Perth Planning – Changing the Ethos

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Introduction

Perth, the most isolated capital in the world has not evolved well. Decades of poor planning coupled with the political whim to create a so-called 'modern city' has caused Perth to spread too far and lose its early authenticity.   In order to control the spread, urban infill strategies without density limits or quality controls are now being imposed on the city without regard for place or sensibility. A new planning ethos is urgently needed which respects existing amenity and character and focuses on community values and needs rather than simply facilitating developer demands.

Sir Peter Hall, one of England's greatest modern-day planners, had the view that city planning had lost its way. In a public lecture shortly before his death he posed the following two questions:

1) How can we improve cities until we have changed the system?
2) What is the use of changing the system if people don't firstly understand what good cities really are? [1]

Changing the system would be a challenging and prolonged process, but necessary. To release the vice-like grip exerted by the development industry and the planning bureaucracy in favour of the community would meet stiff resistance in Perth. To change the autocratic, top-down approach to city planning as it is practiced in Perth would require a seismic attitudinal shift. This lecture does not focus on devising ways to bring about change; the focus instead is on Sir Peter Hall's second question. The overall objective therefore is to show the importance of designing healthy cities where the central focus is on the long-term needs of people. You may think this is a strange concept; surely planning always takes the needs of people into account? Sadly, it usually only does this within the extremely limited understanding planners have of human ecology. So much planning theory and policy is not based on a sound evidence-based understanding of human needs which leads, in time, to unhealthy and unsustainable cities. It is a little like trying to plan and develop a harmonious and healthy garden without taking the time to understand plant biology and soil science.

Background

Cities are extremely complex manmade environments where today the majority of people live. People too are extremely complex. Social and individual needs are many and varied as are biological and emotional needs. The evolution of a good city requires its planners to firstly understand and then respond fittingly to these multifaceted and intermeshed needs.

For thousands of years cities have served humans by offering symbolism, identity, security, employment, education, convenience, and the opportunity to find companionship. Lewis Mumford once wrote:

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[1] Adapted from "Reflections on a life time of planning" by the late Sir Peter Hall – Planner and geographer
The original version of this viewpoint appeared in Town Planning Review 85.5 (2014), published by Liverpool University Press.

…only in a city can the full cast of characters associated with human drama be assembled and only in a city can there be sufficient diversity and competition to enliven people's lives and sharpen their skills to the highest level through conscious and intense participation.[2]

Mumford's view of course is based on an ideal city. Many modern cities only offer very small areas where the full drama of life can truly unfold. Large portions of many cities are now relatively soulless and offer residents little more than basic shelter.

At their most basic level cities must be functional. They must firstly offer safety and security. They must facilitate ease of movement. Everyday services must be available. Suitable land for places to work, worship, live, socialise, shop, play sport, and be educated must be available. These are the most basic of human needs which psychologist Abraham Maslow[3] states are needed by humans to start evolving. Simply planning to facilitate these functions will not necessarily and usually does not produce a good city or appropriate living environments. Indeed, Richard Florida's Place and Happiness survey revealed that the provision of essential or basic services ranks lower in peoples' perception of place-related happiness than aesthetics and lifestyle[4]. Many evidence-based studies now suggest that modern dense cities, crammed with all the functional facilities required to support human existence, can be harmful to their inhabitants[5]. It appears that rural dwellers are now happier and healthier than those raised in cities[6], which is ironic given that the mass migration from the farm to the city gave rise to urban growth in the first place. This brings into sharp focus one of the great paradoxes of our time:

The places in which we dwell can simultaneously nurture and hinder human development.[7]

It wasn't always like this. In medieval times many cities in Europe and the Middle East evolved from outpost towns established by empire builders such as the Romans. For over a thousand years humans learnt how to create cities and towns which comprised small self-sustaining and locally-based environments in which people lived and worked. Community life was strong and was usually kin or guild-based. People living in these towns and cities were much like we are today[8]. Following the exhausting plagues in Europe and England (c. 1300 to c. 1600) things changed. The trend to greater urbanisation started as people weary from centuries of disease and death started to migrate from rural living to city life. Then, with the later emergence of the Industrial Revolution (c. 1700 to c. 1800) the urban world dramatically changed. Well-established medieval values of localism and self-sufficiency disappeared. Mass housing for a rapidly growing workforce was needed to keep the large production factories running; newly invented steam trains were used to enable suburbs and small towns to spread out across the countryside; electric motors were invented which led Elisha Otis, in 1852, to

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[2] Slightly modified but based on Mumford, L. (1989), The Urban Drama in "The City in History", p 116.

[3] Psychologist Abraham Maslow, in 1943, produced his famous concept about the hierarchy of human needs which has been used continually to help people understand the impacts on human development when deprived of essential developmental needs.

[4] See Richard Florida's Who's your city? pp 270-271 in which he tables the key results of a survey involving the views of 27,885 individuals about the relationship between place and happiness.

[5] See Giles-Corti. B, et al (2012), Increasing density in Australia: Maximising the health benefits and minimizing harm, Commissioned by the National Heart Foundation Australia.

[6] Meyer-Lindenberg, A. (2013) Big City Blues, Mounting evidence shows how city living can harm mental health, pp 59-61, Scientific American Mind, March/April 2013.

[7] This was the theme of a lecture by the author on *Sense of Place – Sense of Being*, Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, 2015.

[8] Robert Fossier's "The Axe and the Oath" depicts ordinary life in the middle ages and he concludes that these early urbanites were similar to modern urbanites in many ways.

develop the first safe elevator which, in combination with the use of steel, made possible the first high-rise buildings (c. 1890). Perhaps the biggest change of all, the change which impacted most on cities, occurred when Henry Ford launched his affordable automobile for the masses in 1908. The age of the car-dependant city had arrived.

During these early periods of urbanisation the social and community benefits of the medieval city were lost. Family structures and guild systems broke down. Offspring moved out of the family environments to other parts of the city in search of work. They would often meet others in similar circumstances, marry and start their own families. Cities became terribly polluted in what Lewis Mumford called the Paleotechnic Paradise: Coketown[9] (due to the prolific use of burning coal for energy production). This period marked the beginning of the many complex social and environmental problems associated with our large modern cities. The garden city planning movement, started by the likes of Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928)[10], was devised in response to the emerging problems associated with the cities of the Industrial Revolution. A second problematic developmental period started following WW2 when large tracts of homogeneous suburbs were built to house the families of returning soldiers, particularly in America and Australia. In the 1950s the great American and Australian urban 'dream' was being carefully honed. In the 1960s, following the so-called baby boom, the annual population growth rate in these countries was at its peak and has been steadily reducing ever since. Families, according to the marketing experts employed to sell land, houses and cars, should all have their own detached house in the suburbs sited on its own piece of land. Dad would work and use the family car to travel to his place of employment. Large shopping malls were built to replace the corner stores and mass consumerism was encouraged. The extended family, whose demise had started in the Industrial Revolution, mostly ceased to exist, and was replaced by the much-encouraged nuclear family because more households meant more sales of land, houses and consumer goods. Today we live in cities which have evolved following this 'dream'. Sociologist Ray Oldenberg observes that "man now works in one place, sleeps in another, shops somewhere else, finds pleasure or companionship where he can, and cares about none of these places." [11]

Perth in the 1970s - poor planning starts and authenticity is lost

Cities like Perth are a good example of how planners, strongly influenced by land developers, facilitated the great urban 'dream'. All of the observations made by Oldenberg in his book The Problem of Place in America can be seen in Perth. The city has grown as a monocentric, care-dependant, and linear entity. The majority of people live in a suburban environment offering little stimulation and diversity. Workers are compelled to perform a mass migration ritual twice daily journeying to and from work which can often take longer than two hours. Shopping and accessing essential community services can only be done by travelling in the family car. People can often live completely anonymous lives and may never even know the names of their adjacent neighbours. In 1960, Australian architect Robin Boyd wrote the 'Great Australian Ugliness' in response to the design and planning of Australian cities[12]. It is critical to note at this point that it is not suburbia itself which makes for a poor city. Most European and Middle Eastern cities are primarily comprised of a suburban

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[9] See Mumford. L, (1961), *"The City in History",* Section 15: p. 446, Harcourt, Inc.

[10] See Mumford. L, (1902), "The Garden City Idea and Modern Planning" in *The Urban Design Reader*, Eds. Michael Larice and Elizabeth Macdonald, pp. 44 – 53).

[11] See Oldenburg. R, (1989), "The Problem of Place in America" in *The Urban Design Reader*, Eds. Michael Larice and Elizabeth Macdonald, p. 140.

[12] Boyd was fiercely criticised when his book was first published. He was called un-Australian for voicing these views. His book is now a best seller and has been reprinted many times.

environment. The major difference between these cities and the cities of Australia and America is that they did not evolve based on the motor vehicle and they are polycentric.[13]

Perth could have evolved well as a primarily suburban city if only it had been planned well. Unfortunately decades of poor planning has caused Perth to grow into what could best be described as a malformed city. It was the seriously flawed Corridor Plan implemented in 1970 which led to this malformation. Ironically government planners still insist that this plan has served the city well[14]. Linear cities, which Perth has largely become, have few effective precedents. Spanish urban planner Arturo Soria y Mata in 1882 conceived of the concept of a linear city. Soria's proposal involved developing a central services and transport spine then forming the city on either side. Rather than at least trying to make the linear form work in accordance with Soria's ideas, successive Perth governments simply allowed residential land to be continually released along the northern and southern corridors, in leapfrog fashion, without including the essential transport system and dispersed employment centres. It wasn't until 1990 that the government decided to start the process of building a rail link to service the northern corridor and in 2004 the southern rail line was commenced.

A royal commission report into the Corridor Plan was released in 1972 and it makes very interesting reading[15]. Many experts provided evidence that the corridor plan was seriously flawed and should be amended. The major areas of concern were:

1) Corridors too long
2) Edges too rigid
3) Lacks good conservation policy
4) Lacks details of work centres
5) Spaces between corridors are too large
6) Increases travel distances
7) Orientation of transport systems toward CBD is contrary to the decentralisation of the work force

In keeping with the autocratic and top-down ethos which has always pervaded Perth planning, the Corridor Plan was adopted as proposed and the expert's opinions ignored. Perth now extends further than any capital in Australia and suffers from serious traffic congestion and lack of dispersed employment opportunities.

Perth has not only suffered from poor planning; it lost its early authenticity when the premier of the day, Sir Charles Court, sanctioned the demolition of almost every historical building in the city centre based entirely on his personal whim that Perth should become a 'modern city' befitting its status as the capital of a large mining state. Even His Majesty's theatre was slated for demolition before common sense prevailed. Perth's CBD is now a soulless place reflecting none of its early character or history. The city centre is little more than a collection of dull functional buildings with empty and windy forecourts. Buildings with intriguing facades, beckoning windows and entries lining the footpaths have all disappeared. Fremantle would have suffered the

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[13] A polycentric city is a conurbation of many smaller city units each with their own degree of self-sufficiency and identity.
[14] "Western Australia has an enviable history of metropolitan planning starting with the adoption of the Stephenson-Hepburn plan in 1955, followed by the Corridor Plan in 1970…" are the opening lines in the foreword to Directions 2031.
[15] http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/intranet/libpages.nsf/WebFiles/Report+of+the+Honorary+Royal+Commission+of+inquiry+into+the+corridor+plan+for+Perth/$FILE/Inquiry+into+the+corridor+plan+for+Perth+1.pdf, retrieved 23/2/2016

same fate if it had not been for the efforts of many prominent residents who could see the value of their city's heritage[16].

The psyche of the development industry was laid bare during this time. Developers were very willing to destroy the city's character in order to create wealth and the government encouraged their desire. Today the government and developers possess the same attitudes. They still display no understanding that the history of a city told through its buildings provides identity and authenticity; it is in fact the very thing that drives people to visit cities. Fremantle is again under attack from developers and the brutal insertion of a massive office tower in Perth's last remaining intact heritage precinct[17] provide strong evidence that the symbiotic relationship between developer and government still overrides heritage values.

Perth in the 21st century - planning rhetoric discords with reality in the push for densification

The impetus now is not solely to create a 'modern city'; now the impetus is to create a 'dense city' which if not done well can lead to serious environmental and public health problems, both mentally and physically.

For decades there has been little concern amongst planners about the evolution of modern cities in the colonised world[18] even though urbanists, geographers and sociologists were providing warnings from the 1950s. Now things are beginning to change as environmental psychologists and medical scientists are collecting evidence about the impact of the urban environment on its inhabitants. Slowly, a general awareness among planners is emerging that things need to change. Perth however is many years behind and is still not aware of the shift. Our government planners are focussed primarily on physical planning and for many years now have simply adopted the generic planning theories and policies developed in other Australian capitals.

Most planning theory focuses on physical determinism, an approach centred on the belief that through provision of physical elements, such as parks, buildings and transport systems, a healthy city will grow. Jane Jacobs, in her analysis of New York's Morningside Heights, proved that physical determinism doesn't work.[19] In the case of Morningside Heights, planners attempted to reverse the district's decline toward becoming a slum by applying planning theory and redeveloping the area in a move which the planners called "a great success in city saving". [20] Following their redevelopment efforts Morningside Heights continued to decline at a greater rate. Jacobs observed that "in city after city, precisely the wrong areas, in the light of planning theory are decaying". Her greatest criticism of planners is that they simply do not study how cities really work preferring instead to confine themselves to idealism.

Planning theory often discords with reality and one example which occupies much attention these days focusses on   the desire to densify the existing parts of cities. Planners, particularly in Australia, now tend to vilify suburbia. Much of the rhetoric is centred on transport planning and the desire to reduce car dependency;

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[16] See "Fighting for Fremantle" the Fremantle Society Story, by Ron and Dianne Davidson for an account of how close Fremantle came to destruction.

[17] This precinct includes the Perth Town Hall, the Treasury Building and the old Titles offices.

[18] The colonised world includes The Americas and Australia.

[19] See Jane Jacobs, (1961), "The Uses of Sidewalks" from The Death and life of Great American Cities, in *The Urban Design Reader*, Eds. Michael Larice and Elizabeth Macdonald, pp 80 – 92.

[20] Jane Jacobs, (1961), "The Uses of Sidewalks" from The Death and life of Great American Cities, in *The Urban Design Reade* , Eds. Michael Larice and Elizabeth Macdonald, p 82.

the higher the density the more likely we are to afford public transport systems is a central theme. If the argument was valid, which it isn't, that higher densities alone increased public transport use, and as a result reduced car dependency, then one of the greatest mistakes of modern planning would be reversed.[21] Another theme is that urban sprawl will consume valuable agricultural land as the suburbs expand. While this is valid in some countries it should be noted that less than 1% of Australia is urbanised.[22] The push for densification in Perth started during the recent population boom in Western Australia when in 2011-12 the population's rate of growth reached approximately 3.5%, most of which was due to overseas migration. In 2013-14 the rate of increase declined to 2.5% and is further declining. [23] For Perth to achieve a population of 3.5million people by 2050, as predicted by state planners, it will require an average annual population growth rate of 1.5%. Considering the natural rate of population growth in Western Australia is approximately 0.75%[24] this will require an average annual migration rate also of 0.75%. Considering also that the state now offers far less employment opportunities this migration rate may not be achieved. Adelaide and Hobart are both cities struggling to employ their citizens and during 2013-14 the rate of population growth in these cities was only 1% and 0.6% respectively.[25] It is incorrect to assume that the population of cities eternally increases – there has to be a purpose. Of course it is prudent to plan for population growth however the often alarmist claims of rapid population growth in Perth are a hangover from a short-lived boom-time rhetoric which is often cited by developers and their planning consultants to justify their claims for increased densities.

Irrespective of which theme is being pushed with respect to higher densities there are indeed some benefits to be gained from living in cities with reasonable levels of higher density, as demonstrated in European cities. It is incorrect however to believe that density on its own creates more liveable cities. European cities are extremely rich culturally and physically and it is this richness which makes them great cities, not simply their density. One only needs to look at the recent cities created in China to see how consolidating a large population into a small area does not create a liveable city. There are also many examples in Perth, such as the Springs development in Belmont, where simply increasing densities does not create liveable environments. Jill Grant refers to this phenomenon as stranded density:

> *efforts at suburban residential intensification have…resulted in "stranded density", where dense developments are just as deprived as low density areas of urban amenities.[26]*

Urbanists and environmental researchers have been warning for some time that the benefits of urban consolidation can quickly be outweighed by social and physical problems. There is by no means universal agreement that urban consolidation in developed areas is desirable[27]. What we are now seeing emerge is a significant inconsistency between planning rhetoric and reality, just as Jane Jacobs observed in the 1960s. Increases in noise, atmospheric pollution and heat are now emerging as generators of stress-related illness in

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[21] Unfortunately increased densities and well patronised public transport systems do not reduce car usage. Paris, London, New York, and Rome are just a few examples of highly congested cities which possess excellent and well patronised public transport systems.

[22] Area and proportion of land surface occupied by human settlements, structures and activities that support human settlement. Department of Environment, Australia, 2015

[23] ABS - 3218.0 - Regional Population Growth, Australia, 2013-14

[24] A natural rate of population growth results from the balance between births and deaths.

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] Grant, Jill et. al. Interface: The Future of the Suburbs. Planning Theory & Practice, 2013. Vol 14. No. 3, 391-415

[27] See Hildebrand Frey (1999) "Compact, Decentralisation or What? The sustainable City Debate", from Designing the City: Towards a more Sustainable Urban Form (1999), in The Urban Design Reader, Eds. Michael Larice and Elizabeth Macdonald, pp 328 – 342.

many urbanites, mostly resulting from increased density[28]. For example, motor vehicle-related air pollution is believed to be responsible for between 900 and 2,000 early deaths each year in Australia[29]. Given that significant increases in residential density will generate a significant increase in motor vehicles it can be assumed that the impacts of vehicle-related air pollution will increase. Some planning and transport theorists believe that higher densities should be developed around train stations because they assume, ideologically, that people living within walking distance of train stations will use the service to travel to work. Unlike England, where a large percentage of people use the train, the reality is that less than 10% of people living around train stations in inner Perth suburbs use the service to travel to work. Unless their place of work and residence are conveniently located along the same railway line there is little benefit in living adjacent a train station[30]. Another interesting example of reality versus planning theory can be seen in the application of theories with respect to creating walkable environments. The planning theory is that higher densities will induce people to walk. This is based on observations that many people walk the streets in dense European cities. In a recent study of Clarkson, a Perth northern suburb where planners have followed New Urbanist planning theories designed to create what they believe will become walkable neighbourhoods, less than 3% of people can be observed actually walking at any time of the day even in areas of higher density around the train station.[31]

The desire to see more people living in apartments is probably one of the best examples of the discord between planning theory and reality. High-rise apartments certainly result in a consolidation of urban populations however they are by far the least preferred housing choice, particularly in Perth[32].There are very good reasons for people to prefer living in a house. Houses offer levels of flexibility, adaptability and opportunities for individual expression not possible in apartments. The recent surge in apartment developments in Perth has been fuelled by a major jump in land prices which, for the first time, has meant that small apartments are more affordable than a house. It is important to understand that there is only a limited demand for single bedroom apartments. The larger apartments are still less affordable than most houses and the trend toward apartment living will abate when land prices reduce.

Current planning polices and strategies driving densification in Perth

Perth's densification push is being enabled by two new planning documents known as Directions 2031 and Perth and Peel @ 3.5million (2015); both are produced by the Western Australian Planning Commission (WAPC). As with the Corridor Plan the general community, who are by far the major owners of land in the city, have had little input into the preparation of these documents; in fact most people would not have heard of either. The only time the community becomes aware of these types of planning policies is when they are advertised for comment which is in keeping with the autocratic ethos of our planning system and the general desire to disempower the community.

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[28] See Giles-Corti. B, et al (2012), Increasing density in Australia: Maximising the health benefits and minimizing harm, Commissioned by the National Heart Foundation Australia.

[29] Brook, R.D., et al. Particulate matter air pollution and cardiovascular disease: an update to the scientific statement from the American Heart Association. On behalf of the American Heart Association Council on Epidemiology and Prevention, Council on the Kidney in Cardiovascular Disease, and Council on Nutrition, Physical Activity and Metabolism. Circulation. 2010;121:2331–2378.

[30] See ABS data on journey to work figures.

[31] See "*Investigating the effect of New Urbanist planning principles on suburban walking behavior", an honours thesis completed by Chantala Garn (2015),* School of Earth and Environment, UWA.

[32] See http://www.planning.wa.gov.au/dop_pub_pdf/housing_full_report.pdf, p22

The central suburbs of Perth are fully developed and unlike many American cities we do not have large tracts of abandoned or underutilised industrial land. Consequently there is little land in the inner suburbs available for new development. Government planners therefore rely heavily on the use of so-called activity corridors and activity centres to facilitate urban infill. Activity corridor is planning parlance for a busy road and includes roads such as Stirling Highway, Charles Street, Albany Highway, Cambridge Street, and Marmion Avenue. The Stirling Highway Activity Corridor or SHAC is one interesting example where government planners see the opportunity to line both sides of Stirling Highway with small apartment developments suitable for a range of users including "ageing local residents wanting to downsize from larger dwellings and continue to live in their local area". [33] Older people along with infants are the most vulnerable group to urban environmental issues such as atmospheric pollution, noise and heat and they should not be considered as one of the primary target residents along very busy roads. The Herdsman Glendalough detailed area plan is another case where the state government has prepared plans to allow development of high-rise apartments along very busy roads, in this case the proposal is to line Scarborough Beach Road with residential towers sitting on offices and shops at street level. Planners are so ideologically and unilaterally focused on achieving high density development that they have forgotten, or never knew, that good planning involves creating healthy environments.

Activity centre usually means an existing urban centre such as Innaloo, Karrinyup, Carousel, Whitfords City, and Garden City. It also means existing character town centres located in areas like Subiaco, Mt. Hawthorn, Mt. Lawley, Bayswater, Victoria Park, Leederville, Claremont, Swanbourne, and Wembley. There are many serious questions about the long-term appropriateness of both activity corridors and activity centres:

1) Is it really possible to retrofit established urban centres?
2) How are existing commercial hubs to be converted to places where people both live and work?
3) How is affordable housing going to be constructed in centres where the costs of aggregating land and the costs of building high-rise apartments are inherently high?
4) Will employers wish to establish in these centres?
5) Given the dispersal of jobs across the city, will those who live in activity centres be able to work there?
6) Will there be sufficient investment in the public transport network to prompt a reduced level of dependence upon the car?[34]

Additional concerns relate to demand:

7) Most of household growth to 2030 will be amongst older households who will have little desire to leave their attached houses;
8) Most children of baby boomers have already purchased a detached suburban home so a dwelling in an activity centre will have little appeal;
9) Young singles and couples without children will not be able to afford the high cost of dwellings constructed in activity centres.

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[33] See http://www.planning.wa.gov.au/1265.asp#phase2, retrieved 2/25/2016
[34] See Birrell, B. et al (2014), "Melbourne 2030: Planning Rhetoric Versus Urban Reality"
Chapter 2, Residential Infill and its threat to Melbourne's liveability, Monash University Publishing.

There are also concerns, such as the one below, that contemporary planning strategies do not understand that children need to occupy the city too:

> *Contemporary strategic planning has almost become child-blind, with the new higher density centres being built essentially for the childless in mind. The talk is of 'vibrant' and 'liveable' mixed use town centres, characterised by pavement cafes, restaurant and entertainment precincts, shopping and office jobs. The new Australian compact city will be developed into distinctive zones based on age, life style and household composition with town centres for the childless....* [35]

These are legitimate questions and concerns being asked by experts; questions which our government planners ignore just as they did when warned about the long-term consequences of the corridor plan. The issue here is that ideological theory takes the place of common sense.

To encourage developers to overdevelop sites in existing inner Perth suburbs and hence meet the states arbitrary infill targets, the state government planners lifted limits on residential densities so that now apartment developers can develop sites to accommodate far more dwellings than was ever envisaged in long-standing local government planning schemes. The current situation has moved to the point of utter disbelief which becomes evident in this comparison with London. In London they divide the city into central, urban and suburban areas as a means for describing the different capabilities for density increases. Central areas, where the highest densities are permitted, are those within international, metropolitan or major town centres. The only area in Perth which would possibly reach this category would be the CBD. In all areas the density limit can increase and decrease according to the degree of accessibility to public transport.[36] England, as previously mentioned, and particularly London, has some of the most accessible and useful public transport networks in the world. Studies have shown that public transport usage is significantly higher in England than in countries like Australia and America.[37] London further categorises density limits according to the number of rooms in apartments or houses. Perth planners, by comparison, adopt a crude and ungrained means for defining density. Here's where the comparison gets interesting. The maximum densities recommended for London, where accessibility to useful public transport is highest is 215-405 dph (dwellings per hectare) for central areas; 70-260 dph for urban areas; and 70-130 dph for suburban areas. In areas with limited access to public transport and where patronage is low, which is typical of the Perth context, the maximum density recommendations drop significantly to 50-110 dph for central areas; 50-95 dph in urban areas; and 50-75 dph in suburban areas. Recent developments being approved in Perth, outside the CBD, are regularly in the vicinity of 300-400 dph and higher, equal to the highest density limits recommended for central areas in London. Developments of this density now appear randomly in existing Perth suburbs where they are so completely out of context.

The lack of quality controls required to ensure apartment developments and their surrounds offer good living environments is one of the stark differences between Perth and other Australian capitals.   State planning regulations in Perth exerts few controls to preserve the amenity of existing neighbours and no quality controls exist to ensure that developers provide residents in new developments with acceptable standards beyond those imposed by building regulations. The lack of controls in the Perth planning system with respect to

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[35] Gleeson B J (2007), Child-Friendly Cities: Critically Exploring the Evidence Base of a Resurgent Agenda, Urban Research Program, Griffith University.
[36] See London Plan density matrix in "London Housing Design Guide", (2010), p29.
[37] See Mees, P. (2009) "Public Transport Solutions for Suburbia", Routledge

resident amenity comes into sharp focus when compared with the requirements imposed on developers in New South Wales, for example. NSW's Residential Flat Design Code is:

> *a resource to improve the design of residential flat development. It is based on the principle that good quality buildings help improve the quality of life. It deals with the location, size and scale, appearance and amenity of the buildings in which many people live.* [38]

This code has been in existence for at least 15 years now and Perth government planners have never attempted to adopt something similar, probably for fear of angering the development industry.

The only planning instrument local governments have to keep building size compatible with its context is plot ratio.[39] There is a direct link between plot ratio and density so to override local government planning schemes the WAPC in 2015 introduced a planning mechanism to ensure that plot ratio limits could be increased by 25%. Again, this can be achieved in the absence of comprehensive quality controls. Developers now can claim the 25% plot ratio increase as a matter of course. The resultant impact is that buildings in existing suburbs are far larger and bulkier than their neighbours.

Disempowerment of local values by Development Assessment Panels

To further ensure that high-density apartment developments eventuate, state planners instigated a Development Assessment Panel (DAP or JDAP) system which has the capacity to comprehensively override local government planning policies. These panels consist of five voting members; two are local councillors, and three are government appointments, so they are biased toward state government policy from the outset. The combination of writing planning policies aimed at densification; arbitrarily removing density limits; increasing plot ratios by 25%; failing to require developers to meet appropriate standards of amenity; and providing developers with the opportunity to have their projects approved by DAPs with no sympathy for the local context has seen the emergence in many parts of Perth, particularly existing character town centres, of over-sized developments. Local planning provisions devised over many years to preserve existing amenity and character which ensure good relationships exist between buildings, are now ignored all in the pursuit of higher densities. The cumulative impacts of increasing car numbers, destroying visual amenity, loss of human scale, loss of space to grow trees, increased wind velocity, increased heat gain, and the environmental impact on neighbours seem to matter little as these buildings continue to appear.

Decisions by DAPs to override community values are increasing. The reasons given by DAP members when overriding recommendations by relevant regulatory authorities (local governments) are often naïve and simplistic. Their reasoning shows a failure to understand the totality of the regulatory environment affecting their decision making. In a recent case in The Town of Victoria Park, The Town recommended against approval of a large apartment building in Burswood because a new structure planning process had commenced which would see the area transformed from a rundown light industrial area to a predominantly high-rise residential precinct. In the absence of well-formulated planning controls to ensure all future buildings in the area were integrated harmoniously, which is a critical issue when preparing for a large number of neighbouring high-rise

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[38] See introductory comment in Residential Flat Design Code Tools for improving the design of residential flat buildings, http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/~/media/Files/DPE/Manuals-and-guides/residential-flat-design-code-2002-02.ashx, retrieved 2/25/2016.

[39] Plot ratio is the ratio of overall building area to the land area on which the building sits. The higher the plot ratio, the greater the resultant building size. Adherence to plot ratio is one of the primary planning instruments used to control building bulk and mass.

buildings, The Town argued that it was too early to approve this development. The two local government members of the JDAP agreed with the Town and moved not to approve the application until the structure plan was complete. The three government-appointed members disagreed and approved the proposal giving the following single-sentence reason:

> *On the majority, the JDAP felt that the application could be approved with suitable conditions noting that the preparation of the local structure plan is yet to be finalised and it is likely that on advice from the Administration, that it will be at least a year before it can be formally adopted.[40]*

In this case, the JDAP felt it unreasonable for a developer to wait a year before a proper planning framework had been established in the area. Their desire to push for densification regardless of the consequences was clear to see in this case. This decision will compromise the future planning of the Burswood precinct all because of adherence to an ideology.

The community is becoming very concerned about DAP decisions and has started to challenge their decisions. In a recent case in South Perth the Supreme Court quashed a JDAP decision to approve a 29 storey development on the South Perth peninsular. The South Perth peninsular is probably one of the best examples of harmonious relationships between high-rise buildings anywhere in Perth. The streets are beautiful, landscape abounds, buildings are set well away from each other and there is wonderful natural light entering the public areas.   After the case the community members and their lawyers stated that:

> *It is a sad indictment of the local planning procedures that litigation provided the only available means of redress for the residents of South Perth. We are fortunate in Western Australia that our Courts have the wisdom and independence to protect the public against the unlawful exercise of power through the judicial review process but there is still a need to grant the public a means to challenge the merits of bad planning decisions by JDAPs. There is still much to be done to address the current planning chaos in South Perth. The developers have repeatedly tried to mischaracterise opposition to the high-rise development as a minority of disgruntled residents. The reality is that residents throughout South Perth, Como, Kensington and Manning have been shocked by these unexpected planning approvals. We were never consulted about residential skyscrapers in South Perth. Our concerns about the incorrect application of the Town Planning Scheme were fully justified. We are not anti-development; we simply want responsible development that preserves the character of the area."*
> [41]

In a Parliamentary Enquiry held into DAPs in 2014/15 government planners and property industry representatives expressed their views that DAPs were successful. The Minister for Planning still states that the DAP process is working. A consistent contrary view was expressed during this enquiry by members of the community and representatives from local government. Submissions stating problems and concerns about DAPs were by far in the majority.[42] This is strong evidence reinforcing that the community and their representatives in local government feel uneasy about their values being overridden in order to facilitate development.

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[40] See http://www.planning.wa.gov.au/Metro-Central-JDAP.asp, Minute No 148, p20.
[41] This is part of a statement released on 25 February 2016 by the applicants following the Court's decision.
[42] http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/parliament/commit.nsf/(WebInquiries)/0F3777625B0816EA48257D7A0035D688?op endocument, retrieved 2/26/2016

It should also be noted here that Western Australia, unlike other Australian states, does not include in its legal system a third party right of appeal. This opportunity offered to other Australians is denied to Western Australians. Unfortunately both major political parties support this lack of democratic right just as they both support the DAP system.

Human psyche is so interesting; politicians, government planners and representatives of the property industry who cry loud for increased densities are also community members so why do they so quickly loose empathy for community values and concerns. If the character of their local neighbourhood or their home was being seriously compromised by inappropriate development would they not feel it too? They like to call community protesters NIMBYs who can't accept change and who hold up progress; this is the classic splitting technique used by governments and bureaucrats to paint objectors as problem makers driven solely by self-interest. Given the right circumstances they too will most likely be NIMBYs.

Changing the ethos

Perth is Perth, not Melbourne, Sydney or Vancouver, which is often touted in the media as an ideal model for Perth to emulate. Perth is located on a relatively harsh coastal plane and backs on to a desert. It is one of the windiest cities in the world and is miles from nowhere. Its primary reason for being is to support Western Australia's mining industry. The psyche of the city in general terms is casual and relatively carefree. The centre of the city is beautiful due to the expansive Swan River; beyond this the city is monotonous with the exception of areas directly on the coastline and in the hills areas. Perth must be considered as a unique place with unique challenges and opportunities; simply adopting generic, off-the-shelf planning strategies from other cities and cultures, as is the current practice, is inappropriate and lazy and will only further complicate Perth's current planning problems.

The ethos must change. Firstly the attitude of planning bureaucrats toward the community has to alter. Perth's community is under siege from planning bureaucrats, make no mistake about that. Rather than follow the lead of many countries our planning bureaucrats steadfastly refuse to properly engage with and listen to the broad community. Localism and community values are overridden at every opportunity in favour of centralist planning ideology. Wealth creation through property development is a powerful motivator and our government planners have a long history of being all too ready to listen to developers, rather than the community, when devising planning policies. This acrimonious 'battle' mentality has been ramping up in intensity in recent years[43] as planning bureaucrats introduce generic densification strategies and DAPs ensure they are implemented without giving proper consideration to existing contexts. The general disposition of the state government is one of confrontation rather than conciliation and this attitude probably flows down to senior bureaucrats. Clearly, the state must pull back from this domineering approach to planning. Instead of the debate focusing on creating a generic dense Perth, government planners should concentrate on creating a unique healthy Perth which can truly nurture its residents. Planners are attempting the impossible and undesirable task of changing the very DNA of Perth's inner suburbs in order to accord with their image of a city. While they invest so much energy on this task they take their eye off the real game which is to make Perth's outer suburbs more self-sufficient and liveable. Government planners on their own have very few answers or strategies for developing healthy liveable cities. A healthy city can only emerge through closely

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[43] City of Perth (Elizabeth Quay), Cottesloe (Marine Parade), Scarborough, Subiaco, Nedlands, South Perth, Fremantle, Bayswater, Guilford, Mt. Lawley, Cambridge, Canning, and Rockingham (Point Peron) are areas where community concerns about planning issues have been overridden by either the state or local government in recent years.

working with the city's occupants in a process which Loius Albrechts calls co-production. [44] Albrechts shares with us with this wonderful central African proverb:

Everything you do for me without me, you do it against me.

Planners need to move beyond seeing statutory planning as a means for creating cities and start to see the creation of communities as the way forward. This will require at least the following:

1) Listening carefully to a wide range of humanists who understand human ecology;
2) A paradigm shift away from centralism toward localism;
3) An understanding that the city is not one homogenous entity where one size fits all in planning matters; and,
4) Respect for the community.

Secondly, the community has to commit to educating itself and engage in planning. Apathy is the state of mind which enables disempowerment to occur. The broad community is simply too complacent when it comes to matters of planning. While some voice concern, the majority sit back silently and watch their environment being compromised through poor planning and in most cases this is because the city's residents don't know what good planning is. One of the best long-term ways to ensure that the community becomes engaged in planning is to start teaching about creating communities and planning in primary school. Children are quick to pick up on issues dealing with the environment and sustainability and often they are the force needed to convince their parents to take action. In the short-term however the community needs to become more engaged and lobby for large-scale changes such as:

1) Reversal of the current policy of unlimited density;
2) Removal or limitation of the DAP system;
3) Introduction of third party rights of appeal in planning matters;
4) Development of a qualitative design guide for apartment buildings to ensure developers create good living environments for residents and preserve amenity for existing neighbours; and,
5) Development of a policy requiring state planners to engage fully with the community during the preparation of important planning policies.

In the same way that business and development groups form lobby organisations to support their interests, the general community should consider forming a strong well-informed community leaders group with the aim of lobbying for community interests in all planning matters.

Relevant readings

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[44] See Albrechts, L, (2012) "Reframing strategic spatial planning by using a coproduction perspective" Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design 2015, volume 42,

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