

JUDITH SLOAN

High-rise residential blocks in suburbs are not the solution



Illustration: Sturt Krygsman

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I have lived most my life in suburban Melbourne. I know my mother always regarded the backyard as the most desirable feature of our home; with four energetic children, it was an invaluable, secure retreat.

We could play cricket, bang the tennis ball against the back wall of the house and explore the garden while playing games. Mum would get on with the many chores that consumed her daily life, knowing that her children — often with various local playmates — were close by and occupied while enjoying the fresh air.

I see this with my first daughter, who managed to produce four children in fewer than four years — twins are part of the brood, mind you. She has a secure backyard where the children can play imaginative games, bounce on the trampoline or kick the soccer ball until it deflates. She doesn't have the time to take the children to the local park every day.

Now we are led to believe that this way of life is essentially selfish. We need to get with the program. Residents should not be objecting to the rezoning of suburban land from one dwelling per lot to multiple dwellings per lot. And heaven forbid any objections from residents to height restrictions on taller dwellings.

According to Reserve Bank boffins, 10-storey apartment blocks are just not high enough. What we really need is 20 storeys. Hang the facts that these buildings cast shadows across suburbs, create wind tunnels and are often built to such low standards they will end up as slums.

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Where once there were four to eight people living on 700sq m of land, those who know better down at the Grattan Institute want 10 times that. We need high and medium-density dwellings, according to them, if we are to improve housing — actually living space —

affordability and avert the presumed disaster that fewer people in Australia will end up owning their own home — oops, living space.

The fact there are many more people living in these suburbs without any other adjustments being made in terms of local amenities or transport links may call into question the judgment of these advocates of high-density living. They may make the case for these adjustments as well, although state and local governments won't be listening — that's for sure.

For all these experts' complaints about the appalling prevalence of nimbyism, make no mistake — infill development is occurring at a frightening pace across Melbourne, where annual population growth tops 100,000, thanks largely to immigration. Because the state government controls planning along arterial roads, any objections from local residents are inadmissible for new dwelling construction along them.

As a result, houses on large blocks are being torn down and replaced with tall apartment buildings, generally with inadequate — sometimes no — parking.

There are also some anomalous areas, such as the one around Melbourne High School in South Yarra, which has a curious zoning arrangement because of the previous existence of a chocolate factory. The plethora of poor quality high-rises there, many with only one bedroom, is an eyesore.

And nothing has been done to transform the nearby South Yarra railway station, where it is common for commuters to wait more than 15 minutes just to get on the platform. The state government has no intention of upgrading it to accommodate the booming number of passengers.

Readers from other cities will be familiar with similar instances of completely inappropriate infill developments.

Should we believe the pontificating of the Reserve Bank researchers that zoning is adding \$489,000 to the cost of a dwelling in Sydney and \$268,000 in Melbourne? The short answer is no. The study is replete with assumptions and most of the data is sourced from the self-serving property sector. There are other much lower estimates that could be arrived at with different assumptions and different data.

There is also their weird assumption that geography is somehow irrelevant. But if you think of the land formations and the waterways in Sydney, in particular, the scope for close-in development was always limited, a point former NSW premier Bob Carr always recognised.

Even in Melbourne, there was always the opportunity to develop the city out to the west. But the west is flat, treeless and dry. It was entirely unsurprising that before we had these interfering boffins looking to criticise citizen-led development, that Melbourne developed in an easterly and southern direction to take advantage of the foothills and the sea. Melbourne has now developed out west, but it is still flat and dry, even if more trees have been planted.

Then we have the RBA guesses about the impact of preventing apartment buildings having 20 storeys rather than 10. On the basis of limited data, the estimated additional cost per apartment is close to \$400,000, or almost 50 per cent of the cost of buying an apartment in Sydney. My advice, however, is to regard this figure with a grain — perhaps many grains — of salt.

So, what are these zealous advocates of high-density living really saying? Existing residents should have no rights over how their suburb is developed; there are no real reasons zoning should exist in any case (so a foundry or abattoir next to the apartment building would be fine); and if everyone were just to live in tiny dogboxes, then housing/living space would be much more affordable.

But here's the thing: the real message is that the population has been allowed to grow too fast. The "cost" of zoning has risen significantly during the past two decades because of the growth in demand — a point conceded by the Reserve Bank. And even the Grattan Institute now belatedly acknowledges the case for cutting the immigration intake to ease the demand pressures on the housing market. That's what this story is really about.

I'm all for opening up new housing developments on the outer fringes of our cities.

If there have been problems doing so in the past, it has been almost entirely the fault of state governments and the imposition of dubious city limits and excessive imposts.

The complicity of certain property developers also should not be overlooked; they are often keen to create artificial shortages.

In combination with good transport links and adequate local infrastructure, the real strategy should be to develop these areas to accommodate a more modest increase in the population flowing from a reduced migrant intake. However, I won't be holding my breath for common sense to prevail.

Had I wanted to live in New York, Hong Kong or London, I would have done so. I just happen to love a backyard, as do many other Australians.



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