

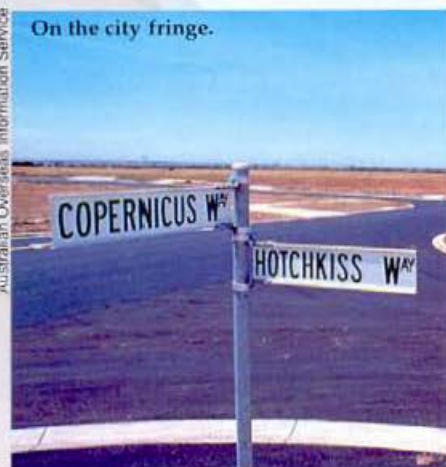
# People on the move: WHERE? WHY?

Despite calls for urban consolidation, people continue to move from inner areas to city fringes and beyond. Some of their reasons are surprising.

**A**ustralia has long been one of the world's most urbanised nations. In the 1890s, 2.5 million Australians, or nearly two-thirds of the population, lived in towns and cities — a level of urbanisation not reached by the United States until the 1920s. Today, more than 70% of Australians live in major urban areas.

But unlike the spread of urban society overseas (especially Europe), where rural villages were gradually subsumed by population growth and secondary industry, Australia's urbanisation largely preceded and fostered the development of manufacturing and the settlement of rural areas.

As a result, our cities are functionally nothing like European ones, where people live more compactly, travel to work on foot or bicycle to a much greater degree and use public transport more often. Australian city life — with its characteristic emphasis on owning a backyard big enough for kicking a football — is suburban, sprawling, energy-inefficient and essentially car-dependent. Melbourne and Sydney, for example, have an average density of 15 persons per hectare, less than one-third of the European average. (Brisbane and Perth have only one-fifth of that average). Fewer than 6% of the workforce in Sydney and Melbourne travel to



work on foot or bicycle (compared with 23% in London), and these cities have a level of car ownership second only to major American ones.

Australian governments and planners have tried for decades to consolidate and compact the cities and make Australian urban life more efficient and European-like. Melbourne tried high-rise public housing in the 1960s, while Sydney went for a flat-building boom and urban renewal in the 1970s. Both failed to halt the drift towards the urban fringe. In the 1980s, they introduced incentives to promote dual occupancy and non-detached housing, only to find they had under-estimated the appeal of the free-standing home on a quarter-acre block.

Between 1981 and 1986, the level of non-detached accommodation dropped slightly in both cities. A 1991 study by the Department of Geography and Environmental Science at Monash University found that medium-density housing units currently comprise less than 10% of new housing starts in Melbourne and their construction is in decline. Expert opinion remains divided on the costs and potential social and economic benefits of consolidation.

Today, however, urban consolidation is again on the agenda, due in part to government planning on ways to reduce global warming or the enhanced greenhouse effect.

According to a federal government working group on ecologically sustainable development (ESD), a move towards a more sustainable society in Australia requires changes to urban life, especially in the use of the car. The transport sector produces 26% of Australia's emissions of the main greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide — most of it from automobiles.

In its 1991 report to the Prime Minister, the ESD working group on transport argued for planning measures to reduce greenhouse emissions by making urban residential areas more dense, with a greater emphasis on public transport, mixed land-use and the establishment of so-called urban villages to minimise the need for car travel. Urban villages are car-free areas of high-density residential and commercial development that can be built around railway or bus stations. While common in Europe, they have not been tried in Australia.

The report examined a number of urban design scenarios for reducing greenhouse emissions. One plan included restricting all new urban development to the inner suburbs, lowering average road speeds, cutting parking in the central business district by 25%, and adopting measures that increase public transport use by 5% a year and bicycle use and walking by 9% a year. These changes would reduce greenhouse emissions by an estimated 15.3% by 2005, compared with 1988 levels. (The federal government has set an interim target of a reduction totalling 20% from 1988 levels by 2005.)

The report acknowledges the opposition such stiff measures may engender, but lists the annual costs of air pollution from cars (estimated by the Inter-State Commission at \$671m in 1990) and road accidents (more than \$4 billion) and the loss of valuable farmland and natural habitat among its reasons for recommending change.

A member of the ESD transport working group, Dr John Brotchie of the Division of Building, Construction and Engineering in Melbourne, is among those who have suggested urban consolidation of a different kind. Dr Brotchie argues that the modern city is undergoing a transition from a predominantly industrial economy to



Urban eye-sore: the Jolimont rail yards in central Melbourne typify the under-used inner-city areas considered for housing redevelopment in Australia's capitals.

an informational one, where new technologies based on the computer and telecommunications are allowing economic activity to become 'less clumpy', more spread-out and more specialised.

The changes provide, he says, an opportunity for consolidation not of residential dwellings but of daily activity patterns and possibly residential and service activities. Environmental savings would arise from concentrating much of the city's new employment activities in suburban centres close to home, and the movement of some workers to existing homes closer to their jobs. The ESD working group believes this approach would generate savings in greenhouse emissions from urban systems of between 8 and 30% by 2005.

The working group is not alone in its deliberations. Federal and State housing ministers have renewed calls for urban consolidation, indicating the need to reduce the burden of providing infrastructure in cities — that is, the growing cost of sewerage, roads, drainage, reticulated water, electricity and gas. More recently, the federal government launched its 'Building Better Cities Program', committing \$60m in 1991/92 to projects that would revitalise cities, promoting urban renewal and consolidation. Another \$760m is earmarked for the program over the following 4 years.

The question facing the planners is: 'How can urban consolidation be made to work this time?' New research by CSIRO has confirmed the long-held view that Australians are reluctant urbanites. But, more im-

portantly, the research has turned up some possible explanations.

Since at least 1945, people have been moving out from the larger Australian cities, mainly towards the towns, rural centres and smaller cities on the coast. On current trends and without overseas immigrants, the large cities would eventually suffer a decline in population.

In 1989, for example, 90 000 people moved permanently out of Sydney. During the same period a net flow of people occurred from the inner areas of the cities to the urban fringe. (Contrary to this pattern, 15- to 24-year-olds are moving heavily into the inner cities.) Geographers have long assumed that both of these movements could be explained chiefly in terms of job-seeking and the pursuit of cheap housing.

But a major study of migration within Australia by Dr Joe Flood and colleagues at the Division of Building, Construction and Engineering has revealed a much more complicated picture.

Drawing on data collected in the 1986 Census, the study found that employment had declined substantially as a reason for change of residence, and that residential changes among people not in the workforce differed greatly from those of workers.

According to Dr Flood, employment as a reason fell from 43% of internal migration in 1970 to 26% in 1987. While job-seeking remains the most important stimulus for long-distance moves, another factor is on the rise — the quality of life-style.

His research shows that the desire to live in pleasant surroundings with clean air and close to friends, relatives and community and sporting activities



Contemporary inner-city housing.



Old with the new: new terrace houses have been built alongside their 19th century counterparts in the inner Sydney suburb of Woolloomooloo.

is becoming for many the main reason for leaving the inner and middle city suburbs and heading for the urban fringe or beyond.

Increasingly, the search for employment is less important as a motive. Indeed, as the study shows, moves by people in the workforce appear to be going against the general trend. People with jobs, Dr Flood says, are moving into the cities, while those not in the labour force (about 45% of the adult population), and the smaller group of unemployed, are moving out — mainly towards coastal regions in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland. The non-employed include fixed-income earners such as pensioners, retirees, spouses in single-income families and others living on the proceeds of personal investments.

**A**s a consequence of this divergence of the employed and the non-employed, Australia can be effectively divided into four categories of migratory areas: growth (regions gaining in all groups of internal migrants); displacement (gaining employed people but losing the non-employed); marginalised (losing the employed but gaining the non-employed); and depressed (losing all groups).

The growth regions include far outer Sydney, the mid-north coast of New South Wales, far eastern Melbourne, eastern Victoria, far outer Brisbane, the Gold Coast, far northern Queensland, most of Perth and southern and eastern Adelaide. The displacement regions include the older suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney where 'gentrification' is taking place. The marginalised areas

are chiefly the 'quiet resort' towns of south-western Victoria, the Hunter region of New South Wales, the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, south-western Western Australia, northern Adelaide and Tasmania. Inner and southern Melbourne, inner western Sydney, western New South Wales, most of Brisbane, central Perth and northern and western South Australia are among the depressed regions.

The size of the movements between these regions is surprising, Dr Flood says. In a 5-year period, inner and middle Melbourne lost more than 68 000, while the city fringe and country Victoria gained 28 000. During the same period, Sydney's inner, middle and outer suburbs had a net population loss of 114 000. Far outer Sydney gained nearly 50 000, and coastal New South Wales another 35 000. Similar trends appeared in Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide.

Dr Flood attributes the migratory pattern partly to a rise in the proportion of the population on fixed incomes, but he also sees it as evidence of either worsening inequality or a more consumer-oriented attitude in choice of residence or both.

He said it was possible that high city costs were driving people on limited incomes out of the city into marginalised areas or 'rural ghettos'. On the other hand, they may simply be seeking a more pleasant place to live on a fixed income.

Either way, he says, the pattern has important policy implications for the advocates of urban consolidation. Within the displaced areas of the inner city suburbs, demand for social services and public transport will probably

decline, with the opposite likely to occur in the marginal areas outside the cities. The danger, therefore, is that too little will be spent on the provision of social services and other amenities where they are needed most.

Consolidating the inner cities with large amounts of expensive medium-density housing may also create windfall profits for property developers and drive out more people on limited incomes. Dr Flood estimates that new infrastructure in developed, inner urban areas can cost up to three times as much as that for residential development on 'greenfield' sites at the urban fringe. Urban consolidation in this form may simply price poor and disadvantaged residents out of the housing market.

Dr Flood says that, while changes to urban form can provide considerable energy savings, a whole range of social and economic issues must first be addressed to ensure that a move towards the ecologically sustainable city does not make our cities unliveable for those least able to adapt.

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#### More about the topic

'The Determinants of Migration in Australia. Final report of the DITAC Internal Migration Study'. J. Flood, C. Maher, P.W. Newton and J.R. Roy. (Commonwealth Department of Industry, Technology and Commerce: Canberra, 1992, in press.)

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