‘Affordability’, ‘Character’ and ‘Diversity’, are we generating grounds for community opposition in planning policies?

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Introduction

This short article discusses three common terms that are often used in planning policy documents and later on generate community opposition, in particular towards infill developments. While in planning policies words such as ‘affordability’, ‘character’ and ‘diversity’ are used positively to promote infill development, they are usually perceived negatively by community and result in delays for implementing infill developments. Refereed studies were selected from Sydney, Melbourne and Perth to support the argument. Each study shows community is concerned with ‘unknown’ social change in their neighbourhood.

- Affordability

‘Affordability’ is one of the key objectives of infill developments, which is widely addressed in planning policies for major cities. It is also core of various studies in literature. While among planners and policy makers it has positive connotation; communities perceive it quite the opposite. The difference in views often generates community opposition, resulting in delays in planning process to fulfil planning objectives.

One of the recent studies from Sydney investigated factors, intensifying opposition to affordable Housing Development in Parramatta (Davison et. al., 2016).

‘Prejudice against Prospective Occupants’ is among five identified factors, indicating community concerns with the effects of people who will occupy the affordable housing. ‘Unknown’ social outcomes of development, affected community perception and escalated community opposition.

- Character

‘Character’ is also another term mentioned in state planning policies as one of the strategies in order to protect and build cultural identity, and sense of place. However, sometimes it is a key instigator of community opposition, delaying infill development projects. In Dovey et. al. (2009) study: ‘Understanding neighbourhood character: The case of Camberwell’ in Melbourne, it was argued that ‘character is a complex concept that cannot be reduced to physical elements of design’. It is ‘a ‘feel’ or 'atmosphere', objective and subjective, personal and impersonal’. In other words ‘character’ is not limited to built forms; rather it encompasses socio-cultural characteristics of an area as well as everyday experience of people (Dovey et. al., 2009). The way infill projects change not just the built form but also socio-cultural (demographic) character of an area is an important concern for existing communities.

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1 Gallent et al., 2002; Iglesias, 2002; Galster et al., 2003; Koebel et al., 2004; Schively, 2007; Tighe, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2013; Ruming, 2014a, 2014b

2 Rice, 2009; Cook et al., 2012; Rowley et al., 2012; Davison et al., 2013; Weller & Bolleter, 2013; Ruming, 2014)

• Diversity

‘Diversity’ is another word numerously used in planning policy documents in particular for housing policies. The aim is to create different housing choices (mix of dwellings) for different demographics and different household budgets. In author’s study of three transit oriented communities in Perth (Nematollahi et. al, 2016)⁴, it has been identified that having ‘a diverse mix of people in the precinct’, ‘availability of different housing types in the precinct (including apartments, terraces, villas, units) and ‘increasing the chance of meeting more people in the area’ are the least liked features of a dense neighbourhood. Associating ‘diversity’ with increase in low-socio-economic households, ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘antisocial behaviours, crimes’ clearly show the negative perception towards ‘diversity’ strategy.

Respondents described ‘availability of different housing types in the precinct’ as ‘cheap, small housing that attracts the criminal element’, ‘diminish feel of community’, ‘more traffic in quiet streets and likely increase in crime and graffiti’.

Uncertainty around what kind of people various housing types in particular apartments may bring to the area, creates negativity around the ‘diversity’ strategy.

Conclusion

The intention of this article was to highlight some key strategies that often cause community opposition for infill development projects. While there are proposed strategies in mentioned studies and similar studies to tackle the negative perception, it is important for policy makers to review the terms that may have adverse effects on developing compact city planning goals.

References:


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⁴ Nematollahi et. al. (2016)


Ruming, K. (2014a) “It wasn’t about public housing, it was about the way it was done”: challenging planning not people in resisting the Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan, Australia, Journal of Housing and the Built Environment, 29(1), pp. 39–60.


