

GROWTH AND CHANGE

CREATING PROSPEROUS PLACES

— BY MICHAEL LENNON

Famous urbanist and intellectual Hugh Stretton told me once that the highest and best use of land was growing children. For the property valuers of the world this may seem a flippant remark, but it struck me at the time as being extraordinarily incisive.

In the endless debate of what should and shouldn't happen in relation to land in Adelaide, we need to remember that our central purpose is to create a place that people can prosper and lead fulfilling lives.

In South Australia we have the most aged population in Australia. We have the highest proportion of single person households and within a short period of time are likely to have the highest proportion of people aged over 80. In light of this, the government is considering ways in which population from other parts of the world might be expanded into Adelaide and regional South Australia.

However, there are two characteristics that are central to these considerations. One is the constant reduction in household size and the second related issue is the occupation rate within our dwellings. This is especially relevant for a city of 1.38 million people with a metropolitan expanse from Gawler to Sellicks Beach of 104 kms.

Hugh Stretton taught me the importance of challenging arrogant assertions about how people should live and instead, to

understand why people live in certain types of ways and make certain types of choices.

For all those who assert that we should be surrounded by Italian-style piazzas and live in Berlin-style chic and vibe, the reality is that Australian suburban life offers unparalleled quality of life for families and children in relative safety and prosperity. We need to value and respect this, rather than decry our suburbs as some kind of failure. In comparison with almost anywhere in the world, Australian suburbs produce a daily lifestyle which most people would envy.

Against this background, the State Planning Commission is asking questions about what our neighbourhoods should look like, how they will function in the future, and importantly, how we are renewing the suburbs we live in.

Cities are organic. They are not fixed in time. They grow and change. Partly in response to the poor quality of urban renewal and urban infill, there is substantial and substantiated negative response to the perceived loss of character, amenity and quality of our streets and suburban life.

This is not the first time this backlash has been evident. In the 1960s and 70s, following the infill of large suburban blocks with two-storey cream brick flats, we saw significant attempts to restrict our urban densities for good reason.

In the past 20 and 30 years we have seen many infill projects, such as Mawson Lakes and more recently Lightsview and Brompton, that have shown better approaches to how new and revitalised neighbourhoods can be created out of urban infill.

In many people's minds this is confused with heritage, the protection of our legacy and history, and leads to a polarisation which is unhelpful and unproductive in planning the way we live.

The new planning system needs to separate out much more clearly than is currently the case, what we mean by state places of heritage significance, local places of heritage significance, areas of historic value and lastly the preservation of a valued character. This is the essence of the so-called 'heritage debate'.

The Environment, Resources and Development Committee of Parliament is currently producing a report assessing the complexity of the system that has been built up over the last 25 years. It is clear from Brian Hayes and the expert panel's report he released in 2016 that there is an absence of rigour, consistency or fairness in the treatment of heritage places and of the people who own these properties as well as in the community, neighbourhoods and citizens who have a legitimate interest in these matters.

In the next few months, the commission will attempt to construct a positive and respectful dialogue with people from all sides of this debate. This is in order to find a pathway forward which both respects the verdant streets with established dwellings in neighbourhoods where we get a sense of belonging, while also addressing what we know are the challenging demographic forecasts for the state, the cost of endless urban expense for a relatively small population and the desire for people in an aging population to grow older close to established friends, neighbourhoods and networks.

The government has tasked us all with finding a way forward which calmly addresses these issues, and respectfully engages with people, while not resiling from the need for a new strategy to manage higher quality urban renewal in metropolitan Adelaide.

Michael Lennon, Chair State Planning Commission.

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