

Design key in Perth shift to micro lots

Suzanne Hunt, Comment The West Australian
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They may be cheap for Perth real estate, but there is a catch... they are on a 80 square metre block.

The WA Government recently unveiled plans to build housing on very small blocks — of less than 100sqm — that will allow non-strata-titled terrace-style homes to be built in Perth.

It's a novel concept for a city that has focused for so long on building 4x2s on ever-smaller blocks but it's a move that the Australian Institute of Architects supports wholeheartedly.

We believe the introduction of this housing type can help reduce the cost of urban sprawl by providing more diverse housing in suburbs where desirable infrastructure — public transport and open spaces, shops and services, education and health facilities — already exists.

Research in other States suggests that infill terrace housing is more affordable than surrounding homes on larger blocks — about 20 to 30 per cent less than the local median house price — making it a great option for young families or down-sizers who want to stay in the suburb they love, near friends and local support networks.

There are financial benefits beyond the cost of the home. Infill terrace houses can be beautiful places to live with good amenity, and cost less to run than stand-alone homes, but achieving these outcomes relies on high-quality design.

Ideally, architects would be involved before subdivision starts to ensure the ideal location and orientation of small sites. Architects can then plan homes that make the most of passive design principles, such as solar orientation, thermal mass and

cross ventilation, and the placement of windows and doors to bring in sunlight and natural breezes throughout the year.

Getting the basics right from the start will reduce the need for air-conditioning in summer and heating in winter, which equates to lower energy bills for the life of the home.

Infill terrace houses also need to fit into the context and character of streetscapes and neighbourhoods. The placement of garages at the rear and balconies at the front can contribute to a strong sense of community, while good landscaping provides summer shade and privacy.

The test site at Ellenbrook is a commercial joint venture between Department of Communities' Housing Authority and a private syndicate. Project-managed by LWP Property Group it will guide the potential development of a new R-Code.

In our submission, the institute reiterated to the Government that architects are best placed to balance the competing design challenges associated with small lot housing, to achieve maximum amenity and liveability, ensuring infill terrace houses remain desirable places to live and hold their value over time.

We understand that there is some community hesitation and resistance to increased density in parts of Perth, but we believe that this housing type can play an important role in the city's overall growth strategy.

We hope to see some terrific options combining good design with a range of price points on the market in the near future. Small house lots are a great example of our most-quoted aphorism that "architecture is for everyone".

Suzanne Hunt is president of the Australian Institute of Architects, WA, and principal of Suzanne Hunt Architect