

Planners Must Connect the Dots: Why communication is key in our profession. – Wolter Consulting

“No one wakes up and thinks I want more density!” said Susan Lloyd-Hurwitz, CEO and Managing Director at Mirvac, at the Future Cities Summit 2019 in Sydney. “But they might say they want a library, a swimming pool or other amenity that only arrives with more people.”

For us as planners, conversations about density, convenience, housing affordability and the missing middle begin in university auditoriums. But then comes the real world... Both on our career front where we constantly face the community vs developer vs government policy clashes, and our personal life as we look for ways to enter the housing market or navigate through our choices in the rental market, struggling to decide between convenience and affordability.

When it comes to delivering great cities, as planners we have the knowledge to be opinion leaders and trusted advisors on all fronts - developer, government and the community. We know that ‘great cities are no accident.’ Yet, we continue to see existing and even new housing policies that trigger urban sprawl and make housing a major contributor to inequality. Housing costs continue to escalate, homelessness is rising, and young generations and families are forced to choose where they live based on nothing but the price. We need to speak louder!

The media doesn’t help either, as headlines on the topics of development ignite nothing but a sense of danger and loss. The NIMBY (Not in my Back Yard) voice continues to dominate and is taken as representative of our whole community. But the comfortably settled ‘suburbians’ for whom the notion of the “Great Australian dream” still seems current are not representative of our community! Typically they are the entrenched homeowners, most of whom have a vested interest in the value of their property. We need to constantly remind policy makers that our community also consists of university students, young professionals (singles and couples), people who chose a weekend out with friends instead of mowing the backyard, travel instead of a large mortgage and the convenience of amenities nearby, instead of being cut off in distant neighbourhoods by the \$30 - \$50 Uber trip each way. In most cases there is no platform given to new residents who are looking for a new home in the neighbourhood, because they are not the existing residents who are consulted during plan making. Who better to help them find their voice but the university students themselves!

It is never too early to start the conversation. Strong leadership to gain our voice, to inform, influence and inspire the community conversation starts now, as we leave university auditoriums and have conversations with friends and family on an every-day basis. Maybe it’s your backyard BBQ conversation, chats in the pub or over a family dinner. Don’t shy away from these difficult conversations. If people wish they had more choices in their suburb, a swimming pool or better transport options, it is up to *us* to connect the dots in people’s minds between density and convenience of having facilities, the missing middle and affordability, the protests against development and the “diversity” of voices which currently simply does not exist.

As planners, we understand that feedback from community members protesting against development can be very short term in nature (roadwork, construction, noise, increased traffic) and “devoid of acknowledgement of the long-term positive benefits that often occur for the wider community.” ([Brad Jones, Challenges of Growth and Beyond, The Agenda Vol.59, No.4](#)). We must challenge this. It is not about trying to win the argument, but about “empowering community views through explanation and education.” This is our most challenging but increasingly important role as planners.

Having a YIMBY (Yes In My Backyard) mindset is key to future proof Australian cities. And we, as planners, are responsible for spreading it. Discussing the issues in our University auditoriums or boardroom meetings is just a start. We must carry the message further, beyond our work and study environments. Together we can balance the NIMBY voice and the media bias, and work towards getting to Yes. Think about it, “no one wakes up and thinks I want more density... but they might say they want a library, a swimming pool or other amenity...” It falls on us, as planners, to help connect these dots in people’s minds.

