CHAPTER 7

THE TRIUMPH OF SUBURBIA?
THE (IN)ABILITY OF PLANNING TO CONTAIN
THE ‘GREAT AUSTRALIAN DREAM’

Paul J. Maginn

INTRODUCTION

In 2003 the WA State Government conducted what arguably remains the largest public-consultation exercise, Dialogue with the City, ever held in Perth. The Dialogue initiative was hailed as an ‘exemplar of deliberative democracy’ (Hartz-Karp, 2005; see Hopkins, 2010a, 2010b; Maginn, 2007 for a critique) on account of the various modes of information sharing, consultation and participation that were deployed, finally culminating in a large-scale community forum event that contributed to the metropolitan plan review process which would eventually give birth to the Network City: Community Planning Strategy for Perth and Peel (WAPC, 2004). The planning narrative underpinning the Network City plan was that Perth risked becoming a seriously bloated and unsustainable metropolitan region if it did not take prompt action to curtail urban sprawl. The discursive rhetoric espoused by the then Premier, Geoff Gallop, the Planning Minister, Alannah MacTiernan, and the various keynote speakers could be summarised as: ‘consolidate or perish’. The rallying cry was that Perth needed to adopt new urbanist and smart-growth planning ideals – chiefly, higher residential densities and transit-oriented developments. Notably, for a process that was supposedly premised on deliberative democratic principles, it was bereft of any keynote speakers who might have extolled the virtues and benefits
of low-density suburbia and suburban growth. This should not be interpreted as a declaration that low-density suburbia is without its problems. Rather, the point is that suburbia represents the heartlands of Australia (Gleeson, 2006), where the majority of us live and where the ‘great Australian dream’ is pursued.

The sustainable development of Perth, and all other Australian metropolitan regions, is by no means a new planning policy objective. The idea of urban consolidation seized the Australian metropolitan planning policy imagination in the late 1980s in the wake of the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987). As Stretton (1989, p. xli) has noted:

> [o]ne by one through 1987 and 1988 [state governments] announced policies of urban consolidation: they would slow or stop the outward growth of their cities by getting more people to live with less space per head in the existing suburbs.

Whilst there are undoubtedly economic and environmental challenges with an increasing (sub)urban footprint (as raised in chapters 10 and 11), it would be naïve to think that ‘new urbanism’ or urban-growth boundaries offer a panacea to one of planning’s most ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973). This is not to say, of course, that sustainable development objectives should not be pursued. As Perth extends northwards and southwards along the coast and as the population has increased, there has been a need to ensure that the outer suburbs are properly serviced in terms of job opportunities and public-transport options. For example, the WA Department of Transport (2013) has highlighted that ‘light rail can help meet increasing passenger demand, assist with traffic congestion and reduce Perth’s dependence on private car travel, as well as influencing a more compact and sustainable form of urban development’. Nevertheless, planners in their pursuit of urban densification and consolidation objectives face a significant challenge in that the ‘great Australian dream’ of a house on its
own block remains the dominant preference of the majority of Australians (Grattan Institute, 2011; Troy 1996; WAPC, 2014).

Since a separate house is one of the defining characteristics of suburbia, the long-running commitment to the ‘great Australian dream’ would seem to suggest that people prefer a ‘suburban way of life’. This sentiment is particularly strong in Perth where a recent study found that a separate dwelling was preferred by almost 80 per cent of respondents, when not constrained by income (Government of Western Australia, 2013). This compared with 13 per cent who favoured semi-detached housing and only 7 per cent who preferred flats, units or apartments. Furthermore, the majority (64 per cent) of those who lived in the latter form of accommodation also expressed a preference to ultimately live in a single dwelling. ABS Census data shows that the majority of households at the national and metropolitan scale live in a separate house (see Table 1). Notably, there are signs, albeit to varying marginal degrees across different metropolitan regions, that the dominance of the detached house is being slowly undermined.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Separate house</td>
<td>75.33</td>
<td>74.21</td>
<td>-1.12</td>
<td>75.75</td>
<td>76.60</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>80.58</td>
<td>78.22</td>
<td>-2.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-detached, row or terrace house</td>
<td>8.94</td>
<td>9.89</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>12.90</td>
<td>12.23</td>
<td>-0.67</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>8.61</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat, unit or apartment</td>
<td>13.05</td>
<td>14.27</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>10.25</td>
<td>10.77</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>11.28</td>
<td>12.29</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other dwelling</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>-0.39</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>-0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwelling structure not stated</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.66</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.53</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Separate house</td>
<td>74.22</td>
<td>71.70</td>
<td>-2.52</td>
<td>77.72</td>
<td>77.66</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>63.07</td>
<td>59.59</td>
<td>-3.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-detached, row or terrace house</td>
<td>10.16</td>
<td>11.64</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>12.96</td>
<td>12.02</td>
<td>-0.94</td>
<td>11.28</td>
<td>12.74</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat, unit or apartment</td>
<td>14.15</td>
<td>16.10</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>8.08</td>
<td>9.71</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>23.88</td>
<td>26.95</td>
<td>3.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other dwelling</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwelling structure not stated</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.70</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.48</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Dwelling Structure by Greater Metropolitan Region 2001-2011.
Source: ABS Cat. 2003.0 (Time Series Profile, Place of Enumeration)

At the national level, 75.33 per cent of all households in 2001 lived in a separate dwelling, which fell to 74.21 per cent in 2011 (-1.11 percentage points). Using the proportion of detached dwellings that households live in as a simple proxy for the extent of suburbia, then Brisbane (80.58 per cent) was the most ‘suburban’
region in 2001. Brisbane retained this title in 2011 despite the proportion of households living in single dwellings falling to 78.22 per cent (-2.35 percentage points). Although the majority of Sydneysiders live in a single dwelling, Sydney is the least suburban metropolitan region in that just under 60 per cent of households lived in a detached house in 2011 – this is down from 63.07 per cent (-3.48 percentage points) in 2001. A very marginal decline (-0.06 percentage points) is evident in Perth with detached houses accounting for 77.66 per cent in 2011 compared to 77.72 per cent in 2001. Adelaide was the only region to record an upswing in its share of detached dwellings, increasing from 75.75 per cent to 76.6 per cent between 2001 and 2011 (0.85 percentage points).

All major metropolitan regions have witnessed an increase in the share of households living in high-density accommodation (i.e. flat, unit or apartment). This growth has been above the national growth trend of 1.21% points in Sydney (3.07% points), where more than one in four households now live in high-density accommodation. Above-trend growth in high-density living is also evident in Melbourne (1.96 per cent) and Perth (1.63 per cent) with just over 16 per cent and almost 10 per cent of households respectively living in a flat, unit or apartment. If the decadal percentage point rate of change in the share of detached dwellings for 2001–2011 were to continue into the future, it would take an estimated 220 years (i.e. the year 2236) for the share of separate dwellings at the national level to fall to 50 per cent. It would take approximately 110, ninety and thirty years for this 50 per cent share to be reached in Brisbane (year 2126), Melbourne (year 2106) and Sydney (year 2046) respectively. Profoundly, given the marginal decadal rate of change (-0.08 per cent) in the share of single dwellings in Perth, it would take a total of 4,520 years for a 50 per cent share of all dwellings to materialise!

Despite the apparent housing and suburban aspirations, preferences and experiences of Australians, metropolitan planning in Perth (and other metropolitan regions) since the 1970s appears to have effectively been trying to steer people’s housing choices via
the introduction of policies (e.g. Activity Centres Policy, WAPC, 2010) and housing targets designed to increase residential densities and ultimately contain (sub)urban sprawl. This chapter looks initially at the broad policy aims and objectives in relation to urban consolidation and densification across the various metropolitan plans for the Perth region since 1955. Next, it provides an empirical analysis of the spatial patterns of residential development, mainly at the local government area level, across the Perth metropolitan area using a mix of data including dwelling stock, building completions and lot approvals. Whilst there has been an increase in higher-density dwellings over the last decade or so, this has tended to be somewhat geographically confined and geared towards certain markets. It is argued that the planners in Perth face a major uphill struggle in terms of creating a more consolidated, densely urbanised and connected metropolitan landscape as outlined in policy documents such as Directions 2031 (WAPC, 2010) and Draft Perth and Peel@3.5million (WAPC, 2015a).

CONTAINING THE UNCONTAINABLE?
One of the earliest indications of modern planning’s concern about the ‘(sub)urban expansion’ of Perth can be found in The Report of the Metropolitan Town Planning Commission (1930). The overarching aim of this report, overseen by Harold Boas, was to highlight the ‘present conditions and the future tendencies of the development of the metropolitan area’ (p.1). Moreover, the report, when ‘reduced to [its] essentials’ was concerned with four key objectives in relation to the future planning of Perth: (i) consolidation; (ii) co-ordination; (iii) economy; and (iv) efficiency. These objectives resonate loudly with the objectives of contemporary metropolitan plans (Maginn, Goodman, Gurran & Ruming, 2016). The issue of consolidation in the 1930 Report centred on two inter-related aspects of the governance of Perth, one institutional and the other physical planning – issues that persist to this day.
The Triumph of Suburbia?

On the one hand, consolidation related to the question of whether or not to amalgamate the nine local municipalities – Claremont, Cottesloe, Fremantle, East Fremantle, North Fremantle, Guildford, Midland Junction, Perth and Subiaco – as well as the then twelve local road boards – Bassendean, Bayswater, Belmont Park, Canning, Claremont, Cottesloe Beach, Fremantle, Melville, Peppermint Grove, Perth, South Perth and Swan. A more consolidated urban governance regime was seen as a pathway to realising more efficient and effective physical planning of the metropolitan region. As with the most recent attempt at local government amalgamations in Perth (Metropolitan Local Government Review Panel, 2012), this idea lacked much political appetite amongst the local government sector. This was despite the ‘growing in the minds of citizens the feeling that the system is not giving the most efficient results’ (Metropolitan Town Planning Commission, 1930, pp. 154–5).

And, on the other hand, although the term urban consolidation is not explicitly used in the 1930 Report, it is strongly implied:

Bad planning is expensive planning, not only to the land owner but ultimately to the local authority and to the people generally. Excessive and lengthy roads demand extensions of all essential services. Ultimate widenings, extensions and diversions cause expense and inconvenience. (p. 144)

Paradoxically, the 1930 Report also notes that the single family home had emerged as the ideal housing type and, with further careful planning, urban congestion and slum dwellings could be eradicated. Furthermore, it was estimated that dwelling density in Perth at the time was about six houses per acre (approximately fifteen per hectare). With the recent establishment of new suburbs such as Nedlands, Dalkeith and Mount Lawley based on garden city planning principles (Freestone, 2010) with homes built on quarter-acre blocks, it was anticipated that dwelling densities would fall to below six.
Chapter 7

Major concerns about the increasing suburbanisation of Perth re-emerged in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This was marked by the appointment of Gordon Stephenson and Alistair Hepburn, who were charged with producing the first metropolitan plan for the Perth and Fremantle region. The Perth metropolitan area was projected to grow from about 400,000 to 1.4 million by about 2005. Such growth invariably raised questions about where and how people would live. In light of this demographic and spatial challenge the *Stephenson-Hepburn Plan* (Government of Western Australia, 1955) effectively called for the imposition of an urban growth boundary and the establishment of ‘activity centres’ and ‘growth poles’:

> It is strongly advocated that a firm line should be drawn as a limit to the lateral expansion of the main built-up area, and that encouragement should be given to decentralisation within the Region as well as within the State. (p. 7)

Despite this call for the introduction of an urban growth boundary, there was a clear recognition that the ‘single family house on about one-fifth acre [i.e. 810m$^2$] of land is likely to be the predominant house type for many years’ and that the proportion of these homes ‘will increase with the distance from the centre, and in new areas the average net density will be about 15 or 16 persons per acre’ (p. 14). This translates into about 3,700 to 3,950 people per square kilometre. This contained suburban growth was to take place across ‘34 residential districts within the main urban concentration’ (p. 44) and north and south of the Swan River. For example, in Districts 9 to 11, 13, 17 and 18 (i.e. Mount Lawley, Maylands, Bayswater, Bassendean, Beechboro and Mirrabooka) the population was proposed to increase from about 43,000 to almost 249,000, a 478 per cent increase. South of the Swan River, the population in Districts 22, 27 to 29 and 32 (an arc from Redcliffe/Rivervale/Kewdale through Lynwood/Parkwood/Riverton to Beaconsfield) was expected to increase from 25,500 to 243,500, an increase of 855 per cent (+218,000). In
terms of ‘outer suburban’ areas, the decentralisation strategy of the 1955 Plan meant that proposed population growth in Kalamunda, Armadale and Kwinana-Rockingham was 549 per cent, 432 per cent and 1,751 per cent respectively.

The managed growth philosophy that underpinned the 1955 Plan ultimately proved to be an unobtainable objective. This is reflected in a planning bulletin about the then recently completed Corridor Plan wherein concerns about ‘urban sprawl’ were explicitly expressed:

One of the serious problems that can be created by the rapid expansion of a city-region is urban sprawl – a rolling front of suburbia which gradually swallows up the countryside. Sprawl is expensive in development costs and wasteful in its requirement for public utilities, transport and social services. It destroys the quality of the environment. (Metropolitan Region Planning Authority, 1972)

These concerns about sprawl resonate with Bruegmann’s (2005) analysis of the anti-suburban (Mumford, 1961) and anti-sprawl (Kunstler, 1993; Newman & Kenworthy, 1999) rhetoric that have persisted throughout the twentieth century in the USA, UK, Europe and Australia. In short, urban sprawl, or mass suburbanisation, has been accused of a diverse range of inter-related planning crimes: (i) increased economic costs in terms of servicing new suburban subdivisions; (ii) increasing private car use and congestion; (iii) causing environmental degradation and aesthetic and symbolic destruction of natural landscapes and open space; and (iv) creating socially, culturally, aesthetically and even intellectually redundant *blandscapes* (Bruegmann, 2005; Gordon & Richardson, 1997a, 1997b; Vaughan, 2015). Kunstler (1993) has arguably gone the furthest in critiquing the suburbs, labelling them as the ‘geography of nowhere’. Notably, Kunstler’s vitriol towards the suburbs seems to have little regard for the intelligence of those that have chosen to make their lives in suburbia.
THE PERILS OF URBAN CONSOLIDATION

The ability of the Corridor Plan to ‘counter urban sprawl’ ultimately proved to be an unrealisable policy objective. A review of the plan (State Planning Commission, 1987) concluded that additional new land needed to be rezoned as urban in order to accommodate revised long-term growth trends for the metropolitan area. Simultaneously, there was re-affirmation of the need to contain urban sprawl in the new metropolitan strategy, Metroplan (Department of Planning and Urban Development (DPUD), 1990, p. 19).

The environmental, social and economic aspects of urban sprawl have been widely debated in the community in recent years. The Review Group concluded that a more consolidated urban form was both possible and desirable. Metroplan endorses this conclusion and seeks to slow down and contain the outward growth of suburban Perth. [emphasis added]

Given the fact that the 1955 Plan and the Corridor Plan both failed to contain urban growth, this should arguably have been a signal to planners to be more cautious in their assertion that urban consolidation was possible. Relatedly, the claim that consolidation was desirable evokes the notion that planners were out of step with what people actually wanted and preferred. In any event, the containment of urban sprawl was to be achieved by two key approaches. On the one hand, planning policies were to facilitate the development of ‘well-designed medium-density housing developments and the opportunity to locate these close to the centres of activity and public-transport facilities’ (DPUD, 1990, p. 19) in the key regional centres throughout the metropolitan region: Armadale, Canning, Fremantle, Joondalup, Midland, Morley, Rockingham and Stirling. In addition, residential densities were also expected to be intensified within the Perth central area and adjacent suburbs such as Northbridge, East Perth, North
Perth and Mount Lawley. On the other hand, *Metroplan* advocated that suburban renewal and increasing densities within pre-existing suburbs also had the potential to contain urban sprawl. *Metroplan* was careful to articulate that any such suburban infill needed to be done sensitively. The ‘blanket redevelopment of established suburbs irrespective of local conditions’ was not an option. Rather, ‘[c]areful management of the rate of changes [was] essential if the character of these suburbs is to be retained’ and local concerns and neighbourhood amenity had to be protected from ‘low-quality or over-intensive development’ (DPUD, 1990, p. 30).

Whilst all these policy objectives are admirable and indicative of the environmental sustainability epoch in which they were written, *Metroplan* acknowledged that Perth was a ‘suburban city’, that stopping urban sprawl altogether was an impossibility, and (somewhat reluctantly) acknowledged that the single dwelling was still the dominant housing preference. On this latter issue, *Metroplan* sought to highlight that more housing choice and greater housing affordability were needed in order to meet the ‘demands’ of a changing population characterised by more diverse and smaller household types – i.e. ‘the elderly, childless couples, single-parent families and single-person households’ (DPUD, 1990, p. 28).

Despite the planning rhetoric about containing urban sprawl via suburban renewal and concentrating development in and around regional centres and transport corridors, *Metroplan* effectively conceded that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve this objective:

A growing region like Perth will require new urban land to meet its expected long-term housing requirements. Even with policies which promote urban containment and encourage renewal and revitalisation of older established suburbs, the new urban land requirement is considerable. Metroplan estimates that perhaps 80 per cent of the Region’s new dwellings will be constructed in new urban areas (DPUD, 1990, p. 35).
Metroplan remained committed to the idea of corridor planning and, as such, it proposed a number of extensions to the base corridor structure of Perth to accommodate new urban development. In the north west corridor, for example, land from Burns Beach through to Two Rocks was earmarked for rezoning. Similarly, land in the north east corridor extending from Guildford/Beechboro through to Upper Swan and Middle Swan was proposed; in the south east corridor, land from Canning Vale through to Armadale, Byford and Mundijong was all rezoned to urban; and in the south west corner the whole of Baldivis was to be subdivided and developed. Rather than contain the outward expansion of Perth, the extension of these various corridors merely facilitated suburban development. This was evident in the next metropolitan plan, Network City (WAPC, 2004).

**Consolidation by Consensus and Demographic Necessity?**

The Network City plan (WAPC, 2004), as with its predecessor, was underpinned by a strong commitment to environmental sustainability and ‘participative decision-making at the local and regional level’ (p. v). Concerns were expressed about ‘population growth’, ‘car dependency’ and ‘scattered suburbs’ (p. 3), environmental sustainability and the cost of servicing new suburban subdivisions on the fringe.

The overarching vision of the Network City plan was that ‘[b]y 2030, Perth people will have created a world-class sustainable city; vibrant, more compact and accessible, with a unique sense of place’. The plan was also underpinned by a core set of values (sustainability, inclusiveness, innovation and creativity, sense of place and equity) and principles (more efficient land-use and infrastructure; stronger environmental consciousness and management; better resource and energy efficiency; and enhanced community vitality and cohesiveness) that would create a ‘new’ deliberative democratic-informed approach to planning. Containing sprawl was very much a key objective that was to be realised via a three-pronged strategy. First, there was to be greater integration between
land-use and transport with activity centres and inter-connecting corridors privileging public transport and providing the physical base to realise this objective. Next, urban growth was to be better managed by adopting a staging approach to the release of zoned land for development and highlighting the cost of servicing new subdivided lots. Finally, a development target of ‘60/40’ was set, whereby 60 per cent of all new housing was to be developed within pre-existing urban areas (i.e. ‘inner and middle sectors’) and 40 per cent would be in new suburban areas.

Ultimately, the Network City plan failed to make it past the draft stage and was thus never properly implemented. At the election in September 2008, the incumbent ALP state government lost power to the Liberal Party who formed a coalition with the National Party after intensive negotiations. Change of government tends to usher in planning reforms and a new metropolitan planning strategy. Sure enough, the newly elected Liberal-National coalition released a consultation document on planning reforms in March 2009 with a new draft strategic plan, Directions 2031: Draft Spatial Framework for Perth and Peel (WAPC, 2009), released in June of the same year. A final metropolitan plan was adopted just over one year later, Directions 2031 and Beyond: Metropolitan Planning Beyond the Horizon (WAPC, 2010). The adopted plan echoed the planning vision of the Network City plan:

By 2031, Perth and Peel people will have created a world class liveable city: green, vibrant, more compact and accessible with a unique sense of place (WAPC, 2010, p. 2).

The issue of managing urban sprawl remained a key objective of Directions 2031 although the discursive rhetoric around this issue was more muted than in previous plans. So much so in fact, that the term ‘sprawl’ does not feature anywhere in the core document of the strategy. Instead, alternative terms – ‘consolidated’, ‘compact’ and ‘urban growth management’ – are used, albeit somewhat infrequently, to indicate that sprawl needed to
be tackled. Curiously, however, the use of the latter term points to a tacit reaffirmation that Perth is a ‘suburban city’ and that suburban growth was likely to prevail. Simultaneously, there was an acknowledgement that increased densification was possible as a result of changing housing needs and wants.

For any planning vision to be successful it must be in tune with the aspirations of both residents and business. The planned growth of the outer suburbs must meet the needs of people seeking new accommodation in suburban surroundings. Increasing numbers of people are also looking for apartments in established areas close to employment centres with good public-transport access. Other people want to remain in the suburbs where they have lived for many years but they no longer wish to maintain a traditional house and garden. The planning system needs to ensure that all of these lifestyle choices can be provided for. (WAPC, 2010, p. iii)

Notably, however, the development targets for new housing in pre-existing urban areas was revised downwards from 60 per cent to 47 per cent, such that 154,000 of the projected 328,000 new homes required to meet future population growth would be ‘infill development’ involving low-, medium- and high-rise apartment developments. Relatedly, in terms of residential densities, these were to increase from ‘an average of 10 dwellings per gross urban zoned hectare… to 15 dwellings… in new development areas’ (p. 4). As noted earlier, this was the residential density for Perth back in 1930. In anticipation of projected population growth in the Perth and Peel region to 3.5 million by 2050, the issue of urban consolidation (re)emerged in 2015 with significant policy vigour. A suite of draft strategic planning documents, ‘the over-arching Perth and Peel@3.5million report and four draft planning frameworks’ covering thirty-three local government areas (LGAs) across four sub-regional areas – Central (nineteen
LGAs), North-West (two LGAs), the North-East (three LGAs) and the South Metropolitan Peel (nine LGAs) – were released (WAPC, 2015a/b/c/d/e). Particular emphasis on urban consolidation is outlined in the Central planning framework which states that ‘the business as usual approach which allows the city to continue to sprawl is not sustainable’ (WAPC, 2015b, p. 15). Urban consolidation is defined in the central planning framework as the ‘process of increasing or sustaining the density of housing in established areas [where the] ultimate aim is to reduce development in greenfield areas at the edge of the city’ (p. 15).

The planning framework highlights that household size and structure are changing with increasing numbers of smaller households and that there is need to have policy settings that will stimulate the development of a more diverse range of housing options in terms of townhouses, units and apartments. However, there appears to be an underlying assumption that the majority of smaller households will automatically opt to live in smaller dwellings as these are better suited to their household structure and budgets as they will be relatively more affordable than larger, detached suburban dwellings. There will undoubtedly be a proportion of smaller households who will opt to live in smaller dwellings either through choice or because external circumstances dictate their housing options. Judd, Bridge, Davy, Adams & Liu. (2012), for example, highlight that a greater proportion of older cohorts tend to live in larger houses and generally prefer to age-in-place rather than downsize. Similarly, Wulff, Healy and Reynolds, (2004, p. 69) highlighted that despite the rise in lone-person households between 1981 and 2001:

…the preference for separate detached dwellings, as opposed to higher-density multi-dwelling alternatives, has barely altered. Some commentators have expected that decreased household size would lead to both higher residential densities and demand for smaller dwellings. This has not happened. On the contrary, the average size
of dwellings has increased even though new suburban subdivisions most often offer smaller block sizes.

More recent research by WAPC/DoH (2013) on Perth residents’ housing preferences found that in overall terms almost four out of five survey respondents (n=866) preferred a detached house whilst only 7 per cent favoured flats, units or apartments. As noted earlier, almost two-thirds (64 per cent) of those that lived in higher-density housing would prefer to live in a single dwelling; if housing choices were unconstrained, only 16 per cent would remain in an apartment. Whilst the *Perth Housing We’d Choose* survey identified some nuanced variations in housing preferences, for example: one-bed dwellings were only preferred by between 0.4 per cent and 2.0 per cent of respondents; apartments were the preferred housing choice of less than 10 per cent of respondents; and semi-detached housing was preferred by, on average, 20 per cent of couples with children, single and group/retiree households. This more than doubled to 45 per cent when affordability became an issue. Ultimately, then, the pursuit of the great Australian dream and, thus, an essentially suburban way of life still seems to loom large in the aspirations and preferences of Perth residents.

Despite the challenge facing planning in terms of trying to contain suburban growth, it is of course vital that policies and regulations are in place so as to provide planning certainty, particularly for developers and housebuilders, so that more diverse housing types and densities can be built when/if the market so demands such housing options. Such policies have already been implemented and are being pursued with residential densities being up-scaled in various activity centres and transport corridors across the metropolitan area as part of local housing strategies. The dilemma of course is knowing when the market (i.e. developers and households) will move in this direction and whether there will be sufficient interest to dramatically slow down suburban growth. A sense of where the
market has been heading can be ascertained by looking at (i) the geography of lot activity (i.e. developer lodged applications; applications under assessment; conditional approvals; developer stock of conditional proposed lots; and final approvals) and (ii) dwelling approvals for different house types and densities. This data allows the geographical extent of suburbia to be mapped and moves the discussion, thus far, from seeing suburbia and a suburban way of life simply in terms of detached dwellings. The fact that more diverse housing types, such as detached housing, group dwellings, townhouses and apartments and thus higher residential densities, are being achieved within outer-middle ring and outer-ring metropolitan areas should not be automatically read as an indication that urban consolidation is being achieved.

SPATIAL PATTERNS AND TRENDS IN LOT AND DWELLING APPROVALS

Table 2 and Table 3 provide an overview of the trends (2004–2015) of the number and share of (i) proposed and (ii) approved lots within the Perth and Peel region at the sub-regional planning level as per Directions 2031. In terms of the overall number of developer proposed lots (n=293,095) only 17.8 per cent (52,085) were within the central sub-region (an area covering nineteen LGAs) for the period 2004–2015 – significantly below the 60 per cent and 47 per cent infill targets as set in Network City and Directions 2031. The share of proposed lots within the central region fluctuated from a low of 12 per cent in 2012 to a high of 24.5 per cent in 2006. A significant majority (82.2 per cent) of proposed lots between 2004-2015 were located within the outer-metropolitan sub-regional areas. The north west corridor was the dominant region accounting for 21.4 per cent (n=62,633) of all proposed lots. Notably, this region only comprised two LGAs – Joondalup and Wanneroo. The south west corridor region – Cockburn, Kwinana and Rockingham – also accounted for a
greater share of proposed lots (20.2 per cent) than the central region with some 59,182 lots. In terms of approved lots, a similar pattern of spatial distribution is evident. That is, only a minority (18.9 per cent) of total approved lots were located within the Central sub-region whereas 81.1 per cent were in the outer metropolitan regions. Most of this outer metropolitan growth was within the south west (23.2 per cent) and north west (22.9 per cent) regions accounting for more than half of all outer metropolitan approvals.

Whilst the number, proportion and geography of lot proposals and approvals provides a basic indication of market ‘preferences’ by both developers and prospective home buyers (proposals) and planning intentions (approvals), it also provides a signal as to the (in)ability of planning to contain urban sprawl. With an 80/20 split in favour of proposed and approved lots in outer metropolitan areas, planners face a difficult, if not seemingly impossible, task in stopping suburban growth. A relatively more effective indication of efforts to control suburban sprawl and the enhancement of urban consolidation can be ascertained by looking at the geography of approvals by dwelling type. Data on construction trends in detached houses, terrace/townhouses, flat/units (one to three storeys) and apartments (more than three storeys) can be used to identify, in broad terms and at different scales, where lower-/higher-density housing is being built. Data on these trends are drawn from the UDIA (WA) Dwelling Approval Tool, cover the period 2001/02 to 2013/14 and are analysed at the Greater Perth and SA4 level. The SA4 level data are used as a proxy for the planning sub-regions as per Directions 2031.

As can be seen in Figure 1 (Number of Dwellings) and Figure 2 (Share of Dwellings), detached houses have consistently remained the most popular form of accommodation within the Greater Perth region. May 2006 was the peak month for housing approvals with 1,880; the peak month for apartments was January 2008 with 721 approvals – this accounted for 37.6 per cent of all approvals that month. The number of approvals for housing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central (No.)</td>
<td>3,097</td>
<td>3,098</td>
<td>2,980</td>
<td>2,844</td>
<td>2,693</td>
<td>2,232</td>
<td>2,012</td>
<td>2,623</td>
<td>2,139</td>
<td>2,421</td>
<td>2,545</td>
<td>1,536</td>
<td>30,220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central (%)</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North-west (No.)</td>
<td>4,053</td>
<td>3,937</td>
<td>3,931</td>
<td>2,854</td>
<td>1,763</td>
<td>1,408</td>
<td>1,763</td>
<td>2,591</td>
<td>1,835</td>
<td>3,099</td>
<td>3,813</td>
<td>3,845</td>
<td>34,880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North-west (%)</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North-east (No.)</td>
<td>1,857</td>
<td>1,001</td>
<td>1,683</td>
<td>1,750</td>
<td>975</td>
<td>918</td>
<td>1,559</td>
<td>1,252</td>
<td>1,703</td>
<td>2,066</td>
<td>3,152</td>
<td>3,214</td>
<td>21,130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North-east (%)</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-east (No.)</td>
<td>1,424</td>
<td>1,557</td>
<td>2,085</td>
<td>2,599</td>
<td>1,815</td>
<td>1,550</td>
<td>1,567</td>
<td>1,635</td>
<td>1,788</td>
<td>2,603</td>
<td>3,052</td>
<td>3,040</td>
<td>24,715</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-east (%)</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-west (No.)</td>
<td>4,055</td>
<td>3,360</td>
<td>3,399</td>
<td>3,116</td>
<td>2,173</td>
<td>1,543</td>
<td>1,945</td>
<td>2,532</td>
<td>1,812</td>
<td>3,092</td>
<td>3,616</td>
<td>4,747</td>
<td>35,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-west (%)</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peel (No.)</td>
<td>1,846</td>
<td>1,658</td>
<td>1,966</td>
<td>1,390</td>
<td>1,208</td>
<td>815</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>489</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>835</td>
<td>1,170</td>
<td>1,140</td>
<td>13,289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peel (%)</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perth &amp; Peel (No.)</td>
<td>16,332</td>
<td>14,611</td>
<td>16,044</td>
<td>14,533</td>
<td>10,615</td>
<td>8,466</td>
<td>9,384</td>
<td>11,122</td>
<td>9,511</td>
<td>14,116</td>
<td>17,348</td>
<td>17,522</td>
<td>159,624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perth &amp; Peel (%)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Triumph of Suburbia?

greater share of proposed lots (20.2 per cent) than the central region with some 59,182 lots. In terms of approved lots, a similar pattern of spatial distribution is evident. That is, only a minority (18.9 per cent) of total approved lots were located within the Central sub-region whereas 81.1 per cent were in the outer metropolitan regions. Most of this outer metropolitan growth was within the south west (23.2 per cent) and north west (22.9 per cent) regions accounting for more than half of all outer metropolitan approvals.

Whilst the number, proportion and geography of lot proposals and approvals provides a basic indication of market ‘preferences’ by both developers and prospective home buyers (proposals) and planning intentions (approvals), it also provides a signal as to the (in)ability of planning to contain urban sprawl. With an 80/20 split in favour of proposed and approved lots in outer metropolitan areas, planners face a difficult, if not seemingly impossible, task in stopping suburban growth. A relatively more effective indication of efforts to control suburban sprawl and the enhancement of urban consolidation can be ascertained by looking at the geography of approvals by dwelling type. Data on construction trends in detached houses, terrace/townhouses, flat/units (one to three storeys) and apartments (more than three storeys) can be used to identify, in broad terms and at different scales, where lower-/higher-density housing is being built. Data on these trends are drawn from the UDIA (WA) Dwelling Approval Tool, cover the period 2001/02 to 2013/14 and are analysed at the Greater Perth and SA4 level. The SA4 level data are used as a proxy for the planning sub-regions as per Directions 2031.

As can be seen in Figure 1 (Number of Dwellings) and Figure 2 (Share of Dwellings), detached houses have consistently remained the most popular form of accommodation within the Greater Perth region. May 2006 was the peak month for housing approvals with 1,880; the peak month for apartments was January 2008 with 721 approvals – this accounted for 37.6 per cent of all approvals that month. The number of approvals for housing
Figure 1: Dwelling Approval Trends (No.) by Housing Type, Greater Perth 2001–2013.
Figure 2: Dwelling Approval Trends (%) by Housing Type, Greater Perth 2001–2013. (UDIAWA, 2013)
Figure 3: Share of Dwelling Approvals by Dwelling Type, Greater Perth (2001/02–2013/14).
during this month/year was 929 although it would be April 2012 before the number of monthly approvals for housing reached its lowest level of 628. The number of approvals for apartments in the same month/year had plunged to zero, down from 210 the previous month. In fact, approvals for apartments between August 2008 (412) and May 2013 (416) fluctuated considerably, averaging around 200 to 230 per month. This drop in approvals for both houses and apartments coincides with the onset of the global financial crisis.

Single detached homes accounted for 80 per cent (n=176,444) of all approvals between 2001/02 and 2013/14 – see Figure 3. This signals that a ‘suburban way of life’ predominates within Perth and echoes with the housing preference found in the Housing We’d Choose report (Government of Western Australia, 2013). In terms of a more ‘urban way of life’, as measured by ‘high(er) density’ housing (i.e. flats/units and apartments), both of these types of housing accounted for only 3.2 per cent (n=7,104) and 6.5 per cent (14,302) of all approvals respectively. Terraces/townhouses accounted for 10.5 per cent of all approvals. Whilst this type of dwelling offers relatively higher residential densities than single houses, it is arguably the case that, in terms of dwelling type, it represents more of a ‘suburban way of life’ than an ‘urban’ one, especially if such housing is located outside the central Perth area and in outer-metropolitan areas.

Figure 3 shows the overall percentage share of housing relative to the other three forms of housing for each since 2001/02. There was a notable drop in the share of single dwellings in 2007/08 to under 70 per cent. Simultaneously the share of apartments (15.4 per cent) and terraces/townhouses (12.7 per cent) reached some of their highest levels during the same year. These trends reflect developer optimism, underscored by a fast-growing economy due to the resources boom, in both these forms of housing. It is worth noting that approvals for terraces/townhouses has been fairly consistent and averaging 10.2 per cent, whereas approvals for apartments have been prone
to considerable fluctuations, thereby indicating considerable market cautiousness towards this form of housing.

Table 4 shows that 2007/08 was the peak year for apartments with 2,861 approved. Other significant years for apartment approvals included: (i) 2006/07 (1,830); (ii) 2012/13 (1,410); (iii) 2004/05 (1,392) and (iv) 2011/12 (1,132). A total of 8,595 apartments were approved over these five years and 14,302 were approved over the whole period (2001/02 to 2013/14). Despite these positive figures, for every one apartment built during each of the ‘top five’ years for apartments, the number of houses built equalled: (i) 4.5, (ii) 8.1, (iii) 10.5, (iv) 10.6 and (v) 10.7 respectively. In overall terms, 12.3 houses were built for every apartment built during the period 2001/02 to 2013/14. The UDIA (WA) data shows that there is an appetite for higher-density housing, i.e. terrace/townhouses. A total of 23,179 terraced/townhouses were approved between 2001/02 and 2013/14. Hence, the ratio of apartment to terrace/townhouse approvals was 1:7.6. The three peak years for approvals of townhouses/terraces were: (i) 2009/10 (2,529); (ii) 2007/08 (2,345); and, (iii) 2006/07 (2,161). Even when all other housing types are combined, the ratio to single houses stands at 1:4.

Trends at the wider metropolitan level mask what is happening at the sub-regional level. To reiterate, the SA4 level is used as a proxy for the planning sub-regions within Directions 2031. Whilst these proxies are not an exact match, they still provide a fairly strong indication of the spatial distribution of approvals for lower- and higher-density dwellings in ‘urban’ (i.e. Central planning region) and suburban (i.e. outer metropolitan planning regions) areas. As seen in Figure 4a and 4b, approvals for single dwellings dominated five of the six SA4 areas in absolute and percentage terms. Perth-Inner was the exception to this in that apartments accounted for almost half (48.9 per cent) of all approvals within this SA4 area. Notably, Perth-Inner accounted for 62 per cent of all apartment approvals across the metropolitan region, thereby indicating
that apartments are being developed in outer suburban areas. Sure enough, a noticeable number/share of total apartments were approved in the South-West (1968; 13.8 per cent) and South-East (1835; 12.9 per cent) SA4 areas. Whilst these approvals point to a small measure of policy success in terms of increasing densities within suburban areas, ultimately the overall trend and spatial pattern of approvals clearly suggests containing urban sprawl remains an extremely challenging policy objective.
CONCLUSIONS

Efforts to control what was initially termed urban growth have been a facet of strategic planning in Perth since at least the 1955 *Stephenson-Hepburn Plan*. A policy zeal to address the issue of ‘urban sprawl’ emerged in the 1970s with the *Corridor Plan*. Policy efforts intensified with *Metroplan* in 1990, which emerged during the ascendancy of global concerns about environmental sustainability. These concerns (re)emerged during the early 2000s when the then Labor Government (2001–2008) championed sustainability, urban consolidation and new urbanist planning idea(l)s during the development of the *Network City* strategic plan. So much so, in fact, it was proposed that 60 per cent of all new development should take place within pre-existing urban areas. Following the state election victory of the Liberal and National coalition (2008–present), this development target was revised downward to 47 per cent in *Directions 2031*. Given the preciseness of this number it conveys the idea that planners have somehow calculated the ‘meaning of density’. It is more likely, however, that 47 per cent seems a relatively easier target to achieve than 60 per cent as was suggested in *Network City*. Politically, 47 per cent arguably represents a more palatable target for those who might have concerns about increased densities within their local neighbourhoods. Either way, this target seems a long way off from being achieved if past trends in lot approvals and building approvals/proposals are any indication of the future.

The ‘great Australian dream’ of a single house on its own block still appears to be deeply impregnated into the socio-cultural DNA of Australians, with the majority, approximately 80 per cent, still seeming to prefer and/or aspire to this housing type. Despite these preferences and actual experiences, planners in Perth (and other metropolitan regions) have persisted in pursuing an urban consolidation or densification policy agenda. Unfortunately, they appear not to have had any major impact on containing suburbia. *Directions 2031* (WAPC, 2010) shows that the Perth metropolitan region increased in size from 66 square kilometres to 870 square...
kilometres between 1925 and 2012 – an increase of 1,218 per cent or an annual average increase of 14 per cent. This is despite successive metropolitan plans since the 1970s all determined to stop suburban sprawl. The overall rate of urban expansion, however, appears to be slowing down with the metropolitan region expanding from 631 square kilometres in 2002 to 830 square kilometres in 2008 (31.2 per cent or 5.2 per cent per annum) and then 870 square kilometres in 2012 (4.8 per cent or 1.2 per cent per annum). This diminishing rate of expansion can be largely explained by the overall increasing size of the metropolitan region.

All of this is not to say that nothing should be done to manage ‘urban sprawl’ and that suburban growth is not without any problems, especially in relation to environmental sustainability, accessibility to employment opportunities, congestion and overall quality of life. As Stretton (1989) has noted, planning has an important role to play in ensuring that zoning and regulation conditions are in place so as to enable a more diverse mix of housing at different densities to be developed when the market signals that such housing is desirable. Even where there may be pent-up demand for higher-density housing, developers and prospective purchasers need to navigate the politically fraught terrain that can often surround densification, in particular local neighbourhoods and local government areas. The issue of ‘local politics’ and NIMBYism could ‘easily’ be resolved if the state government adopted a more authoritarian policy approach to planning. The prospects of such an approach being introduced in a capitalist liberal democracy such as Australia are fairly remote at this point in time, however.

There has been tacit acknowledgement by planners and politicians that Perth is essentially a ‘suburban city’, yet planning policy at the state (and federal) government level appears to have been informed by a largely ‘urbanist’ mindset as opposed to a ‘suburbanist’ one (Dodson, 2016). This speaks to Gleeson’s (2014) recent pronouncement that the era of *Homo urbanus* has arrived now that a majority of people live in cities. Whilst this is ‘true’, it is important
to make the distinction that the majority of city dwellers, at least in Australia, actually live in suburban environments as opposed to urban ones (Gordon, Maginn & Biermann, 2015). Hence, it might be more accurate to proclaim that we are, and always have been (Davison, 2013), living in an era of what might be termed *Homo suburbanus*. Relatedly, whilst Glaeser (2011) has declared the ‘triumph of the city’, again, a more nuanced proclamation would seem to be the triumph of ‘suburbia’.

In spatial terms, the slowing expansion of the Perth metropolitan region seems to offer a glimmer of hope in terms of containing urban sprawl. This raises the prospect that Perth might be heading towards a state of ‘peak suburbia’. In socio-cultural terms, however, the data analysed in this chapter suggests that the *suburban way of life* looks set to prevail into the foreseeable future. That being the case, rather than engage in a policy agenda that gives emphasis to ‘the urban’ and containing suburban sprawl, it might be more productive to develop an approach – *smart sprawl* – that works with the grain of suburbia. What is there to lose? Over fifty years of working against the grain of suburbia have not been that kind to WA planning and planners; from a rational comprehensive planning perspective it is arguably time to adopt a new approach to a perennial policy dilemma.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thanks to Alistair Sisson, my former Honours student and now a PhD student at The University of Sydney, for assistance with the UDIA (WA) Dwelling Approval Tool data. Thanks also to Prof Roger Keil (York University, Canada), Prof Laura Vaughan (UCL, UK) and Prof Jon Shaw (Plymouth University, UK) for their candid feedback on thoughts and ideas underpinning this chapter and the two anonymous referees for their comments and suggestions.
The Triumph of Suburbia?

NOTES

1. See Map 7 (p. 43) and Table 6 (p. 44) in the 1955 Plan for full details of proposed population distribution.
2. The SA4 regions are the largest sub-state regions in the Main Structure of the ASGS. They are designed for the output of labour force data and reflect labour markets within each state and territory within the population limits imposed by the Labour Force Survey sample. SA4s provide the best sub-state socio-economic breakdown in the ASGS. (Source http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/B01A5912123E8D2BCA257801000C64F2?openDocument)

REFERENCES

Chapter 7


186
The Triumph of Suburbia?


Western Australian Planning Commission. (2010). *Directions 2031 and Beyond: Metropolitan planning beyond the horizon*. Perth, WA: Government of Western Australia.


Chapter 7
