

McMansions crowding out the character of Canberra's older suburbs

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The Griffin legacy for many Canberrans was laid out in our own backyards. As the garden city's roots sank down deep, older suburbs pre-1980s became highly regarded for their quiet leafy spacious feel, featuring modest homes on generous blocks along tree-lined streets.

Traditional homes boasted ample space for a compact garage on the side and toolshed at the back, planting space for a big shady tree to spread its branches, a decent back lawn for kids to romp and for a dog to run around in, space for an outdoor patio and a BBQ, for a practical sunny veggie patch, compost heap, fruit trees, even chooks.

Open front gardens encouraged neighbours to get to know each other, enlarging and contributing to the sense of streets as a proudly shared and visible space filled with movement and public life, where casual conversations and safe interactions with passers-by could happen. This was the fresh-faced city where a brave new nation dreamed up its capital and thousands chose to come and live, many going on to raise their families, discovering a quality and relaxed life in a well planned garden city with good jobs, good schools, affordable housing and an enviable supply of parkland and bushland to play in and explore that could genuinely offset a lack of surf, golden beaches or harbour views.

But recent inquiries show all that is changing and increasingly the one-size-fits-all approach to planning that the ACT has borrowed from other cities produces XL homes crowded into small, medium and large blocks of land.

Since the 2008 reforms of the ACT Territory Plan that effectively chucked out and replaced the overarching legislation and machinery, the majority of single dwellings built in the last seven years have been processed through what is known as the "Code track". The Code track consists of some ultra-basic planning rules: maximum height and number of storeys, minimum setbacks, a notional building envelope to protect a neighbour's solar access and minimum private open space.

According to all the public information made available, if a development conforms in every way with those requirements, it no longer needs to be assessed or publicly notified –instead, licensed private certifiers are hired by developers, architects and builders, paid a fee to determine whether or not the plans comply, and only the most immediate neighbours are shown those plans before construction starts. However, as Dickson residents discovered last year, certifiers can easily seek exemptions to most of those rules with impunity, and neighbours are none the wiser until the building has gone up.

A little-known clause in the Planning and Development Regulations allows the ACT Planning and Land Authority to disregard front, side and rear setbacks, building envelope and minimum private open space, and to grant exemptions to private certifiers where a technical officer sees fit. Oversight is minimal.

A recent case in Marsden Street, Dickson, came to light when an older house was knocked down and footings were laid unusually close to all three fencelines.

The appetite for extremely large new houses on blocks large, medium and small is putting pressure on the very qualities that make Canberra a special place to live. Excessively large homes do nothing to improve affordability or sustainability. In fact, they do the opposite, driving up land values and house prices while degrading the environment overall, reducing on-site stormwater detention and robbing suburbs of soil, landscape and habitats.

No longer is there adequate space to plant a big shade tree at the back let alone a hedge along the side for screening. No longer is there room for a veggie patch in the sun, or a lawn big enough to romp in or let a dog run around. Where once neighbours might have chatted casually over the back fence there's now barely room to squeeze a clothes line, and the view from the street is dominated by a wide double garage and an expanse of walls, with minimum planting space for a front garden.

There is an unhealthy flow-on effect, either by design or by default, that children growing up in these Extra Large homes and McMansions typically spend most of their recreational time indoors, in front of electronic screens, instead of out playing and learning about the world first hand.

All this because the rules that people were told about and consulted on and repeatedly assured were clear, quantitative and straightforward turn out not to be firm rules at all.

The taste for Extra Large homes and McMansions is running riot. We no longer squeeze them onto very small blocks in newer suburbs, we now let them knock down and replace much more modest homes in established suburbs where the streetscape and neighbours feel the brunt and the classic residential amenity Canberrans have grown to cherish suffers.

The character of older suburbs is shifting before our eyes. Instead of the garden city of old with selected areas redeveloped for higher densities and a better mix of housing to suit changing demographics, we confront the affluent obese city of the future here and now while the under-resourced Environment and Planning Directorate soldiers on, ticking boxes and delivering Campbelltowns.

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