

Bigger can also mean better

■ Geoff Warn



A city is characterised by the quality of its housing and good cities embrace variety, accessibility and vitality. In these times of hyperspeed change, a city that expounds qualities of care, inclusion and permanence is both reassuring and inspiring.

Perth's urban area stretches to 150km and covers just over 1000sqkm. Two million people live here now and we are expecting a steady increase during the next 35 years to more than 3.5 million.

Where will well over one million extra people live? Within the current area? Or do we keep expanding the city limits?

These are key questions addressed in the State Government's strategic land-use planning documents Perth to Peel @ 3.5 Million, now out for public comment. This draft report presents three viable scenarios for Perth's urban growth.

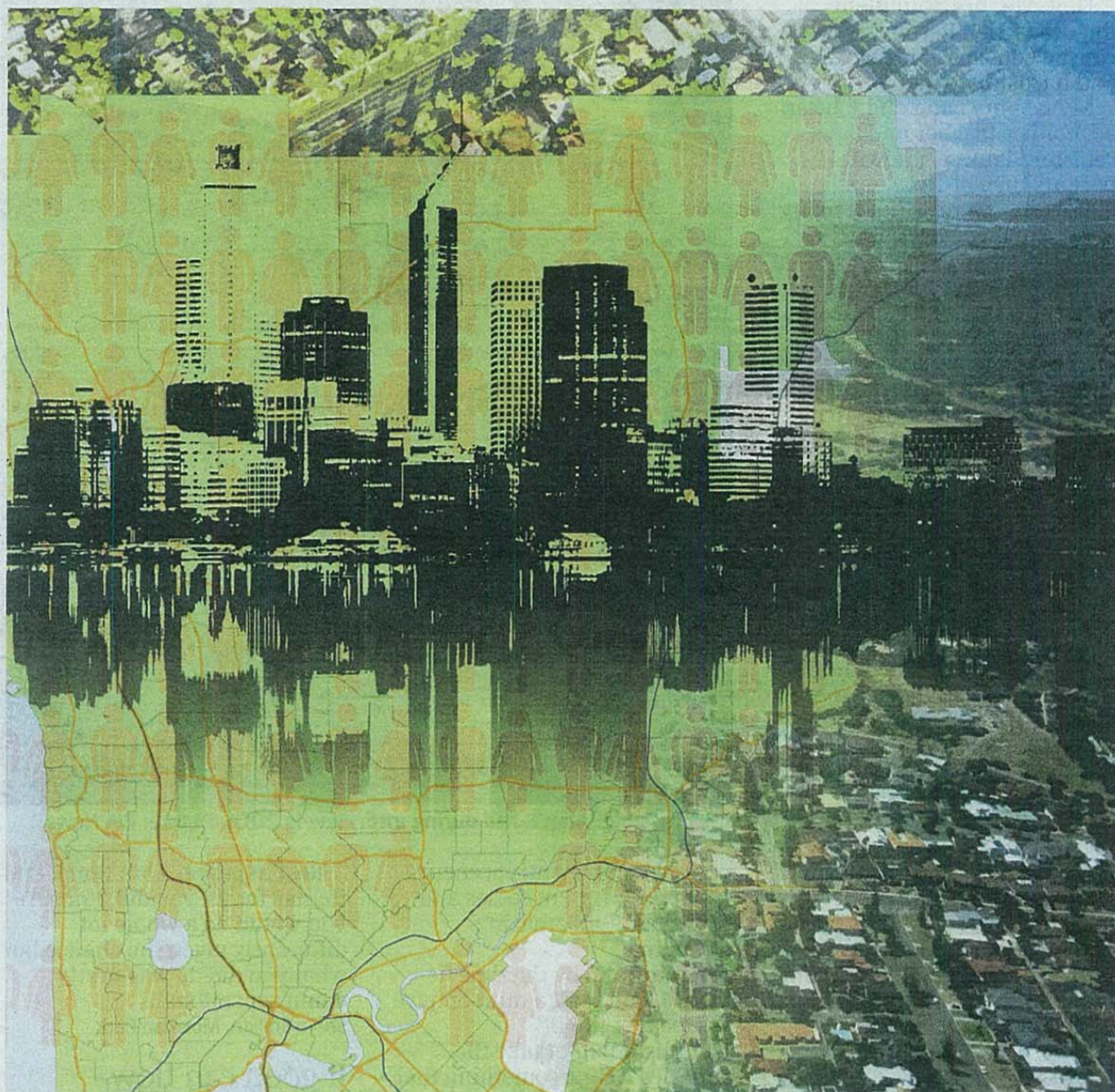
The most ambitious plan is to arrest further suburban sprawl with a growth boundary and confine the population within the current metropolitan area.

The second option is business as usual, the easy approach. This would meet growth demands with market-driven sprawl, continuing to expand the boundary of the metropolitan area — a Los Angeles form of urbanity.

The third option is a middle-ground approach that balances limited suburban sprawl with grouped housing and commercial centres concentrated in more densely populated activity areas, networked with integrated transport systems.

In this Connected City model the qualities and character of our suburban lifestyle are essentially maintained for the majority of people, while for others the many benefits of apartment living will become more readily available.

The Perth to Peel @ 3.5 Million report recommends infill housing targets of 47 per cent, and if this is achieved Perth will become a denser city as it becomes bigger, though the



infill target could be higher.

Currently, across the metropolitan area, 28 per cent of new housing is infill development, and our population density is 1762 people per km². Interestingly, the population density of the sprawling mass of Los Angeles (a city many West Australians seem to abhor) is 2703 per km².

The density of Melbourne is 2032/km², Sydney is 2762/km² and London is 5632 per km². Berlin's population is 3.2 million people, and its density is 3994 per km².

Most Berliners live in apartments close to parks, plazas, retail and commercial streets, and the public transport network is very impressive. It is a diverse, creative, tolerant, safe, "green" city with an abundance of street life with cultural and recreational facilities. And it has some very good architecture, old and new. There

are many cities equally successful on these accounts, demonstrating that density does not have to equal low amenity or a reduced standard of housing.

So, are we satisfied with Perth getting bigger and bigger or should we strive for a bigger and better city? Hopefully the latter.

Excellent cities also look good and have their own vitality. They embrace creativity and integrated design, and they are not overly timid when it comes to risk and trying something different. Good architecture and urban design contribute to a well-designed public realm and permeate cities with their beneficial qualities.

I have recently been concerned to see some disturbingly bland, apparently low-cost and profit-driven housing at the outer edges of our sprawl, with little public amenities and not a single tree in sight. Unfortunately, we have

on this occasion fallen below standard, precisely where well-considered urban design and good basic housing is necessary.

Is this what we want? We are a very wealthy country. The quality of our housing should be of a high standard, with suburbs and urban neighbourhoods that are comfortable and fulfilling places to live and work.

Denser suburbs and neighbourhoods are necessary to achieving the Connected City model and well-designed apartments with easy access to good public amenities (parks and gardens, schools and health care, shopping and cultural activities) are essential to a healthy, content and vibrant community.

Our city centre should also become much more varied, complex and exotic.

The goal must be to develop



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Perth into a capital that is more economically stable, more appealing to residents and businesses, is attractive to tourists, is diverse and more socially balanced, a city with regional significance and a positive international reputation.

We have achieved some very good results. As our city evolves, the challenge is not to overlook our successes, nor miss the opportunities for improvement under the pressures of extended growth and continuing economic fluctuations. With committed government leadership we can actively design a better city for our future. Positively embracing density, accepting the need for better public transport and improving apartment design are essential.

These advancements are not easily achieved and will take considerable effort. While high construction and development costs and housing commoditisation make affordability, variety and choice difficult, we are also facing societal change, which is understandably unsettling.

So, this is the time for pragmatic research, for more in-depth dialogue and critical debate, and a shift in attitudes towards greater diversity, improved quality and sustainability.

■ This article is part of a series in which WA Government Architect Geoff Warn will discuss major projects and issues surrounding urban design and planning