



At the Grassroots of Urban Consolidation

ARC Project DP0773388 The Demand for Higher
Density Housing in Sydney and Melbourne
Working Paper 1

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Almost all of the research and analyses about urban consolidation are concerned with the big picture. They typically use extensive databanks such as the Census of Population and Housing or household travel surveys to advance analysis of the characteristics of urban consolidation and what it means in terms of housing choice, travel and travel mode, and the kinds of households and communities living in medium- or high-density housing.

While this research is valuable, there is little that investigates the perceptions, expectations, understandings, pleasant surprises or disenchantments of those living in such housing. There are obvious reasons why this is so. Personal interviews are difficult, and time consuming. They have to be carefully targeted and the numbers involved have to be considerable to enable any reasonable generalizations to be drawn of the larger populations which they represent in large cities. Yet this area of behaviour, perception and experience is crucial to the implementation of policies about urban consolidation which often rest on untested assumptions. In other words, does the extensive building of attached dwellings and flats provide the key social outcomes that planners expect?

These expected social outcomes might be summarised as:

1. addressing changing housing needs and providing more housing choice and affordability;
2. improving access to jobs and services and increasing public transport use; and
3. improving social sustainability and cohesion through building up social and community capital within larger populations with more extensive personal and social contacts in comparison with areas of lower density.

Constructing a research methodology

Various attempts have been made to more adequately associate the aggregated analyses with the intimate scales of personal experience. A current ARC project called 'The Demand for Higher Density Housing in Sydney and Melbourne' has developed and carried out a three-pronged research program designed to do this.

1 Factor analysis

The metropolitan scale is represented by an analysis designed to unpack the spatial and social structure of the higher density housing market in Sydney and Melbourne. As in previous studies of this kind, this factor analysis of selected social, economic and demographic variables shows such a housing market is segmented. Each sub-market, housing quite different kinds of households appears in several different locations forming a discontinuous pattern.

This analysis of Sydney and Melbourne shows similar sub-markets which have been described as 'battlers', 'apartment elite', 'economically engaged', 'achieving education' and 'residentially retired'. While these sub-markets appear in each city, there are important differences. For example, while the largest sub-market in Melbourne (achieving education) consists largely of students in higher education, the largest in Sydney (battlers) consists largely of low to medium income families with children.

2 Survey of apartment residents

1,597 surveys of households living in apartments were carried out both by telephone and via a web-survey. The survey was carefully and deliberately designed to provide evidence about how each of the three social ambitions and assumptions about higher density living listed previously had found expression in the lives of the respondents.

Furthermore, on the basis of their responses, each was allocated to one of the five sub-markets. Consequently, their responses could be used to provide examples of how households living in each sub-market felt about their housing and their location and how far their lifestyle might be shaped by these conditions.

3 In-depth interviews with apartment residents

The initial research plan was to follow the survey with 54 in-depth interviews with interviewees selected from each of the housing sub-markets in different locations in each city (identified as inner, middle and outer zones) and interviews focused on one of the following three issues:

- Household choice and drivers of demand.
- Transport and access.
- Livability, urban design and communal living.

However, this became impracticable given the difficulty of recruiting sufficient participants from each group (with three people required in each zone for each sub-market group). However, 29 further in-depth interviews with survey respondents (each assigned to a specific housing sub-market) were conducted providing additional in-depth examples of peoples' experiences of apartment living. Respondents included people in all five sub-market groups, and people in inner, middle and outer Sydney as well as inner, middle and outer Melbourne. Each interview was conducted focusing on one of the three issues above.

Sufficient interviews were carried out to provide information to support the survey findings regarding the extent to which each of the expected outcomes of urban consolidation (described above) may have been realized and to identify a number of qualifications or conditions that might need to be taken into consideration for future planning.

The results

The results of this research are multi-faceted and are being published initially as a series of Working Papers on the City Futures Research Centre web-site.