Communal backyard

STREET WISE

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The biggest challenge facing Australia’s capital cities in the 21st century is curbing unsustainable suburban sprawl through infill development, or development in existing urban areas.

Our sprawling suburban fabric has served us well but in the context of diminishing resources and climate change it is highly vulnerable.

State governments are attempting to achieve infill development next to public transport nodes and along public transport routes. We believe for Australian cities to be truly resilient, a greater diversity of infill strategies is required, not least of all because cities are not achieving their infill targets.

Capital city planning policies stipulate that 60 per cent of all new residential development should be infill and yet typically only 30 per cent is achieved. This means some 70 per cent of all new development in Australian cities is on the fringe, further extending an already vulnerable city form.

It is in this context that the Australian Urban Design Research Centre and the Centre for Built Environment and Health, both from the University of WA, are exploring the potential of infill development next to upgraded parks. Upgraded parks could function as high-quality communal “backyards” for residents living at higher densities who do not have sizeable areas of private open space.

Perth’s existing parks have not, to date, produced any substantial urban densification along their edges or in adjacent areas. We contend that this reflects the typically low-quality, mono-functional nature of our suburban parks.

Many of our parks do not inspire most residents to want to live next door. To make these parks more attractive to potential residents, we propose they be upgraded to include more tree and shrub planting, a greater diversity of recreational infrastructure such as walking trails, skate parks and fitness equipment, community gardens, and also privately run cafes and kiosks serving park users and providing a revenue stream for park maintenance.

Parks also perform an important ecological role in our cities that would be strengthened as part of this proposal. Parks infiltrate and clean stormwater; provide wildlife habitat, cool the surrounding urban areas and can be used to grow food. With climate change our cities will become drier; storm events more intense and local food sources more important. In this context it would make sense to correlate the important “ecosystem services” these parks will provide with residential densification.

The Australian suburban dream of the 20th century was synonymous with the stand-alone house on a quarter-acre block; a dream rapidly becoming unaffordable, economically and ecologically. We believe higher density living around a well-designed and maintained communal “backyard” which grows food, provides numerous recreational opportunities and performs important ecological roles is a dream worth considering for the 21st century.

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Infill drawcard: Julian Bolleter argues for urban infill around upgraded parks working as shared open space.