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Is Australian High-Rise Housing On the Right Track?

Australia is at a critical decision point about how to manage projected growth. Historically, the response has been to build suburban sprawl, but this is no longer considered sustainable. Today the question is; how to densify and maintain the high quality of life for which Australian cities are famous? We ask, "Is multifamily high-rise housing in urban Australia on the right track?"

YES

Chris Johnson, CEO, *Urban Taskforce*

Sydney's population has reached five million people, and over the next 40 years is heading to eight million people. The big change will be in density, in public transport and in the form of the city. Essentially, we must go up rather than out. All of Australia's major cities will accommodate more high-rise housing, with Sydney leading the way, and I believe this is the right direction.

The 2016 census had nearly 30% of Sydneysiders now living in apartments, and current planning approvals are running at around 70% in favor of apartments. Sydney is fast heading towards becoming a "50/50" city, with half the dwellings being detached houses and half apartments. There are calls for the "missing middle" – terraced houses and townhouses that increase density without height – but with Sydney land values so high, these are unlikely to become more than 10% of dwellings.

The high-rise tower generates the most controversy, but it is often the dwelling type that many people prefer. It is also the most efficient way to use land, especially that which is close to the railway stations now being converted to rapid metro-style service. Sydney and other Australian cities' future growth will be a network of rapid metro rail lines with clusters of high-rise housing spreading out from the stations. These will be taller nearer the station and step down after 600 meters or so, to the "missing middle," scale, and then to low-rise suburban housing. So we are literally on the

right track with high-rise housing in Australian cities – so long as we are locating them near the metro.

NO

Elizabeth Farrelly, Associate Professor, *Australian Graduate School of Urbanism, Sydney*

I have nothing against towers. For decades, I've argued high density as the greenest living pattern and an essential antidote to sprawl. But Sydney has suffered both a severe housing shortfall and a worsening affordability crisis. Disastrously, this coincidence of green density and housing deficit has provided cover – a mix of "greenwash" and "equity-wash" – for the biggest developer bonanza in our history.

The same pattern holds across Australia: the development wrecking-ball energized by minimal government intervention; a reliance on "market wisdom" to safeguard public interest; the repudiation of development control as "red tape;" the developer-funded self-certification of buildings; up-zoning as a way to fund public infrastructure; and, behind it all, the spurious belief that in housing, as in bananas, increased supply will lower prices.

The fallacies are evident. First, there's no evidence that high-rises are essential to high or medium density. Second, development control inhibits development in order to preserve the public good. Third, housing is not like bananas.

In fact, as Sydney's building boom has grown, so too have prices. When prices stop rising, developers stop building. But politicians go on

mouthed the words written for them by the development lobby.

Most egregious of all, developer-led planning has no concern whatsoever for public amenity or space, and little for the private amenity it should in theory safeguard. Thus, developers endlessly clone sunless, windswept streets, overlooked balconies and bedrooms, cramped units and low-rent fit-outs.

The slum-boom cannot solve the housing crisis, because it is driven by the huge global market for "investor-grade product." Current development controls, politically shaped to apparently limitless numbers of absentee owners, allow bathrooms without windows and "bedrooms" whose only opening is onto a living room that may itself stare directly at the neighbor.

No one would buy these as places to live in. This is a social disgrace and an ecological disaster. If density becomes associated with such bleak disamenity, we'll be right back to where we were a century ago, when those with choice opted for the sun, space, and birdsong of the burbs. Sprawl.

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International Conference

Elizabeth Farrelly will present
"Green or Greed: Density-Done-Well or Developer Free-for-All?" in
Plenary 3: *The Future of Connected
Cities and Skyscrapers*, Tuesday
31 October at 3:45p.m.