

THE SUBURBAN DREAM: TIME'S UP



BY JEMMA GREEN

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*With Tony Abbott pointing the finger at the 'lifestyle choices' of indigenous people in WA's remote communities, we need to look at the real cost of living an outmoded suburban dream in Perth. Rampant urban sprawl is a social and economic disaster, writes **Jemma Green**.*

Australia has one of the **least affordable housing** markets in the world. And in Perth, one of Australia's fastest growing cities, rich and poor alike want to live last century's suburban dream – we're looking down the barrel at a perfect storm.

In recent weeks, Perth's well-heeled western suburbs, City Beach and Floreat, have been protesting a planning scheme amendment, which will allow duplexes and triplexes to be built in their leafy suburbs. Residents have created a [Facebook page](#) to vent their fumes.

While the residents are complaining about the lack of consultation, that it will favour commercial next door, is at the dark heart of this debate.

If planners and policy makers cave to the pressure, we are laying the foundations for an underclass – one where poor families are stranded at the outskirts of the city.

The suburban dream is a nightmare scenario

There's been a lot of talk recently about the 'lifestyle choices' of indigenous people living in remote communities in West Australia. The reality is that the government is spending a lot more taxpayer money, and losing a lot more in productivity, by expanding Perth's city limits as they've always done in a hopeless attempt to cater to everyone else who wants to live the suburban dream.

We need to talk about urban sprawl. And we need to frame it as an ethical issue - because even if a family can afford a McMansion (Australians have the largest houses in the world, and West Australian houses are the largest in Australia), a 4WD in the garage and enough space for backyard cricket, it doesn't absolve them from the impact their choices have on the rest of the community. A house in the 'burbs might not seem indulgent, but if we continue to build out rather than subdivide, the need to extend public utilities beyond the city threshold is a massive expense to taxpayers.

Sprawl is especially relevant in Perth, which has the **lowest rate of density** and the slowest density growth rate of any city in Australia; not to mention the worst ecological footprint, water and transport **print** in the boat. And **yet**, this month, Perth reached a population of **over 2 million people** is projected to **surpass Brisbane by 2028**, and reach **4.3 million by 2036**.

Because residents are so distant from each other, Western Power, the network operator, needs to build more poles and wires to run electricity and other energy services among them. More poles and wires will cost more money. The money comes in part from the customer, but also, critically, from the taxpayer because the cost of headworks is government subsidised. It's the same for roads, water services, schools, hospitals and police stations.

What's more, Perth's power costs are also government subsidised. As this subsidy is phased out, and the sprawl continues, the costs imposed on consumers, both in terms of taxes and electricity costs is going to rise.

Developers looking to cash in on the affordable housing crisis are packaging false hope in the form of housing estates – the kind glorified on highway billboards. But these estates trigger a series of problems, not least of which is a culture of car dependency.

The problem of traffic congestion in Australian cities cannot be overstated. It's costing us billions in lost productivity, contributing to sedentary lifestyles and dividing families. People don't want to be surrounded by traffic jams so they set up in the suburbs where they then need a car to commute to work – and in so doing they become part of the very problem they are trying to escape. We're starting to see people spend as much money on car trips to and from work as they do on their mortgages and as much time alone in their cars as with their families.

You might be thinking that life in a suburban estate is a matter of taste and it's not fair of me to judge where people choose to live. And even the **research shows** that what people in Perth want most is what they've always had – stand alone houses on large plots of land. But then, is it fair to say they've even had a choice? There is a desperate need to make inner city living in Perth an attractive option. We need to invest in creating vibrant, connected, dense urban zones.

How do we wake up from this nightmare?

It's fairly normal that residents want the character of their suburb to stay exactly as it was from the day they moved in. But we need to adapt for changing demographics and population demand – not build moats around our leafy suburbs and relegate outsiders to the outskirts.

Perth needs to build up not out. This needs to be underpinned by genuine investment in public transport. A single rail line is equivalent to 12 lanes of traffic. Building evermore roads, without a systemic approach to transport is certain to see the congestion problem get worse.

Rather than take the path of least resistance – asphalt roads to ever expanding city limits – we need politicians and developers to think and act boldly with future generations in mind, not just their voting constituencies or the current buyer's market.

But we also need to be the change we want to see in our city. The entitlement culture fostered by WA's boom years needs to be reigned in along with the city limits.

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