



## Where does liveability fit into the housing affordability debate?

**Dean Landy**

There's been a lot of talk recently about housing affordability alongside the recent announcement to release more land along Melbourne's urban fringe. The Victorian Government, like many of its predecessors, has declared that this as a necessary step towards making housing more affordable, but where does liveability fit into this plan?

As an architect and urban designer working in many of Victoria's growth areas, I can understand the caution expressed by experts who warn that the continuous release of land on the urban fringes can create a false form of affordability. Living on the fringe can place a greater burden on people socially and financially if a lack of access to employment, education, health and community services is forcing residents to travel longer distances.

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So, for me, one of the key questions in this debate is whether it's possible to create places in growth areas that provide both affordable and fulfilling lifestyles for those who reside there? I believe affordability and liveability are not mutually exclusive. If considered more holistically, it is possible to create new suburbs that are truly desirable and affordable places to live.

### Great outcomes won't happen by accident

However, great outcomes won't happen by accident. I am an advocate for a more considered and strategic approach to the delivery of community infrastructure in growth areas. To explain how this can be achieved and why it's important, I need to distinguish between two key aspects of 'creating' liveable communities.

Firstly, by planning, designing and building the physical places and services, which I refer to as the 'hard elements' of community, to enable a range of ages and household types to live, work, learn, socialise, shop and play locally, we create a foundation that allows a diverse community to flourish. The business-as-usual approach of uniform housing and single use standalone 'retail' precincts is insufficient.

Secondly, we must also consider the less tangible qualities of new places such as nurturing a sense of community – ensuring there is a diverse mix of people, and creating places with distinctive urban character. It's these social and place qualities, which I refer to as the 'soft elements', which emotionally connect people with their towns, neighbourhoods and streets creating truly liveable communities with an enduring sense of character and belonging.

The 'Great Australian Dream' today is vastly different to that of the sixties: I confidently challenge the notion that a

three-bedroom brick and tile home, a suburban mall, token park and a couple of schools is enough to achieve the true liveability or affordability we need.

I'm often told that there is no market for apartments or town houses when master planning neighbourhood and major activity centres in growth areas. However, I disagree, and the market is disproving this, as we have seen strong demand for more diverse housing typologies such as apartments, townhouses, home offices, terraces and shop-top dwellings in outer urban locations such as SOHO Village, Point Cook and Polaris 3083, Bundoora.

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Achieving a genuine mix of uses in these new town and village centres as well as a genuine sense of place is critical to social and economic sustainability. Elements such as swim schools, churches, play centres, cafes, bars, offices, physio's, mechanics, community centres, medical services, artist studios, business incubators, to name a few, combined with a range of housing typologies entices and supports local employment, diversity, services and vibrancy.

Incorporating this mix of uses creates a ready-made customer base needed for local business success and the early delivery of shops and services that make places liveable. Crucially, building this capacity and critical mass from the outset can be used to leverage and attract further state investment in major infrastructure, such as public transport links, schools, hospitals and community facilities.

Let's shift the discussion from 'how can we make cheaper family homes', to 'how can we deliver liveability and diverse lifestyles for a broader mix of people'. This way alternative, more affordable housing typologies become a desirable choice rather than a sacrifice developers are forced to make to their balance sheets.

### Who should be responsible to lead the change?

The question of who should be responsible to lead this change remains. As design professionals, we have a responsibility to understand the elements that create vibrant communities, but we cannot underestimate the role of visionary developers and their ability to impact what actually occurs on the ground. Our ideas need to be firmly grounded in a commercial understanding of the challenges that developers face while still aiming for socially and economically sustainable outcomes.

While the challenges of creating more affordable housing choices within liveable and vibrant village centres may be many, I find hope in the many passionate people in the industry and beyond who believe that if we work together in a more collaborative, creative and entrepreneurial way, then we will see the creation of communities that people want to live in, enjoy being a part of and are proud to call home. ●

**Dean Landy is an Urban Designer and partner at Melbourne-based architecture firm ClarkeHopkinsClarke, and actively involved in the design of many town centres across Australia. He can be contacted at [dean.landy@chc.com.au](mailto:dean.landy@chc.com.au)**