

a cautionary tale

The disappearance of the back yard from new Australian suburban development has serious amenity and ecological implications and raises important questions about changing lifestyles – and offers a warning to other countries too, says Tony Hall

Until about ten years ago, suburban housing in Australia was characterised by large plots with houses taking up less than a third of their area. This allowed room for significant tree cover and the pursuit of an outdoor lifestyle. For the older inner suburbs this is still the case. In contrast, the more recent suburbs display a disturbing trend.

Within the past ten years the back yard has largely disappeared from new suburban houses in Australia. The dwelling now extends near to the boundary of the plot and, in consequence, near to adjoining dwellings. A high fence, often metal, separates the plots. The dwelling design is normally single-storey, square or deep-plan and incorporates an integral double garage. There is little in the way of balconies and verandas. Windows are often small and tinted. Usually, only one room provides an outlook to the front and surveillance of the street.

The outer suburban landscape in Australia has, in consequence, ceased to be one of large gardens with trees. The residential environment as a whole suffers both aesthetically and from reduced surveillance of the public realm. There is little biodiversity, poor microclimate (especially a loss of shade in hot weather), and increased run-off in wet weather. The residents lack space for sitting out in private, gardening, swimming pools, barbecues, drying laundry and secure outdoor children's play. They also suffer from lack of a pleasant outlook from windows, dark interiors, lack of natural ventilation, and increased electricity consumption. The design implies an indoor lifestyle, insulated from the prevailing climate.

The shift away from back yards therefore represents a loss that not only has serious ecological implications but also raises important questions about changing lifestyles, rendered permanent by the changes to the housing stock.

In marked contrast, new high-density development in city centres is increasingly characterised by views, larger balconies, communal swimming pools and barbecue areas. It is almost as

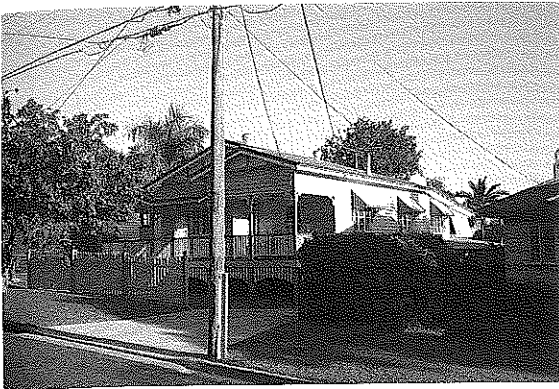
if the traditional concept of the city is being stood on its head.

A study of this increasing, but largely unremarked phenomenon is now available.¹ To try to obtain an understanding of what has been happening, a quantitative analysis of sample areas of Australian cities was undertaken. Comparisons were also made with selected examples in the USA, and a visual inspection of aerial photographs of urban areas was made. What was immediately striking was the clear difference between the older suburban areas, with their substantial tree cover, and newer ones, which were laid out almost roof-to-roof. The different types of form stood out clearly and occupied contiguous areas. The new pattern of development was widespread in all the cities except Adelaide.

What was especially significant was the disjunction in both space and time. There was no evidence of gradual change. Before a certain date, suburban form had incorporated back gardens of useful size and shape and a significant coverage of trees. After this date, they were absent.

Examples of older and newer suburban form were selected from Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney for more detailed examination. The spaces between the dwellings and the distance from the rear of the building to the plot boundary were measured. Sizes of plots and dwelling footprints were recorded. The depth of the space at the rear of the older houses was generally 10-20 metres, but for newer ones it was 2-8 metres, with numerous examples of less than 2 metres or even less than 1 metre. The most revealing statistic was an increase in plot coverage from around 30-37% in the older suburbs to 45-70% in the newer ones.

The phenomenon was not found to result from urban consolidation – i.e. smaller plots and higher densities. It was most obvious in the car-based development on the extremities of cities, a long way from city centres. There had, indeed, been an increase in net residential density from 9-13 dwellings per



Above

Traditional Queenslanders in Brisbane – 600 square metre plots with 30-40% coverage



Above

Recent development 17 kilometres south of Perth – 600-700 square metre plots with 56-65% coverage



hectare to 13-20 dwellings per hectare, and in general, plot sizes had been getting smaller and dwelling footprints larger. However, in examples studied on the Queensland Gold Coast and to the south of Perth, the plot areas were actually larger and the densities lower. Although plots there were comparable to, or larger than, those in the older suburbs of Sydney and Brisbane, they were almost completely covered by larger dwellings. Whatever the size of plot, the dwelling now extended over nearly the whole area except where a front set-back was required. In extreme cases, there was not even a front set-back and the house was enclosed by a metal fence on all four sides.

What is now being built is low-cost housing which provides extensive floor area but not a high standard of amenity and lifestyle. The incentive is now to maximise floor area for the lowest cost. Unlike in Europe, house and plot are purchased separately. Prospective purchasers drive to a locality where they can afford the price of a plot. Having selected their plot, they approach builders offering standard house types. The builders' response to the consumer demand results in a particular design. The

single-storey rectangular plan form, with integral garage, minimises the wall length and fenestration, giving maximum gross floor area at minimum outlay. Extending the house footprint over as much of the plot as is allowed maximises the value of this investment.

The fact remains that people do choose to live in this type of suburban form, in spite of the disadvantages. At the very least, there is an apparent lack of consumer resistance. Why should this be?

Unfortunately, it would appear that it fits all too well into a wider picture of adverse changes in Australian lifestyles. Office working hours have caught up and surpassed those in the US and Japan. Far from the stereotype of the laid-back Australian outdoor lifestyle, people now endure long working hours and commuting times. Relationships Forum Australia² has assembled a substantial amount of evidence from a range of official statistical sources that portrays an alarming picture. Average working hours in Australia are now at the top end among high-income nations, with a strong tendency for work on weeknights and weekends.

An equivalent message has been delivered by Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission.³

It would appear, therefore, that many of the occupants of the houses do not, in reality, spend much time at home during the daylight hours. They leave for work early in the morning and return in the evening. Weekends, when not spent at work, are devoted to many hours of shopping. The lack of a pleasant outlook from the house, probably the most serious disadvantage for day-to-day amenity, is not, therefore, experienced.

International comparisons made as part of the study suggested that the phenomenon was very much an Australian one. New American suburbs, as with the older suburbs in Australia, showed one-third plot coverage or less, despite widely differing circumstances. The house footprints were marginally larger than in Australia, but the plot areas were significantly larger. This gave a back yard equivalent in area to the older Australian suburbs.

The new Australian suburb is still, at less than 20 dwellings per hectare, at a very low density by European standards. British experience demonstrates that back gardens can be provided at substantially higher densities. Regular readers of this journal will be aware that Letchworth Garden City, in spite of its landscape-dominated townscape, has densities significantly in excess of 20 dwellings per hectare. Plot coverage is less than 30%. The same could be said of the inter-war private suburban housing and

'What is needed is an awakening of a general concern for better residential design in the context of a serious debate about sustainable and enjoyable lifestyles'

council estates. Even the latest British residential designs, with densities in excess of 30 dwellings per hectare, can achieve back gardens of 100-150 square metres or more, with a third of the plot being covered by the dwelling.

Why is the problem not prevented by the planning regulations and codes in Australia? They generally specify minimum distances from the building to the plot boundaries and a set-back at the front. This contrasts with the situation in Britain, where distances are measured from building to building. The disadvantage of the Australian approach is that it does not address spaces between buildings. Nevertheless, even allowing for

this limitation, the regulations could ensure back garden provision by specifying rear set-backs in the same way that front set-backs are required. Similarly, Australian planning regulations often make reference to the amount of site coverage by buildings and could require a maximum of 35% coverage.

What appears to have been happening is that local councils have been taking a more relaxed attitude to plot coverage. This is the most plausible explanation of the move from site coverage of 30-37% to 50-60%, or more, and of the way that this trend has become both uniform and seemingly irreversible.

There has been little comment on this phenomenon in either professional or public circles, let alone any action by planning authorities to prevent it. Even minor amendments to local regulations on how plots are developed could bring about a significant change for the better. In the longer term, however, what is needed is an awakening of a general concern for better residential design in the context of a serious debate about sustainable and enjoyable lifestyles. It is also a warning to other countries who should not be complacent about their own situation in this regard.

● **Tony Hall** is a Professor within the Urban Research Program at Griffith University, Brisbane. The report *Where Have All the Gardens Gone?* referred to in this article can be downloaded from www.griffith.edu.au/centre/urp/

Notes

- 1 T. Hall: *Where Have All the Gardens Gone? An Investigation into the Disappearance of Back Yards in the Newer Australian Suburb*. Urban Research Program. Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia, 2007. w: www.griffith.edu.au/centre/urp/
- 2 *An Unexpected Tragedy: Evidence for the Connection between Working Patterns and Family Breakdown in Australia*. Relationships Forum Australia Inc, 2007
- 3 *It's About Time: Women, Men, Work and the Family*. Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 2007