Medium density housing, community compromise for living in a Transit Oriented Development area.

By Shohreh Nematollahi

PhD student at Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Curtin University of Technology
shohreh.nematollahi@curtin.edu.au

Increasing residential density in areas in walking distance around transit stops is a common challenge for local councils, in particular the ones in the established areas close to CBD. One of these problem is ‘community resistance’ to densification. Existing residents in designated TOD areas may not perceive the advantages of increasing density in the same way that most planners do. Is there any middle ground in this debate? Are there any forms of a dense neighbourhood that residents might consider desirable and what lies behind these opinions.

Research incorporating resident surveys was conducted in three case studies in Perth: Canning Bridge, Cannington and Wellard. The aim of survey was to encourage the existing residents to conceptualise the kind of high-density development that they thought would make their neighbourhood a physically and socially desirable place in which to reside.

Residents expressed a preference for dwelling types that were seen to be more inclined towards medium-density (grouped-dwellings and town houses), without any shared or common spaces. While residents were well aware of the benefits of proximity to transport and accessibility to services as benefits of TOD areas, they were not prepared to trade off their preference for their own lot and house to access these benefits. There was resistance expressed to multi storey housing based on preferences for distance between personal privacy and community-wide interaction (social distance). This dominant socio-cultural characteristic appears to show a lack of interest by existing residents to engage in community formation with incoming residents.

Apartment complexes of more than 6 storeys are seen as having more unknown people in close proximity. Most of the residents do not see spontaneous social interaction with new residents or neighbours as a benefit. Their apparent fear of living in diverse communities and a reluctance to live in close proximity to ‘unknown’ socio-economic groups and cultures seems to be shaping their negative perception to dense developments. Their desired residential dwelling choices (along with their statements) are seen as a compromise to avoid potential future conflict with incoming residents.

In a city which is heading to more compact living for various planning reasons, the culture and mentality of its residents need to be more effectively engaged to embrace the realities of

1 Desirable Dense Neighbourhoods: An Environmental Psychological Approach for Understanding Community Resistance to Densification
SHOHREH NEMATOLLAHI, REENA TIWARI AND DAVID HEDGCOCK
Urban Policy and Research, 22 Sep 2015, DOI:10.1080/08111146.2015.1078233
higher density living including the management of communal spaces, the respect for diverse cultures and lifestyles, and patience in the community formation process. While interaction between people/neighbours will result in understanding differences and lessening the fear of the unknown this will not be achieved if existing suburban cultures of privacy and containment are allowed to drive TOD development outcomes.

It is evident from the analysis of case studies that the current level of socialising is not sufficient enough for effectively experiencing a desired dense neighbourhood. It is important that residents of a neighbourhood be willing to socially connect to their immediate community and see this as a cultural value and benefit for all.