and economic pressures of the socio-technical system erode the progressive potential of sustainable innovations.

The findings of this thesis suggest, though, that it might be sustainability logics themselves which are de-railing the progressive potential of the innovations rather than a watering down or co-opting of the concept. This is because the analysis indicated that sustainability logics play an *active* role in maintaining and advancing the existing objectives and interests. The vignettes highlighted the way that normative urban sustainability ideas about the compact city underpin the problematisation of under-development which then informs government intervention. The conclusion, outlined earlier, that the missing middle is an emergent sustainability ‘fix’ highlights the key role that sustainability narratives play in ‘knitting together’ various (potentially contradictory) interests into a semi-coherent narrative that supports preferred solutions.

These conclusions, and the findings about the mechanisms of the ‘fix’, align with several scholars who emphasise the important work that policy rationalities, especially sustainability, perform (Bulkeley & Castán Broto, 2013; M. Davidson, 2010; S. Moore, 2013; Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018). In particular, the vignettes indicate two key areas in which sustainability logics do important work in the recent context of urban housing intervention. First, they ensure the potential solutions remain narrowly defined to support existing objectives and interests. In terms of constraint, one of the questions asked in this thesis was about what is obscured or ignored as a result of the way that problems and solutions in urban housing are understood. It was demonstrated that the problem and solution narratives informing the current urban housing interventions are influenced by twin sustainability logics: sustainability-as-density and sustainability-as-development. It was also demonstrated that these logics inform ideas such as the missing middle which ensure our collective gaze remains on the future; on progress. Directing the gaze in this way is effective in avoiding scrutiny of existing or systemic causes of sub-optimality and inequality. For example, the ‘missing’ emphasis in the policy metaphor has already assumed that a lack of well-designed, medium density housing is the problem requiring a remedy that involves *new supply*. These conclusions reflect similar findings by Moore (2013):

(The) problematisation of issues in a given society, such as suburban sprawl in Toronto, are constructed as much to conceal the negative impacts of proceeding down a certain pathway (i.e. disruption of the status quo) as to reveal the positive aspects of the favoured prescription for reform (i.e. mixed use, neighbourhood and community or sense of place) (p.14).

It also supports the work of policy scholars who have highlighted how the social construction of policy issues is a crucial determinant of the resultant solutions both considered and chosen (Bacchi, 2012; Gurran & Phibbs, 2013; Schneider & Sidney, 2009). This way of thinking is currently neglected in much of the urban planning and housing research looking at medium density housing as sustainable solution.

The second key work performed by sustainability logics is in their ability to ‘stand in’ for direct action. The proposed baugruppen project holds progressive potential for a more community-led development approach and by cutting out the usual costs of marketing and profit-margins, additional funds can be injected directly into the procurement of a liveable and environmentally-friendly (compact) built form. At the same time though, as demonstrated earlier, the marketing of this arrangement and the emphasis on architectural design provides the gloss which paves the way for more suburban intensification *per se* (ie. not necessarily of improved quality). Additionally, in practice the project’s ability to deliver improved affordability is minimal, however, the project is useful in *signifying* government interest in addressing this problem via improved ‘choice’ and the construction of more sustainable smaller homes.

It is in these two ways that sustainability moves beyond an ambiguous concept vulnerable to co-opting, and becomes a productive rationality that assists governments to skirt around meaningfully progressive intervention. Rather than being an ‘empty signifier’ which is *vulnerable* to being used to further people’s interests, the findings resemble Davidson’s (2010) characterisation of a ‘master signifier’. He states that the:

Master-signifier is...not a confused conceptual problem that might be subject to improvement/ development, but rather a place of exclusion. A consequence of this is that symbolization, the signifying gesture, is always found inadequate (p.393).

In the important work of constraining progressive thinking and in the way that sustainability effectively ‘stands in’ and bypasses direct action, the analysis of the vignettes suggests that sustainability logics resemble a ‘master signifier’ more than an ambiguous, slippery concept.

This has significant implications for transitions researchers and for those pursuing more sustainable and equitable urban housing. In particular, it supports the warning made previously by critical sustainability scholars that academics and city shapers can get caught up in these emergent fixes and inadvertently form a coalition that advances existing objectives and serves existing interests (Marvin & Guy, 1997). For example, precinct-scale medium density redevelopment is commonly understood as ‘good practice’ sustainable urbanism which provides improved economies of scale and greater ability to deliver a cohesive build form. The analysis of broader policy design and its context, however, points to a risk that the sustainability gloss provided to this approach makes it easier for large-scale developers to pivot into new suburban markets – without addressing the issues that arose in previous markets.

This interpretation supports conclusions previously made by Bulkeley and Castan-Broto (2013) about the utility of ‘best practice’, who explained that:

Rather than viewing climate change initiatives (or any policy/ interventions) as the spillover effects of a governance system lacking capacity, this analysis suggests instead that such interventions are a critical means through which governing as normal takes place (p.363).

For sustainable urban transitions, this suggests the path to progress might be less linear than the models suggest. Based on the findings of this thesis, urban transitions researchers may need to pay more attention to the *regressive* potential of their innovations being translated into mainstream practice. Gleeson (2012) warned in 2012 that the new urbanology was “weak on epistemology and strong on conventional wisdom” and there were “possibilities of intellectual and policy *regression*” (p.933). The vignettes illustrate the way this can and does occur in the roll-out of flagship sustainable urban housing projects.

These insights build on emerging critical transitions research, and are consistent with the warning made by Caprotti and Cowley (2017) who suggest that:

Bounded sociotechnical experiments are not all aimed at socio-environmental and technical-economic “progress”, nor do they all have progressive outlines – or consequences (p.1447).

To date, this regressive potential has not been adequately acknowledged in the studies on infill housing policy in Australia. This builds a case for urban planning and housing research, which is increasingly drawing on transitions theories to guide efforts towards building a sustainable and equitable city, to engage more directly with the emerging critical literature around transitions and sustainability governance. Cooperative housing studies have commonly focused on the barriers and opportunities for mainstreaming. The analysis of the proposed baugruppen project suggests that advocates and researchers may need to pay more attention to ways in which the broader uptake (including commercialisation) of these types of projects could negatively impact affordability – especially when they are plucked off the exhibition shelf by a housing consumers and developers and adopted within existing socio-technical-*political-economic* systems (Scheller & Thörn, 2018). Acknowledgement of the regressive potential of these trends would be productive in that it would enable advocates to focus their efforts on ensuring the progressive *potential* is realised in practice.

## 7.8 A values-led transition

The influence of sustainability logics in *de-railing* the progressive potential of housing innovations also makes a case for shifting the focus of the transition from being solutions-driven to being values-led. As was highlighted in Chapter 2, the socio-technical transitions literature has commonly considered the conditions in which innovations penetrate (or not), however the political dimensions of problem construction are not adequately acknowledged. The findings of this thesis illustrate the consequences of neglecting questioning of the policy *goals* and the way that urban housing problems are understood.

Urban planning and housing researchers seeking sustainable and equitable transitions may find it more effective to focus their efforts on reconsidering the bigger goals of the ‘sustainable’ compact city, rather than introducing ever new solutions to achieve the compact city vision. One way of doing this might be to re-configure the linear transitions model towards the direct values and abstract goals that are sought in the compact city vision. This would respond to Sayer’s (2009) call for progressive researchers to go beyond the critiques of the system, the “reduction of illusion”, and name upfront the values that are being demanded (p.767). Similarly, the findings support Levitas (2013) advocacy for the use of “utopia as method” in which the “imaginary” of a progressive society is reconstituted.

A stronger outright critique of the governing *logic* is warranted. Persistent questioning of the ‘actually existing’ outcomes of urban housing interventions, especially flagship ‘sustainability’ projects such as WGV, may be a good start for real ‘disruption’ of the system. This argument supports Crabtree’s (2018) suggestion regarding innovative housing arrangements who says:

...perhaps the core challenge is to claim some discursive ground in order to steer the terms of debate, policy, and practice (p.30).

The argument also builds on the work of other urban scholars who have called for a broadening of narrative beyond density fundamentalism (A. Davison, 2006; Dodson & Gleeson, 2007; Neuman, 2005). It has been demonstrated in this thesis the way this rationality actively functions to narrow our view of policy options and drives away direct action so that the “signifier is always found to be inadequate” (M. Davidson, 2010, p. 393). Therefore, in line with Charmes & Keil (2015):

The scientific uncertainties about the real environmental benefits of density show how important it is for research on the transformation of the suburbs to distance itself from the planning discourses on sprawl (p.589).

Rather than seeking progressive change via new *models, technologies, and design*, perhaps a more productive advocacy role for housing and planning researchers seeking more sustainable and equitable urban centres (and housing) would be to collectively and overtly question the many assumptions in the current narratives. While governments are unlikely to magically change their objectives and move towards direct action, this approach would at least limit the productive effectiveness of sustainability logics and reduce the likelihood of urban scholarship contributing inadvertently to advancing the status quo.

## 7.9 Chapter summary

This chapter has established ‘what is going on’ with the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention. This has involved linking the characteristics of the policy design (illuminated by the vignettes in Chapter 6) with the ‘long view’ established in Chapter 5. It was found that the logic and practice of the current housing interventions do not square with the rhetorical objectives or best practice principles of the compact city model. Instead, the missing middle has been diagnosed as an emergent ‘sustainability fix’ which manages, but doesn’t resolve, various contextual pressures and divergent interests. The fix was shown to be productive in avoiding critique of ongoing systemic housing issues, while also facilitating the opening of new markets and opportunities for the private sector. Chapter 7 argued that these findings unsettle the dominant diagnosis of government policy implementation failure by demonstrating the (ongoing) role that governments play in generating the sub-optimal outcomes produced. For transition researchers and housing advocates, the implication is that the current sustainability logics may be derailing the progressive potential of their housing innovations, and a values-based visioning approach may be more productive for generating ‘actually existing’ urban sustainability and equity. The following chapter will expand on these conclusions in relation to the overarching research questions.



# Chapter 8      Conclusions

## 8.1      Reflecting on the research journey

Like much urban scholarship that precedes it, this research was motivated by a vision of more sustainable, equitable, and coordinated urban environments. As the dominant land use in cities, ensuring the quality and accessibility of *housing* is crucial to realising this vision. This research project was originally motivated by a desire to assist in the realisation of more cooperative and citizen-led housing arrangements as a means to achieve broader goals of housing sustainability and equity. It quickly became apparent that in order to make this contribution, it would be necessary to more deeply understand the *current* logic and practice of urban housing intervention. The reason for this was two-fold.

First, examination of the existing interventions was necessary for understanding why alternative housing procurement and ownership arrangements have *not* proliferated in Australia. It was expected that analysis would yield insights into the various policy barriers and opportunities for increasing their take-up. Second, though, it became apparent that more consolidated, liveable, and equitable housing *has* been (at least rhetorically) pursued for more than two decades, with compact city objectives continually forming the basis of urban plans. Planners, policy makers, housing advocates and researchers alike have continued to pursue these objectives despite extensive research indicating that these goals are not being realised in practice. Based on this realisation, this study evolved and became focused on the *active* ways governments may be contributing to the ‘actually existing’ social and environmental outcomes of the most recent urban housing interventions. In other words, what started as a fairly typical attempt to make policy recommendations for improving the quality and quantity of medium density housing, became a broader reflection on how and why the existing intervention logic and practice has continually under-delivered.

This final chapter re-states the research questions and objectives, as well as the analytical and methodological approach taken in this project. Second, the findings that emerged from Chapter’s 5, 6 and 7 are summarised in relation to each of the research questions. Third, the key contributions to urban scholarship are specified. Finally, some reflections are presented regarding the scope and limits of this study, and recommendations are made for future research.

## 8.2 Summary of objectives and approach

The purpose of this research has *not* been to assess the overall merit of compact city principles. Instead, it has set out to understand the persistent and ongoing failure of urban consolidation policies in meaningfully delivering the social and environmental housing outcomes promised. Focussing on the Australian context, specifically in the state of Western Australia, the latest iteration of urban consolidation policy was scrutinised. While government efforts to increase the supply and quality of medium density infill housing has been widely interpreted as a maturing of urban consolidation policy implementation, much of the logic and intervention approach was found to be a continuation of previous iterations. Existing research on the greyfields, though, has neglected critical consideration of the policy *goals* and the political dimensions of the way that urban housing problems are interpreted. The majority of planning and housing research had instead taken a fairly instrumental approach focused on ‘how to’ questions. As urban consolidation policy “rolls on” in Australia and elsewhere (Crommelin et al., 2017), it was considered timely to analyse the current logic and practice of urban housing interventions to consider whether a fundamental rethink of government approach is required.

To consider whether urban housing intervention needs be reconsidered, a novel policy-centred lens was applied to greyfields housing intervention logic and practice. The key elements of this lens included: analysis of the ‘policy design’ *in situ*; examination of the problematisations shaping urban housing intervention; and reflection on the implications (productivity) of the policy design and the problem and solution narratives for realising ‘actually existing’ sustainability and equity in urban housing. To achieve this, a ‘long view’ (Flanagan & Jacobs, 2019) of urban housing problems and solutions was developed in Chapter 5 which positioned the current logic and practice within its historical-political-economic context. This historical overview demonstrated the way that housing problem interpretations have changed, albeit usually in line with shifting macro-economic priorities and governing trends rather than being driven purely by contextual or pragmatic concerns. With this historical context established, Chapter 6 presented three vignettes representing the latest iteration of ideas and practice in urban housing intervention. In each vignette, the analysis interrogated what the ideas and practices said about the way urban housing problems are understood and the key motivations of the current government interventions. The following section summarises the findings of this approach in relation to each of the research questions.

## 8.3 Responding to the research questions

The overarching question guiding this research has been:

*Do we need to rethink the logic and practice of urban housing intervention in order to realise 'actually existing' sustainable and equitable outcomes?*

This research proceeded from a hypothesis that the logic and practice of urban housing intervention may need to be reconsidered in order to realise, in practice, the social and environmental benefits promised by urban consolidation and compact city planning orthodoxy. The findings supported this hypothesis. In particular, the most recent policy design was found to reflect a *continuation* of old logic and practice in urban housing intervention. The defining features of the newest iteration of consolidation policy (density by design, medium density typology focus) were found to be principally a re-packaging exercise which enables a spatial broadening of established logic and practice into new markets. There was little evidence to suggest that the current policy design constitutes the maturing of urban consolidation implementation that is assumed by much of the existing research. Rather, as urban consolidation “rolls on” into the greyfields, the current causes of mediocre and inequitable urban housing outcomes arising from the policy design itself remain unacknowledged, and therefore unresolved. This research has indicated a need for further critical reflection on the logic and practice of the latest iteration of urban consolidation policy which, as it currently stands, risks producing similar mediocre and unaffordable housing outcomes to previous phases.

These conclusions were reached by addressing the following questions:

### *1. What meanings and narratives inform current and emerging interventions?*

Interrogating the current policy logic and problem and solution narratives was a key activity that enabled the overarching research question to be answered. This exercise illuminated specific ideas and discursive mechanisms playing an important role in shaping the way that urban housing interventions are currently calibrated. The missing middle metaphor emerged in urban housing policy conversations during the course of this research, and was identified as a key narrative informing the most recent urban housing interventions in Australia. The metaphor’s use of the term ‘middle’ was shown to be reflective of both spatial and built form objectives; that is, it simultaneously refers to *mid-rise* dwelling typologies in the inner and *middle* suburbs.

In depicting a *lack* of medium density built form in the greyfields, the key problematisation identified in the most recent iteration of urban housing intervention was of ‘under-development’. This problem was depicted in the *missing* middle metaphor and in the objectives of the Gen Y House and baugruppen demonstration projects. It was demonstrated that while these latter projects were rationalised as offering more sustainable and affordable housing outcomes, the actual interventions were primarily targeted at intensifying the suburbs through new development. These ideas, though, have not emerged in a vacuum. The vignettes highlighted the way that the problematisation of ‘under-development’ and the missing middle metaphor rest upon twin sustainability logics which are so well-established they are often considered common sense: ‘sustainability-as-density’ (Quastel et al., 2012) and ‘sustainability-as-development’. The implications and productivity of these narratives is outlined below.

2. *What is obscured, ignored, and/or privileged as a result of the way that problems and solutions in urban housing are interpreted?*

Examining the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention was not merely a descriptive exercise. As has been argued throughout this thesis: problematisations *matter*; they have real implications for when and how governments intervene in society. In particular, the vignettes illuminate the way that the current problem and solution narratives remain firmly oriented around the production of *new, higher density* urban development. In other words, the emphasis on what is lacking and the equating of sustainability with density and with development privileges supply-driven ‘solutions’. While previous research has critiqued the one-dimensional focus on density (Dodson, 2012), and has drawn attention to the dominance of supply-driven housing policy (Gurran & Phibbs, 2013), a key contribution of this thesis has been to demonstrate the continuation of these logics in the most recent iteration of urban consolidation. This is because the majority of greyfields research to date has taken the design and density objectives in the greyfields at face value, and as unambiguously progressive.

The research also provided some insight into *how* this privileging of supply-driven solutions is maintained, despite the lacklustre and mediocre results that density and development levers have produced to date. An important contribution was the diagnosis of the missing middle (and related logic and practice) as an emergent ‘sustainability fix’ – which was found to be actively and effectively holding together disparate interests in a semi-coherent public narrative. The research highlighted three specific ways in which the fix is productive. First, the missing middle metaphor actively maintains a future progress lens that enables (poor) historical and current outcomes to “remain agent-free” MacCallum and Hopkins (2011). In the context of greyfields redevelopment, the conversation remains focused on tapping into ‘under-developed’ spatial and housing sub-markets, allowing developers to pivot to these new spaces unscathed, despite the production of mediocre and defect-plagued higher density products to date.

Second, and relatedly, the sustainability fix was shown to actively favour *indirect*, and ultimately passive, approaches to achieving sustainable and affordable urban housing outcomes. As was discussed in chapter 7, the existing sustainability logics appear to create a (useful) “chain of equivalences” in which density and development can become an effective stand-in for social and environmental goals. The best example of this in action is the rhetorical objective of ‘housing diversity’ (or choice) which commonly provides a stand-in for affordability, sustainability, and cosmopolitanism in modern urban housing intervention logic.

This is significant because when all of the outcomes depicted as flowing naturally from the generation of more density and more development these objectives no longer need to be directly targeted. As was demonstrated in Vignette 2 (Gen Y House), this is productive for avoiding the need for direct government intervention to address housing affordability. Beyond affordability though, these ‘trickle down’ logics are also evident in the idea that (government) investment public transport infrastructure will flow from increased densities as it becomes feasible, and that showcasing architectural design in flagship demonstration projects will flow down to become standard industry practice. The key point to note, though, is that none of these outcomes are assured, or even actively targeted, in the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention.

Lastly, the sustainability fix was shown to play a key role in stabilising social relations and housing expectations in favour of density and development objectives. Despite greyfields redevelopment and urban consolidation policies being rationalised based on *demand for* smaller, more diverse urban housing typologies, the vignettes highlighted the way that projects such as WGV exert a lot of resource and effort in *selling* the benefits and need for density. The need to win over hearts and minds was not only to overcome neighbourhood opposition to new development, but also consisted of “hand-holding” to sell missing middle housing products to consumers unfamiliar with higher density living. The need to win over hearts and minds is peculiar if such housing is demanded by consumers, however the sustainability fix was shown to effectively mask such contradictory cross-talk. Where the sustainability logics were found to be especially useful was in ‘telling’ young people to accept smaller, more ‘efficient’ dwelling for the good of the community. Thus the current fix was shown to play a key role in ‘selling *and* telling’ (Kemeny, 2004) the community to accept density, while also arguing that such housing is in demand.

In all of this focus on density and development and addressing the problem of under-development, this research has highlighted how *alternative* sustainabilities are sidelined in urban housing conversations. Perhaps there are other options for creating sustainable suburban settlements such as direct government intervention to create dense walkable villages and public transit, retail, and community services infrastructure to service those centres. Suburban ‘diverse’, forms of resilience could be supported, such as localised food and renewable energy sources. The activity centre and corridor approaches to accommodating growth are still rhetorically supported, however this research has demonstrated that the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention is moving *away* from TOD ideas and that without active government delivery, such cosmopolitan visions are unlikely to be achieved. Similarly, there are other options for achieving affordability, namely through tax reform or redistribution policies, however these ideas are actively sidelined in the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention.

3. *What are the actual and potential implications of these meanings and narratives for urban housing outcomes? (material and social)*

As implied above, the key implication of the current meanings and narratives shaping urban housing intervention is that the current system of practice is likely to be maintained. As was demonstrated, the sustainability fix is crucial in the maintenance of logic and practice that benefits urban elites and which aligns with macroeconomic objectives. In paving the way for new (medium density) products in new (suburban) markets, though, the fix was also found to be actively advancing these existing objectives. The pursuit of these new markets, as outlined earlier, does not come with any guarantees of better built form and equity outcomes than in previous markets. Rather, the pursuit of housing affordability via density and new development mechanisms alone is more likely to *worsen* the housing conditions of the next generation of homeowners who will be housed in ever smaller dwellings based on their capacity to pay rather than based on their household needs. In addition, the vignettes highlighted the way that the sustainability fix can actually *derail* the progressive potential of innovative projects due to the indirect logics that can drive false measures of ‘success’. Therefore the conclusions suggested that the sustainability fix is not just maintaining the current system, but may hold regressive tendencies that are *holding back* meaningful progress for achieving sustainable and affordable urban housing.

4. *Based on the answers to the above sub-questions, in what ways would the logic and practice of urban housing intervention need to be reconsidered for sustainable and equitable outcomes to be realised in practice?*

Chapter 7 argued that in order to overcome the regressive tendencies of existing urban housing intervention logics, a re-orientation is required in transitions narratives that articulates a vision of an environmentally sustainable and just urban environment. Rather than pursuing linear, socio-technical transition towards known best practice models and innovations, this thesis has suggested that progressive urban researchers and housing advocates pursue a more abstract values-led transition. The visioning exercises of a values-led transition could still determine quantifiable measures of success, however these would be focused on outcomes such as the ability for young people to afford to live in homes aligned with their needs, or based on reducing carbon emissions from urban housing and metropolitan systems. If these were the factors on which the transition was based, more questions would be asked of the current status of these goals and the causal factors driving sub-optimal outcomes. Crucially, any government interventions or housing innovation niches would measure their success in relation to these objectives, rather than viewing the partial translation of potentially progressive housing models and innovations into mainstream practice as success. In other words, a values-led transition would encourage advocates and progressive researchers to keep their ‘eyes on the prize’ and reduce the risk of their projects being derailed by regressive, indirect or instrumental sustainability logics. In addition, by focussing on the outcomes rather than the known solutions, urban sustainability may be able to be conceived in multiple and new ways that go beyond density fundamentalism and supply-driven solutions.

## 8.4 Implications for research (key contributions)

This research has made important contributions to the Australian urban planning and housing literature in both our understanding of **past** policy ‘failures’ and in illuminating the potential **future** outcomes resulting from the current logic and practice of urban housing intervention.

### *Reconsidering past outcomes*

This research has homed in on the latest iteration of urban consolidation policy in Australia. A key contribution has been to position the latest iteration of urban housing intervention in the greyfields within the longer history of urban consolidation implementation. Doing so (in Chapter 5) illuminated the way that the current policy design mostly constitutes the re-packaging and advancement of *old* logics, rather than being reflective of a maturing government implementation approach. Previous Australian scholarship has often taken the view that the mediocre built form and equity outcomes of urban consolidation policies to date have been reflective of impartial or ill-conceived implementation of the (sound) compact city model. The failure to fully ‘transition’ to a sustainable compact urban form in Australia had commonly been interpreted as either instrumental policy failure or a lack of government capacity in an era of neoliberalisation.

Employing a critical policy-centred lens has contributed an alternative reading of the situation which calls into question the dominant diagnosis of implementation failure (both instrumental and due to lacking capacity) in the urban planning and housing scholarship. The analysis of the policy design presented in this thesis has instead highlighted the *active* privileging of particular ideas and solutions that facilitate exactly the types of (mediocre) social and environmental outcomes realised. The key finding demonstrating this point was that the various innovations seen at WGV were driven by a problematisation of under-development. This suggested that rather than being a case of perverse incentives or government oversight, the logic and practice of urban housing intervention actively facilitates the production of quantity over quality.

### *Reconsidering future progress*

The key consequence of this misdiagnosis in the urban planning and housing literature has been a tendency to take government objectives at face value. A contribution of this thesis has been to demonstrate how the uncritical adoption of best practice sustainability logics by pragmatic urban scholars and housing advocates risks them being inadvertently caught up in the legitimisation and advancement of business as usual dynamics. This was mostly illuminated through the identification of a sustainability fix, and its various productive mechanisms. The risk was most clearly illustrated in the case of precinct-scale development and in the showcasing of innovative architectural housing models.

WGV has been showcased as an exemplar of government-led precinct-scale development in the greyfields. The findings of this thesis, however, have demonstrated a need for future research to proceed with a more agnostic stance on the merit of emergent ‘best practice’ models, such as precinct-scale redevelopment. For example, while the amalgamation of larger parcels of land offers the *potential* to produce higher quality design outcomes due to larger economies of scale, further examination revealed that these improved design outcomes are by no means assured. In fact, it was shown that the current facilitation of ‘density by stealth’ encourages further land fragmentation with limited population or even dwelling density gains. This is despite simultaneous criticism of piecemeal greyfields development and ongoing nods to TOD rhetoric.



Similarly, while larger, more professional developers may have the *capacity* to deliver higher quality development than smaller companies, the vignettes also highlighted the productive capacity of current policy narratives which enable these same developers to pivot into new markets unblemished. All of this is not to dismiss the legitimate concerns that have been made about the small-scale, amateur subdivision development occurring in the suburbs. Many of these outcomes have indeed been sub-optimal. It is also not being suggested that, if given the chance, all developers will deliver sub-standard built form. What *has* been demonstrated through this research is that the current narratives actively sideline consideration of causal factors for previous lacklustre built form and equity outcomes. There is therefore a need for future research on greyfields redevelopment processes to take a more critical stance to consider if urban housing interventions are likely *in practice* to deliver the social and environmental outcomes that are ‘possible’. The policy design and problem-centred narrative approach taken in this thesis presents a promising lens through which to conduct such research.

## 8.5 Research lessons and limitations

This thesis has demonstrated the value of examining current policy and problematisations *in situ* as a way of going beyond the rhetorical objectives of government intervention. The policy-centred lens presents a useful tool for critical policy analysis that assists in critical reflection of government priorities. It was also useful for illuminating the ways in which policy narratives actively exclude and obscure particular problems and solutions while enabling other options to remain on the agenda. Upon reflection, greater insight might have been yielded from the interviews if the questions had more closely interrogated the assumptions embedded in the public policy narratives, and if the contradictions and tensions in these logics had been teased out to determine how stakeholders personally resolve them. Unfortunately, the contested and contradictory nature of the identified ‘sustainability fix’ became apparent after the interviews had been completed.

The design of this study meant that it was only possible to make conclusions on the *productivity* or outputs of the fix. The objective has not been to provide new theoretical explanation in regards to *how* (politically, relationally) narratives are generated and maintained by policy actors and ‘city shapers’. In other words, this project has not been able to weigh in on the agency-structure dilemma in determining government capacity. By studying the policy design, though, it *was* apparent that contextual factors (such as a struggling apartment market) do influence the calibration of urban housing logic and practice and that pressures *for* environmental policy making are meaningfully negotiated in the generation of a new ‘fix’. Therefore, a critical approach to policy analysis would benefit from providing space for local context factors to have explanatory power.

Finally, each of the vignettes or ideas explored here could have warranted deeper analysis. An entire thesis could have interrogated ‘housing choice’ or ‘housing diversity’ as a policy narrative, or examined the social and environmental outcomes of cooperative models in practice. Further specific research on each of these topics is warranted, especially from a similar critical perspective as has been developed in this thesis. The approach taken here has been able to achieve depth *via* breadth. The presentation of the findings as three vignettes provided a useful approach that allowed the researcher to zoom into the rich empirical details and then back out again to see ‘what is going here’. Therefore, while various ideas in this study could be explored further in future research, the depth gained via its breadth has provided a solid basis through which such research can proceed.

## 8.6 Ultimate conclusion

Imagine what a fair and sustainable city might look like if we untangled ourselves from the straitjackets of compact city thinking; of sustainability-as-density and sustainability-as-development; and started thinking outside the box. Alternative ideas are possible: building in suburban *and* urban resilience, reducing consumption overall, building low or no energy homes, generating housing that suits the needs of different types of households (but at relevant price points), greening cities wherever possible, using resources that *already exist* – housing redistribution rather than building new, renovation (not to increase the exchange value of houses but to allow our homes to adapt throughout our life courses). Innovative housing models, such as cooperatives, have potential to contribute to these visions, however this research has demonstrated the importance of pursuing these from a values-based position rather than seeking linear, instrumental transition. Urban sustainability logics are not only holding us back. They are productive in advancing the status quo – let’s break free, as Crabtree (2018) argues, by “claiming the discursive ground”! The findings of this thesis represent a call to urban sustainability and social justice advocates to question the dominant problem narratives at every opportunity and ask, like that stakeholder in the first baugruppen meeting I attended, “hang on, what problem are we trying to solve here”. This thesis has argued that the progressive agenda of cities, and housing more specifically, is not just a matter of inventing and mainstreaming innovative solutions or models, but rather depends on penetrating the dominant narratives with innovative *ways of thinking*, including how we understand urban housing problems. This task is pertinent for those studying the most recent logic and practice of urban housing intervention in the greyfields.

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