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The Great Australian dream is an environmental nightmare

By Greg Hardwick



SUPERSIZE ME: Since the mid 1950s the average size of a new house has doubled, and at the same time household size has decreased.

Take a quick scan through a local property magazine and you'll see words of a common theme. Spacious, over-sized, large and luxurious, all appear with monotonous regularity.

The great Australian dream of owning your own home was once a humble ambition, but has it evolved into something more? Is it now an unsustainable desire to build castles as monuments to our wealth?

Since the mid 1950s the average size of a new house has doubled, and at the same time household size has decreased. According to Dr Clive Hamilton, Executive Director of The Australia Institute, each of us occupies at least twice as much floor space as we did in the 1970s. Add this to an increase in household debt, and the stress of paying off mortgages that are often beyond our means, and the reality of the modern Australian dream soon sets in.

"No wonder house prices have risen so dramatically - we seem to want so much more space," Dr Hamilton says.

Paul Summers, from Paul Summers Planning Strategies, says it's not only increased house size. It's their design as well.

"Migrants to the Sunshine Coast buy house types that are responses to other climatic conditions, not those suited to Queensland, because that is the style of housing they are used to."

"Without any doubt, the primary In Sydney, the McMansions are a

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How to help shape our sustainable future

The most important question we face today is: what sort of Australia do we want in the future? We are at the cross-roads, deciding the broad direction of our future. [read more](#)

The thinking person's anti-capitalist

Margaret Thatcher once told the British public there was no alternative. No alternative to the neoliberal economic practice we in Australia like to call economic rationalism. Dr Clive Hamilton believes there is another way. [read more](#)

Consumerism and Consumption

It is a fact most would find hard to fathom, but one nonetheless, that consumption is the key ingredient to the thriving economy worldwide. As the human tendency to live beyond the basic needs eagerly feeds the need to consume, the once sterling state of our natural environment is slowly but surely suffering. [read more](#)

target of excessive consumption spending in Australia is the home." – Dr Hamilton

dominant crop of "super-sized" houses in many new suburbs. Houses averaging over 400 square metres are now built on blocks

much smaller than the traditional quarter acre (1000 square metres). They have been described as "castles, fun factories and mini resorts all in one."

Some leading architects, such as Andrew Andersons, have labelled them "kitschy and fakebourgeois".

"These oversized houses consume huge amounts of energy and create huge greenhouse emissions."

And the cost per square metre of these inefficient houses has surprisingly become an incentive to build bigger. In many cases, mass-produced homes are one quarter the price, per square metre, when compared to an architect-designed house. "The Americanisation of global house design has become so ingrained that builders will tell you the house market demands the biggest house on the smallest site at the lowest price, " said the president of the Royal Institute of Architects, Graham Jahn.

With bigger houses being a better "bang for your buck", there are also fewer people living in them compared to the days of our grandparents.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures point to an ageing population that is largely responsible for fewer people per household. Lower birth rates, an increase in single parent households, and babyboomers, particularly those with an "empty nest", are the main reasons for falling numbers.

The Sunshine Coast now replaces Hobart as the tenth largest urban centre in Australia – Bernard Salt

Mary River Dam receives a 'sympathy vote'

The battle for the Mary River is shaping up to be one of David and Goliath proportions – with the poorly funded community activists pitted against Premier Beattie's spin doctors. [read more](#)

Paradise Lost

As the government unveils its unblinking determination to build a mega dam on the Mary River at Traveston Crossing, it has repeatedly extolled the environmental excellence of its latest cab-off-the-rank, the Paradise Dam. [read more](#)

Slow Food: you are what you eat

It's easy to find fast food. Take a drive, or turn on the TV, and the advertisements can become overwhelming. Promoting convenience, fast food has become a symbol of western culture. But there is a growing force in another direction. [read more](#)

Educate to Sustainability

When presented with a resource use efficiency problem, such as the need to reduce water consumption, the typical strategy is more education. [read more](#)

2006 Sunshine Coast Environment Awards

What a tremendous



A

night it was for the 11th annual Sunshine Coast Environment Awards held at the Coolum Civic Centre on 21st October. [read more](#)

"The traditional Australian value of saving has been sacrificed at the altar of the three-car garage and ensuite," says Dr Hamilton.

study by the University College London on households in England and Wales raises the problems of having fewer people under the same roof.

"One-person households are the biggest consumers of energy, land and household goods," the report states.

"They consume 38 per cent more products, 42 per cent more packaging, 55 per cent more electricity and 61 per cent more gas per capita than four person households."

And with ABS figures suggesting a decrease in family size over the coming decades, the true extent of these impacts have yet to surface in Australia. In Australia and similarly in England, single-person households are expected to comprise 34 per cent of all households by 2026.

Households might be getting smaller, but the population - especially on the Sunshine Coast - continues to expand. According to demographer, Bernard Salt, "the Sunshine Coast now replaces Hobart as the tenth largest urban centre in Australia". And as the population is allowed to grow, so does the need for more land.

A report from the developer lobby, the Urban Development Institute of Australia (UDIA) claims the Sunshine Coast is in the grip of a housing affordability crisis. Noosa, Maroochy and Caloundra in descending order,

the report claims, are the least affordable places in Queensland.

Over 50 per cent of the average Sunshine Coast household's income, which is about \$56,000, is now dedicated to monthly home loan repayments. With house and land packages averaging around \$400,000, many residents are now finding it difficult to own their first home.

The UDIA report claims increased demand, limited land releases, the Vegetation Management Act, Government charges, and delays in planning approvals as being reasons behind the crisis. But it is land supply that has been singled out for attention.

"The limited supply arises because there are finite limits to how many lots can be placed in a particular location," Paul Summers points out. After thorough planning processes in regions like the Noosa Shire, "the notion of simply increasing supply to create more affordable lots flies in the face" of the social, environmental and economic outcomes sought by the community, he says.

With many baby boomers selling houses in the southern states for higher prices, they consequently migrate to the Sunshine Coast and buy at lower prices. The true cost of these interstate migrants, with regard to local water supply, roads and schools and other services, Mr Summers suggests, is not being captured.

As houses become less affordable for many local residents, those fortunate enough to acquire home loans appear to be spending more.

"Without any doubt, the primary target of excessive consumption spending in Australia is the home," Dr Hamilton said.

Member for Ipswich, Rachel Nolan, suggests we may have forgotten the lessons of the past.

"Between 1983 and 2006, average Australian household debt increased from 30 per cent of household disposable income to 150 per cent."

"The traditional Australian value of saving has been sacrificed at the alter of the three-car garage and ensuite with a newly deregulated banking sector egging the punters on," she stated in a recently published article.

And houses aren't just targets of excessive

consumerism. Dr Martin Lee, Senior Research Officer with the Brisbane Institute says houses have become lucrative

investments, often for those who are already well-off. An example is the practice of negative gearing - a practice banned in the US.

"In Australia, however, negative gearing became even more attractive after September 1999, when the capital gains tax system was changed to provide for a 50 per cent discount on assets held longer than 12 months," wrote Dr Lee in an article for the Brisbane Institute.

However, a recent report in the Weekend Australian suggests a shift in Government policy. To date, the "investment property has been the preferred investment for the baby boomers. A policy change to make negative gearing less attractive, may see more properties sold, and a greater emphasis on superannuation.

If baby boomers on the Sunshine Coast start reassessing their investments, will building trends change in the near future?

A research paper by the Business Council of Australia that looks at possible scenarios over the next twenty years, predicts a continuation of our desire to build bigger houses and spend more money.

"Our emphasis on material wealth and visible manifestations of that wealth lead to the desire for bigger houses, faster cars and the latest technology."

It then leads to a crucial question. In a country quickly becoming obsessed with material wealth and bigger houses, how sustainable is the modern Australian dream?

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A NEW SLANT ON OUR FUTURE



The significant problems we face cannot be solved by baby boomers. A policy change to make negative gearing less attractive, may see more properties sold, and a greater emphasis on superannuation. *Albert Einstein*




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