

NIMBY vs YIMBY - what constitutes urban density done well?

Recent media attention on Sydney's density and affordable housing issues has intensified in the medium density housing code debate. The 'missing middle' policy that NSW Planning and Public Spaces Minister Rob Stokes is having reviewed has some critics concerned that, if reintroduced to certain areas (eg. Lane Cove), it may threaten the suburban character where residents do not want change. In many of these suburbs little change has been able to occur due to perceptions that such development will change their character irreversibly, but debate continues between so called NIMBYs and YIMBYs (No vs Yes In My Back Yard) on the question of whether density done well can create safer, more liveable cosmopolitan precincts.

Some critics of this medium density policy include Chris Johnson, CEO of Urban Taskforce, and Tony Recsei who is president of Save Our Suburbs, and it appears from SMH article on 7 July 19 they are vocal on two fronts.

1. Relatively medium rise and low impact development could still have bulky proportions that might jeopardise local character in existing low-density suburbs.
2. There should be concentration of higher density around town centres and infrastructure nodes where land use by zoning can balance retention of lower scale areas with single houses.

In a recent statement Minister Stokes spoke of his intention to see a scaling back of spot rezoning by planning proposals. However it does appear he sees housing diversity as important, and so it will be interesting to see how the pendulum swings on the issue of the medium density residential options.

In relation to planned precincts, which have been controversial in communities such as St Leonards and around Macquarie Park and Ryde in Sydney's north-west, Mr Stokes said it made sense to have development concentrated near transport infrastructure, but that he wanted to collaborate with councils. If there are other ways to deliver it, I'm happy to look at it," he said. (SMH article 15 May 2019, Jacob Saulwick and Megan Correy)

The concept of density done well should also be judged on the precinct context, so it is critical to appreciate that this involves the open spaces and streets that are our civic 'common ground'. This is where there should be more appreciation of the fact that the suburban backyard need is fast receding (but should not disappear entirely), replaced by courtyards and balconies that are more suited to the contemporary lifestyle and active street frontages. Such outcomes are more akin to those European environments many of us fondly recall from our travels, and can still include diversity, amenity and sense of community whether the density is at 100 pph (people per Ha) of New York, 160 pph of Barcelona, 200 pph of Paris or in the case of Sydney just 30 pph but increasing.



Some examples of AJA townhouse projects in Sydney that engage positively with their urban context.

In all these places it is often the relationships with open and public spaces that contribute more to the effective quality of that neighbourhood environment. This is where we are more likely to engage with others with whom we share urban living experiences, communal places and public open spaces that are fast becoming new and more inclusive alternative backyards for social engagement eg. Lane Cove Plaza and hopefully the emerging Rosenthal Avenue Canopy park in the village.

Looking at South St Leonards precinct, it could be that much of the community angst on that masterplan comes from the combination of sub standard multi-unit development and the associated civic domain that has most often not been well conceived or implemented in the past decade. Perhaps the introduction of finer grain townhouses in conjunction with medium rise units could yet create an exemplary and walkable urban village close to transport and amenities, integrated with well-conceived and active open spaces.

Feedback from the independent IPC Panel on the SSL Masterplan and rezoning is imminent. If the SSL development gets a green light from Minister Stokes, then managed within a design excellence review process both in the early and later stages of DA assessment, it could yet realise an exemplary outcome. If so then a YIMBY approach might be able to satisfy those character concerns of the community, while still leaving the developers the yield to make it a worthwhile exercise.

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