

Can higher density enhance liveability?

Higher-density housing requires quality urban development to deliver liveable, walkable communities. A National Science Challenge funded survey in Auckland showed this is what people want from where they live.

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ASSOCIATING ENHANCED liveability with higher density at first glance seems illogical. In the early part of the 20th century, the idea was promoted that better urban conditions required lower densities. So how did we get to arguing that higher density enhances liveability?

Higher density more sustainable

In part, this relates to growing concerns towards the end of the last century about car-dependent suburban sprawl destroying nature on urban peripheries and unsustainable urban forms. Higher-density cities are far more fuel efficient, and thus more sustainable, compared with lower-density cities.

Managing and directing urban development towards higher density has underpinned urban growth management for at least three decades in large cities such as Auckland and others across Australia and beyond.

This involves limiting urban sprawl, directing new development to transit centres, reducing car dependency by increasing access to good public transport,



Medium density terrace housing at Hobsonville Point.

and promoting, if not requiring, higher-density development.

Emphasis now on liveability

In recent urban growth management plans such as the Auckland Plan, the justification for higher-density has shifted. This is from an emphasis on more sustainable urban form to assertions that higher-density housing enhances liveability and quality of life.

The Auckland Plan aims to establish the 'world's most liveable city' where 'higher-density neighbourhoods offer opportunities to create healthy stimulating and beautiful urban environments ... (that) enhance social cohesion and interaction by attracting people across all demographic groups to a mix of cafes, restaurants, shops, services and well-designed public spaces ... meeting the full spectrum of people's everyday needs ...'



An Auckland café. Higher-density areas need quality local environments for enhanced liveability.

This setting of liveability as an urban planning aim framed our research question: Does higher density lead to an enhancement of liveability from the perspective of residents?

Resistance in Australasian cities

Higher-density development in Australian and New Zealand cities has met with resistance, and advocacy by urban authorities may be undermined if it fails to deliver outcomes residents anticipate. Therefore, evidence to support the contention that higher density enhances liveability is important.

This question was examined as part of the National Science Challenge: *Building Better Homes, Towns and Cities*, through interviews with 84 residents living at higher density in three suburban town centres in Auckland. The centres, Albany, New Lynn and Onehunga, are all served by rapid transit, and their net densities range from 57-67 units a hectare.

The interviews with residents were framed by three sets of questions:

- What led residents to choose higher density living.
- Perceptions of liveability, such as being able to walk to public transport and local services.
- Residents' satisfaction with their housing in terms of the immediate neighbourhood and their future housing aspirations.

Access to amenities valued

A surprising finding to the first set of questions was that most residents had previously

lived in lower-density housing in suburbs. We were interested in understanding what motivated their move to higher density.

Overwhelmingly, they valued the services and amenities of the neighbourhood and the ease of access to public transit. These were among reasons for the move. The quality of the housing options available was less important than the amenity of the neighbourhood.

Walkability associated with liveability

Residents also valued the walkability of their neighbourhoods and, where this was appropriately designed, the safe access provided to services and amenities. Residents in these situations also reported that they use their cars less compared to their previous places of residence.

Where neighbourhoods were poorly designed for safe and easy walkability - as in Albany - opposite views were expressed, and movement remained car-dependent. The degree of walkability was strongly associated with liveability by residents interviewed.

Quality of public spaces important

Most residents were satisfied with their housing choices, although this varied between the three locations. The findings show that the quality of the local environment contributes to urban residents' sense of housing satisfaction and hence perceptions of liveability.

This underscores the idea that, as residential density increases, the role of

the public realm is enhanced as a source of housing satisfaction, where public spaces and amenity replace the suburban backyards.

In the context of transit-oriented development, the close association between higher-density, multi-unit housing forms and a walkable catchment to the local centre are interdependent conditions contributing to the experience of liveability.

People make trade-offs

The responses highlight the strategic trade-off people make between multiple factors. For example, while residents saw privacy as very important, most rated their experience as moderate, and perhaps a trade-off for feeling more secure and connected to the neighbourhood. However, while residents expressed overall satisfaction with their higher-density housing conditions, when challenged to consider future housing options, most aspired to own a lower-density, detached house type.

This, however, needs qualifying. First, unconstrained aspirations do not reflect real-life conditions that people face when making housing choices.

Second, urban development policies, with their constraints on urban sprawl and emphasis on intensified development, mean a reducing supply of detached houses - at least those within commuting distances that people tolerate.

Third, in cities such as Sydney, Melbourne and Auckland, the diminishing supply of detached houses is increasingly pricing them beyond the reach of many, especially first-time homeowners.

The potential consequence of unfulfilled aspirations should therefore be of concern to urban authorities. They should ensure that higher-density policies deliver appropriate housing in quality neighbourhoods - places that people consider liveable. ◀

For more ▶ See *Does higher density housing enhance liveability? Case studies of housing intensification in Auckland* at www.cogentoa.com.