



Urban Consolidation in Australia's Four Largest Capital Cities

Tangible outcomes of inner-city apartment developments and their implications for urban planners

Christina Lees
Murdoch University

Article History

Manuscript submitted:

21 December 2022

Manuscript revised:

05 January 2023

Accepted for publication:

18 January 2023

Keywords

Urban Consolidation,
Inner-city apartment,
Urban Planner,
Australia

Abstract

Urban consolidation has become dominant practice in metropolitan planning across Australia's four largest capital cities – Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth – as a result of the escalating need to manage rapid population growth and limit urban expansion. The strategic push for higher-density residential dwellings, such as apartment complexes, around strategic infill locations and activity centers is partly in response to the rising demand for more diversity in Australia's housing stock. Supplementary factors include demographic shifts, cultural changes, and ongoing concerns regarding housing affordability, live ability, accessibility and climate change. Although this style of development has been at the forefront of state government planning agendas for at least a decade, presently little is understood about the outcomes of inner-city apartment buildings, particularly in Perth, as most of the research on modern infill projects in Australia focuses on Sydney and Melbourne. The primary aim of this research is, therefore, to investigate the outcomes of high-density inner-city apartment developments for residents, the community and urban planners within Australia's four largest capital cities, with a particular focus on Perth. The research is informed by a review of academic and government literature concerning infill and apartment developments in the specified cities, as well as a case study of recently constructed apartment building in one of Perth's main activity centers, Fremantle. The study found that state and local governments are not always achieving 'good density', nor are they developing apartment buildings that engender positive outcomes for both residents and the community. Some of the challenges that must be overcome if this is to change include designing apartments that cater to the needs of a diverse population, getting state governments to provide more support for local councils, and engaging earlier and more effectively with local communities. The research findings provide council planners with a better understanding of the challenges faced by residents in new apartment buildings, as well as the difficulties of meeting community expectations and planning 'good density', so that future planning policies and urban development can be more suitably informed.

International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities © 2022.

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1. Introduction

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2013), the total population of Australia was 22.7 million people as of 30 June 2012. Based on their calculations, this figure is expected to grow by between 14.1 million and 25.6 million people by 2061 (ABS 2013). As stated by Infrastructure Australia (2018), the majority of this growth will occur in the country's four largest capital cities, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth.

Prolonged population growth can present many opportunities for the nation, in terms of enhancing liveability, diversity and economic prosperity. However, effectively planning for and responding to this growth will be a significant challenge for each capital city (Infrastructure Australia 2018). Some of the negative impacts associated with rapid population growth are already evident across Australia, as the cities endeavour to absorb additional people. State and local governments are already struggling to contain urban sprawl and satisfy the demands for: (i) greater housing diversity; (ii) more efficient infrastructure and transportation networks; (iii) better delivery of services and amenities; and lastly (iv) more employment opportunities (Western Australian Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage (WA DPLH) 2018; Infrastructure Australia 2018; Ruming 2014; Weller and Bolleter 2013).

Australia has long been characterised by its car-dependent and sprawling capital cities, each typified by detached homes on large suburban blocks and employment opportunities concentrated around a Central Business District (CBD) (Kellett 2011; Ruming 2014; Weller and Bolleter 2013). However, in order to cope with the continued influx of people, Infrastructure Australia (2018, 14) asserts that the “structure and operation of our largest cities will [fundamentally] have to change”. Increasing density, particularly through strategies such as urban consolidation, has “been promoted as a solution” to the challenges stated above, and has consequently become dominant practice in metropolitan planning (Easthope and Randolph 2009; Ruming 2014, 254).

Of the four largest capital cities, Perth is expected to face the highest percentage of population growth in coming years, with current trends indicating that more than 3.5 million people will live in the city by 2050 (ABS 2013; WA DPLH 2018; Weller and Bolleter 2013). Spanning more than 150km along the coast of Western Australia, Perth is also considered to be one of the most sprawled and lowest density capital cities in the world (WA DPLH 2018; Weller and Bolleter 2013). Like all Australian capital cities, until recently Perth had managed to support the additional population by continuing to expand outwards and provide low-density housing in “greenfield development[s] on the urban fringes” of the city (WA DPLH 2018, 12). However, it has been recognised that this approach is no longer sustainable, as Perth is currently facing a housing affordability crisis, increasing infrastructure costs, demographic and lifestyle changes, environmental limitations, and concerns over the impacts of climate change

(WA DPLH 2018; Infrastructure Australia 2018; Weller 2009). In response to these challenges, the Western Australian Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage (WA DPLH) has released a series of urban planning strategies and infrastructure frameworks for the Perth metropolitan region, which reflect the nationwide shift to promote higher density and urban consolidation (WA DPLH 2018). They argue that in order to accommodate the growing population, higher-density housing options will be required in areas that have a strong foundation of existing infrastructure (WA DPLH 2018). To combat the ever-expanding city limit and achieve the level of urban development required, a significant amount of urban infill will have to occur, whereby existing spaces will undergo densification and land may be repurposed for residential use. It is estimated that an additional 800,000 homes will be needed to accommodate the projected 1.5 million additional residents in Perth (Western Australian Department of Planning (WA DoP) 2010). Consequently, an infill target of 47% has been set for the metropolitan region, indicating that roughly 380,000 dwelling will need to be built in designated “strategic infill locations” (WA DPLH 2018, 20). The Queensland, Victorian and New South Wales state planning departments have each adopted a very similar approach for their respective capital cities. One of the ways in which planners are meeting the demands for residential infill is through the development of apartment complexes, particularly around zones of high amenity, or ‘activity centres’, usually located in inner-city areas (WA DPLH 2018; Infrastructure Australia 2018; Weller 2009). The implementation of such development has occurred at different rates in each capital city, with Perth arguably being the slowest to respond in such a manner (Figure 1). However, apartments are becoming increasingly common in Perth and, based on current reports, this trend is expected to continue, particularly in areas such as the centre of Fremantle (WA DoP 2010). Presently little is understood about the outcomes of such developments in Perth, as most of the research on modern urban infill projects and apartment developments in Australia focuses on Sydney and Melbourne. However, a review of the available literature could provide timely feedback for urban planners in Perth. It may be useful to assess where the city is situated within the national context of urban consolidation, namely the development of apartment buildings in activity centres, and investigate what lessons can be drawn from the other capital cities.

2. Materials and Methods

The aims of this research, as described above, will be approached by means of a literature review and case study. Firstly, a review of government and academic literature will be used to frame the impacts of population growth in capital cities within an Australian context and investigate the resultant arguments for increasing urban density. Building on this foundation, the literature review will then explore the challenges of Australian inner-city apartments from the perspective of the residents and urban planners. The literature review will be used to synthesise the existing body of knowledge on this subject and identify any gaps that this research can endeavour to address.

Secondly, a case study of an inner-city apartment building in one of Perth’s main activity centres aims to address some of the identified gaps in the literature. The detailed case study will combine a preliminary investigation of the activity centre, Fremantle, and the apartment building with primary research that focuses on the apartment residents and urban planners. The data collection method for the primary research will involve semi-structured interviews with the residents, inquiring about their demographics, motivations for and experiences of apartment living, and with

Fremantle's Mayor Dr Brad Pettitt, to acquire his insights and experiences regarding delivering higher density residential development. The various projections indicate that Sydney and Melbourne will remain the most populous capital cities in Australia (Table 1)(ABS 2013). However, by 2061 the populations of Brisbane and Perth are expected to grow significantly and become comparable to those of Sydney and Melbourne today (ABS 2013; Infrastructure Australia 2018).

Table 1. Population of Australia's four largest capital cities (in millions), as per the national 2016 Census, and growth projections based on low and high assumption series (ABS 2013; ABS 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d).

City	p	2016	2061	
		Population	Low (%increase)	High (%increase)
Sydney		4.8	8.0 (17.0)	8.9 (18.9)
Melbourne		4.5	7.6 (16.9)	9.8 (23.3)
Brisbane		2.3	3.8 (17.2)	5.6 (25.5)
Perth		1.9	4.4 (23.2)	6.6 (34.7)

Considering the projected increase in population across the country (Table 1) and expected shifts in the Australian demography, it is clear that the 'business-as-usual' method of low-density urban development will no longer be sustainable (WA DPLH 2018; Weller 2009). Theoretically, urban consolidation and high-density living can offer many benefits for each of the nation's largest capital cities and have thus been widely promoted as solutions to many of the challenges that urban planners are currently facing (Easthope and Randolph 2009; Ruming 2014). Generally speaking, smaller dwellings such as townhouses and apartments are more affordable than large detached homes and often have the added benefit of providing opportunities for people to live closer to the city centre (WA DPLH 2018; Fisher and McPhail 2014).

However, concerns have been expressed regarding whether this strategy has been labelled as a panacea for the adverse effects of population growth without proper investigation into the tangible and long-term outcomes of recent high-density developments (Bunker et al. 2005; Easthope and Randolph 2009; Kellett 2011; Kerr et al. 2018; Ruming 2014). Presently, little research has been performed that focuses on identifying who lives in high-density apartment developments around activity centres, especially in Perth, and whether these developments are truly beneficial for the residents and wider community.

Fremantle Case Study

The research thus far has concentrated on the reasoning for and theoretical benefits of increasing residential density in the four largest Australian capital cities, and has also explored some examples of the challenges of urban consolidation for residents, the community and urban planners. The literature mainly focuses on examples from Sydney and Melbourne, presenting a significant lack of evidence-based research on the reality of infill development in Perth. Consequently, the aim of this chapter is to address this gap and investigate urban consolidation in one of Perth's key activity centres, Fremantle.

Fremantle was chosen as a suitable location for this case study because, as one of Perth's main activity centres with significant investment and infill development underway, it provides an opportunity to reflect on what has already been achieved and investigate some of their key learning with respect to planning and developing 'good density'. Moreover, the City of Fremantle is often highly regarded for its sustainability initiatives, and so it may be beneficial for other local governments to gain an insight into some of the different methods they have adopted for approaching the main challenges associated with increasing density.

It is investigated the reality of urban consolidation by conducting a case study on the City of Fremantle, one of Perth's main strategic activity centres, and a recently built inner-city apartment building situated within the West End precinct of central Fremantle. It explored the motivations and experiences of an apartment resident and provided an in-depth account of the council's plans for how to best achieve their infill targets for central Fremantle, the implications of which will be discussed in the remaining chapters.

3. Results and Discussions

The premise of this research was to investigate the tangible outcomes of inner-city apartment developments for residents, the community and urban planners in Australia's four largest capital cities. The objective was to compare the intended benefits of urban consolidation to the real-life experiences of apartment residents and planners in order to identify what is and is not currently working, so that future planning can be more suitably informed.

To this end, Chapter 5 will synthesize the lessons learned from previous chapters by comparing findings from the literature to those in the case study and discussing the implications for the ongoing development of inner-city apartment buildings in Perth and other Australian capital cities.

Australian Housing Priorities

The literature discovered that despite a deep cultural preference for owning a large detached home, when faced with budget constraints, most Australians are opting to prioritise housing in well-situated locations over dwelling type and tenure (Fisher and McPhail 2014; WA DHP 2013; Wulff et al 2004; Yates 2001). This priority was echoed by the case study resident, who explained how his budget and desire to live in an inner-city location had narrowed his choice of dwelling type to apartments.

The resident also discussed how, as a single-person household, he did not want or need a big house with a garden to maintain. The ABS (2013) projections suggest that the Australian demographic will shift in the coming decades to include an older population and a higher proportion of single- or two-person households. Like the case study resident, it is assumed that the priorities of the smaller households and older people will also differ from those represented by the cultural ideal of the 'Australian Dream' (see Kellett 2011).

It is expected that a growing proportion of the population will be attracted to living in existing suburbs close to the city centre that offer easy access to a good mixture of jobs, services and amenities. As discussed in Sections 2.2.2 and 2.2.3, improving accessibility, liveability and affordability are some of the core arguments for the development of higher-density apartment complexes, particularly around 'activity centres' in inner-city areas. The findings from the research concerning the housing priorities and preferences of a growing number of Australians provides weight to the argument for urban consolidation and suggests that it is definitely an avenue worth pursuing in the four largest capital cities.

Affordability Concerns and Considerations

One of the important lessons for planners to take away from this study is the importance of including affordability measures in at least a percentage of the inner-city apartment developments being constructed around activity centres. As previously discussed, budget constraints play a significant role in determining the location and type of dwelling in which a person will live. Moreover, high costs in inner-city locations often compel lower-income households to live in Greenfield developments on the outskirts of a city, which often leads to inequalities, poor social outcomes and higher long-term living expenses (Infrastructure Australia 2018). In addition, concerns regarding the impact high liveability standards will have on the cost of living were discussed in both the literature and case study. In a meeting on 23 July 2018, Dr Pettitt expressed serious concerns about the gentrification of central Fremantle following major investment and redevelopment. It is expected that this problem will occur in many areas of Perth, Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney as they embark on a period of significant urban renewal and higher-density development, as set out in their strategic planning frameworks (Section 2.3). In order not to exacerbate the current housing affordability crisis, and instead achieve the intended benefit of producing lower-cost housing options by developing inner-city apartments, the City of Fremantle has worked with property developers and the Government of Western Australia Housing Authority to include various affordable housing initiatives in a number of high-density developments. For other local governments within Australian capital cities looking to embark on the journey to increase the delivery of higher-density apartment buildings in their area, it would be prudent to follow the examples set by the City of Fremantle and mandate the inclusion of affordability features. One of the ways in which affordability measures can be incorporated into an apartment complex is by introducing unconventional ownership options, such as the shared equity scheme at Established.

The Importance of Recognising Diversity

The research has emphasised that the demographic of apartment residents in Australian capital cities is and will continue to become more diverse, which will consequently influence design considerations and planning policies. The literature findings concerning design standards, as discussed in Section 3.3.1, were reinforced by Dr Pettitt, who argued that apartments should meet minimum design standards in terms of the quality of construction materials but that the size, layout and design specifications should vary in order to deliver an array of choices and price ranges that meet the requirements of the diverse population.

Dr Pettitt also agreed with Kerr and others (2018) and Mizrachi and Whitzman (2009) that current apartment planning policies overlook the needs of families. There is a general consensus that Australian capital cities need to improve the delivery of apartments for households with children but very few examples of how this can be achieved exist. This evaluation draws attention to a significant policy gap that must be addressed if higher-density apartment developments are to deliver positive social outcomes for all future resident groups.

Public Open Space and its Relevance

The growing importance of POS was acknowledged by the case study participants as well as on numerous occasions in the literature. The general opinion is that as residential density continues to increase, and the number of people with access to private gardens and open spaces diminishes, the

delivery of quality POS should become a priority for local governments. The apartment resident reinforced PwC Australia's (2018) assessment of the merit of Fremantle's enviable lifestyle, cultural significance and entertainment options, as he discussed how he valued Fremantle's public realm for its attractiveness, vibrancy and range of activities. In doing so, the resident drew attention to his interpretation of POS and clarified that it is not limited to green open space but instead includes the urban environment as well.

The Key to Community Engagement

Another valuable lesson for local governments, particularly those still in the initial stages of planning for urban consolidation, is the benefit of early and transparent community engagement. Rumung (2014) and Pettitt (pers. comm. 23 July 2018) each discussed how a community is more likely to support a council's efforts to increase residential density if they are involved in the process from the beginning and if the council: (i) provide reasoning behind their decisions on where to develop; (ii) explain what the development will look like and how it will benefit the community; (iii) maintain open communication and provide opportunities for community input; and (iv) accomplish what they say they will. By developing higher-density apartment complexes that truly benefit a community and enhance the public realm, councils will hopefully be able to shift the negative perception of apartments that is ingrained in Australian culture.

The Relationship between State and Local Governments

The last noteworthy topic to discuss is the role of state and local governments in planning and delivering higher-density apartments. According to Australian census data, in the eight years since WA DoP released their planning framework, Directions 2031 and beyond (2010), the proportion of higher-density dwellings in the Perth has not increased (Figure 2b). This could indicate that, despite the state government directive to increase infill and diversify the housing stock to smaller, higher-density dwellings such as apartments, local governments have not yet executed the vision outlined in the planning framework. This may be for a number of reasons, however based on the admission by Dr Pettitt (pers. comm. 23 July 2018) it is likely that one of the primary explanations is that local governments are not being supported by the State to reach their targets. Moreover, if a community is against higher-density residential development in their LGA, a council will have little incentive to advocate urban consolidation as a planning priority.

Furthermore, Weller (2009) argues that current efforts made by local governments to increase density have thus far resulted in a poorly coordinated patchwork design of development and often disappointing outcomes for the community. Again, this may imply that the state government, who have "overall planning control" (pers. comm. Brad Pettitt 23 July 2018), should oversee the delivery of a coordinated local government approach to urban consolidation, now that the planning framework has been laid out.

Summary

This chapter presented six key lessons that have been derived from a comparison of findings in the literature and the case study. Each lesson introduces important themes for urban planners to consider in the ongoing planning and delivery of higher-density residential developments around activity centers. The themes also draw attention to areas that require further investigation, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

4. Conclusion

In response to a rapidly growing population, significant demographic shifts and cultural changes, Australia's four largest capital cities have embarked on a new era of urban development whereby they are moving away from low-density sprawling development towards more compact city designs. Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth have each adopted new strategic planning frameworks that promote mixed- use, medium- to high-density infill development around activity centres that are well-connected by public transport and offer a diverse mixture of housing choices, employment, services and amenities. Each respective state government has promoted urban consolidation as a solution to the challenges brought about by rapid population growth, however there has been little research into whether or not this strategy is achieving the intended benefits. The overall aim of this research, therefore, was to investigate the outcomes of one of the major forms of infill development around activity centres – apartment complexes – within Australia's four largest capital cities. This final chapter will summarise the key findings of this research pertaining to the intended benefits of urban consolidation, the challenges of inner-city apartment developments from the perspective of residents and urban planners, and the main lessons that can be learnt from the case study. The chapter ends with a brief reflection on some of the key limitations of this study and suggestions for future research opportunities. This research has discovered that although there are currently some flaws in the delivery of urban infill throughout Australia's four largest capital cities, there is in fact a need for it, which will only become more pertinent as the population grows. Many of the flaws presented in this research can, however, be overcome through good design and community engagement. Moreover, urban planners have the ability to positively influence the outcomes of apartment developments and urban infill for residents and the community, through the implementation of policies that guide the internal and external design features of a building and enhance the public realm. To this end, the findings from this research are intended to provide urban planners with a better understanding of what is and is not working well in terms of: (i) planning quality products (i.e. apartment buildings); (ii) delivering good density; and (iii) the community engagement process, with respect to increasing residential density, so that future urban development in Australia's four largest capital cities can be more suitably informed, in order to achieve the best possible outcomes.

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