



City of Gosnells at heart of consolidation tsunami

Why it's bad idea and unnecessary as well

Peter Vintila 2015



Introduction

No single development will more profoundly affect the residents of the City of Gosnells than State Government decisions to consolidate the Perth metropolitan area in coming decades. The two major political parties are in agreement about this. The purpose is to accommodate projected population growth without further urban sprawl, without further encroachment on rural land and without further traffic congestion. Over 300,000+ new dwellings will be required in the next 15 years and a further 4-500,000 by mid-century – now only 35 years away. That's substantial and rapid growth.

For the time being (the next 15 years, again) the State Government wants to fit about half of the new shorter term housing development (150,000 homes) into the existing metro area as infill and most of Perth's academic planners are in broad agreement. The strategy is called urban consolidation or infill and current planning targets can be found in a glossy planning document promising that infill and other new developments will bring heaven on earth. The plan's called ***Directions 2031 and Beyond***, and its mission statement promises "a world class liveable city that is green, vibrant, more compact and accessible [and] with a unique sense of place." Most of Perth's residents will be settling for a lot less.

The City of Gosnells

In fact, ***Directions 2031*** is bringing huge stresses to middle suburban areas like those in the City of Gosnells which accounts for around 7% of Perth's current population. To meet the plan's requirements, the City of Gosnells will need to find room for at least 12,000 new infill dwellings in the next 15 years and for as many as 35,000 in the next 35 years. That's a lot of infill. It means almost as many dwellings again as there are now occupying the same urban ground space and this is all to happen in just a little more than a generation.

In addition to that, Gosnells City will also be hosting new greenfield developments in its undeveloped areas while these still exist. This kind of development also brings its challenges but these are not quite as tough as infill – which is being bitterly opposed in the wealthier western suburbs. Do they know something the rest of us don't?

The good, the bad and the ugly

Whether they do or not, the whole consolidation show is on the road.

Demonstration projects and pilot developments and those reading the wind have been out there doing it for some time. They are already leaving their marks on the city for better and for worse. To briefly sum up, consolidation is good for those in Perth's central areas but bad for those in the middle or on the outer, to speak. For them, especially to the south and east and more especially on Perth's long south-eastern axis, taking in the City of Gosnells, it's looking grim. It's often looking bad and ugly. It's a case of the good, the bad and the ugly. See images below.



The Good (inner city consolidation)



The Bad & Ugly (middle and outer suburbs)



Can you spot the differences?

The City of Gosnells must limit, modify, impose more effective design controls on and even help re-imagine Perth's ongoing consolidation project. **In any event, I will make all of these tasks priorities if I am elected to Council.**



The images are taken from a book I am currently writing – *The Death of Suburban Perth*. They are intended to direct attention not to the housing but to public and shared space, to street scapes and the built environments in which the houses sit. Where consolidation is good, that built environment speaks of care and attention and some might think, great expense. To be sure, it can take time (eg the time needed for trees to grow) but as built environments go, it is not expensive. One or two percent of the overall land development budget can go a long way with plants. Ultimately, the mature tree's beauty and shade and multiple ecological services are gifts.

When the public realm as built environment is done well it is also appealing and attractive and adds value to the neighbourhood. When you step out of your front door, you smile and think to yourself "I like living here". In the language of urban design, it is liveable and liveability in these forms is, again, not expensive.

City of Gosnells must do more to limit bad and ugly

None of these observations apply, however, where consolidation is bad and ugly – and that's why it is bad and ugly. Making it well is the work of public authorities and public authorities are failing here. The photos clearly tell us that. Whose fault is that? It's a complicated question but the answer is the state and local government is not blameless

The City of Gosnells could at least protest more loudly. **As a councillor I will lend my voice to this task, too.** Public authorities in democracies are supposed to treat us all equally – that's why we expect equal levels of hospital care whether rich or poor or equally good schools for our children. Those responsible for our streets, shared neighbourhoods and built environments are not treating us equally.

If you don't believe me, look at the photos above again. WA's most senior state planners – the planning Commission, today the MRA – clearly know how to make beautiful and liveable neighbourhoods. They designed the good ones above – in East Perth and Subiaco. But they appear to have forgotten that they are public servants in a democracy and that they must devote their time and resources and considerable talents equally to all of us - in the middle and outer suburbs too. **As a local government councillor, I would be happy to remind them on your behalf.**

Public and private wealth

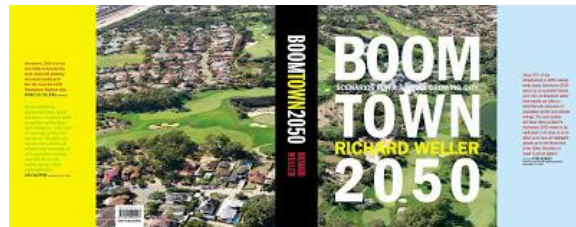
Some of you may think that rich and poor neighbourhoods are just or must be different. Well, that's certainly true of the houses in them. These are built with private money and as most of us know, there is more of it in the inner city. For both good and bad reasons we live with certain levels of inequality in our society and

most people accept that we can't all live in luxury homes or penthouses. But these are not the issue here.

My issue is with public places, assets, services or environments and the public effort they require. These should not be unequal. In the case of our neighbourhoods, we can and should expect equality: good surface treatments, attractively planted verges or islands, well maintained good looking shady street trees, street lighting, street furniture, and urban open space that is cultivated, cared for and can elicit smiles.

The level of care and cultivation should be equal – and they are not that hard to equalise. Big money, again, is not involved: the tree grows itself. As public servants, urban planners and designers are required to treat us equally. As they give way to elitist impulses in a privatising world, they are actually neglecting democratic entitlements and rights. Subiaco and East Perth set high quality design benchmarks and that is good and credit where credit is due. But, at the moment, they are not for everyone – and that is bad.

Local government planners and urban designers, and likewise academic planners in our universities are doing little to help. They lack the power, the courage and often, the imagination too. Richard Weller, formerly a landscape architect at the University of Western Australia, is, again, a notable exception. So, too, is his wonderful book on Perth published 6 years ago: ***Boomtown 2050: Scenarios for a Rapidly Growing City***. It should be compulsory reading and essential professional development in the planning world. It looks like this if you want to follow it up.



Where will the children play

Have a third look at the “good, bad and ugly” photo series. Your heart should sink and you should be demanding more than Perth’s middle and outer suburbs are getting. Your children will be living here before long. And your young grand children playing there. Where will they play? “In a park just a 10-minute walk away”, the planners will say. And how old will they be before they can get and play there independently? Not too much life in the mostly sun-exposed example below.

Contrast this with the opening image of *Boomtown 2050*. Idyllic and romanticised or just a faded print? Perhaps all three. But also true to (my own) life and I suspect all you who are baby boomers. That yard is going – and the backyard too. That’s the



direction of *Directions 2031*. Watch your neighbourhood streets over the coming 10, 20 and 30 years.



The early suburban house Weller, Richard. Boomtown 2050. Perth, WA: UWA Publishing, 2009

Another photo and what a difference a few plants make... No, this is not Subiaco or Claremont. It is how some older streets in the City of Gosnell look before the earth-moving machines arrive. "Strip and clear" is the City of Gosnell's own consolidating formula. In the Western Suburbs, residents are mobilising to stop the strippers, clearers and consolidators. They don't like the treeless world that *Directions 2031* is bringing. You've got to admit it... sometimes the rich get it right.



No consolidation?

Does all of this mean no consolidation? No it does not. But it means much more carefully selected sites and much more careful design standards applied to building and built environment, both. And it means much more vertical as against horizontal development - but less of it, of course, if we make this intelligent trade off.

Take a look at any successful high density city in the world and its density is achieved by going up, not by spreading sideways. See the “Sky”, “Surf” and “River” future scenarios for Perth in **Boomtown 2050**. Pages 384 and 385 graphically illustrate how hard surface footprints reduce by almost an order of magnitude (a factor 10) when the vertical axis is chosen. Not that very high rise is necessarily the most ecologically effective. British studies have shown that one often gets most value from 4, 5 and 6 storey buildings. There is the beginning of a revival of such building in Perth but it is overwhelmingly confined to the inner city, again, as in the example from Northbridge below.



https://www.google.com.au/search?q=central+perth+apartments+northbridge&newwindow=1&espv=2&es_sm=93&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0CAkQ_AUoA2oVChMI-lir-7D7xwIVoiSmCh2otwVQ&biw=1920&bih=955#imgsrc=1Cr4ioFcbe7BEM%3A

But no-one before now has denied the Earth contact with sun and rain....across mushrooming tracts of land zoned for residential purposes and welcomed a general condition of lifelessness from urban horizon to urban horizon the way we now seem to be. Vast islands of Gosnells City (and other middle and outer suburbs will become like this if **Directions 2031 and Beyond** is allowed to run its full course – alienated from or alienating life-giving sun, water, trees, life, children.... It’s bad enough out to 2031. The “Beyond” is really terrifying.

That said, there are signs of relief in Maddington. The Department of Housing (I think) has built the suburb’s first residential building to exploit verticality: an attractive 3 storeys – see below. Clearly, cost does not rule out this building form. More of it can be regulated into existence to take the pressure off ground surface, tree life and liveable ambience.



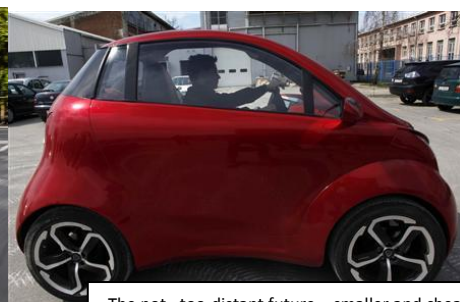
Ironically, the best sites for this housing form in Maddington – adjacent to the railway station – are occupied by acreages of car yards. Let's hope they are encouraged to move on or at least soon start selling electric cars!

Electric cars

Finally, in this discussion, there is the coming electric car which has the potential to significantly contain some of the worst problems of sprawl and automobile domination – those that most worry well-intentioned advocates of consolidation – too many cars using too much space and fossil fuel and emitting too much carbon.....



Available now at competitive prices
©Chevrolet



The not-too-distant future – smaller and cheaper will be the direction chosen by intelligent cities ©Reuters

With good standards, electric cars could also be much smaller than their historic petrol-guzzling counter parts. They will be much smarter too. Electronically-enabled and well-regulated, these cars will need much less road and parking space in future, too. Perhaps we don't need any **more** suburbs, but we certainly don't need to plough the ones we have under. Redesigning and grossly compromising our cities (doing bad and ugly consolidation) because of the environmental threat of 6 cylinder sedans or SUVs... this is just plain stupid. Much better, now, to see how far we can reshape the car.



Conclusion and mea culpa

I worked as an academic planner for a decade at the internationally recognised but now decommissioned Institute for Science and Technology Policy (ISTP) at Murdoch University.¹ Despite the worthwhile public transport research and advocacy of the Institute, its overall research program was unbalanced. It was overly focussed on transport questions and insufficiently attentive to questions of urban form. The door was left open for what I have here called “the bad and ugly” and the neglect of middle and outer suburbs. (As far as I can tell, this remains the case. Very little about the city I see developing around me in the City of Gosnells says different. We get new quality rail services ... and then more bad and the ugly consolidated housing development.)

More difficult questions of urban planning and design went begging at the ISTP. The impact of urban planning and design decisions on the overall quality of cities (not just gentrifying centres) and hence the fairness of cities did not get enough attention. The naïve assumption was that the whole city would automatically rebuild itself as the East Perth Re-development or Subi-centro. Curiously the implications of the now coming revolution in car transport were also overlooked. (The car was demon in the ISTP’s universe; *Boomtown 2050* is also inclined this way.)

To be fair, however, all of this criticism applies to my own work at the Institute at the time as well. Perhaps the cheerful book I am currently writing – ***The Death of Suburban Perth*** – will make good some of these past shortfalls in my own work.

Outline of forthcoming book: *The Death of Suburban Perth*

The discussion above provides a summary account of the early chapters of a book I am in the progress of writing. Other questions addressed in the forthcoming book, include

1. Are our sprawling low density suburbs as bad as official and local academic planners tell us. To be sure, Perth has some problems but is it the worth destroying, for something is often much worse?
2. If these charges are true, and current consolidation practices are destructive, why is it happening?
3. How are our planning institutions and practices being perverted to do bad and ugly work – especially given the history of discipline of town planning?
4. Finally, aren’t there other ways of dealing with the city’s problem?

¹ Re-formed as the Curtin University Sustainability Policy Institute in 2008.