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Balance can be a household word

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With the right choices, our cities need not lose liveability as they grow, writes Jane-Frances Kelly.

In June, the Grattan Institute published a report, *The housing we'd choose*, that contained the first substantial survey of Australian housing preferences since the early 1990s. The survey showed that, contrary to myth, Australians want a mixture of housing choices, not just detached houses.

Many want to live in a semidetached home or an apartment close to family and friends or shops.

The problem is that the market does not provide nearly enough of this housing, especially in the middle and outer suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne. There are a number of reasons for this.

Residents, denied a say in how their neighbourhood develops, often feel they have little choice but to oppose all planning applications and all change. Developers point to barriers that prevent them building housing in established suburbs. State and local governments are caught in the middle and no one wins.

Meanwhile, the populations of our cities continue to grow. Residents increasingly face congestion costs, high petrol bills and distance from family, friends and jobs. More green space disappears and housing everywhere becomes more expensive. Our children are less likely to be able to afford to live where they grew up, and older people will face few options to downsize within the neighbourhood where they built their lives. We urgently need a new approach. A new Grattan report, *Getting the housing we want*, seeks to provide it.

First, we need political leadership to break the deadlock in our cities.

Overseas cities that have managed growth well such as Vancouver, Seattle and Portland did so by ensuring that residents had a real say in decision-making. People showed themselves to be more than capable of accepting trade-offs, making tough choices and working with developers and governments.

As well as deeper engagement, *Getting the housing we want* proposes two major reforms. The first is piloting neighbourhood development corporations to oversee substantial redevelopment of specific areas. The corporations would give residents an active role in shaping their neighbourhoods, in partnership with the housing industry and government. They would be independent bodies with real powers over planning and delivery.

The corporations should develop diverse housing that features good urban design and high environmental standards. They should offer developers certainty but also give residents more control over how their neighbourhoods change. Experience overseas and in Australia shows this can be done.

A new Commonwealth-State Liveability Fund would support the development corporations by providing funding for new parks, community facilities and local

infrastructure in return for neighbourhoods accepting more households. Yet the corporations will not be right for most parts of the city. We also need to encourage high-quality smaller developments such as those built on one or two lots on a residential street. In many established areas, these developments make up the bulk of new housing and some of the most contentious development for existing residents. Here too, we need a mechanism to balance the interests of developers and current and future residents.

This would be achieved through a Small Redevelopment Housing Code that would establish clear standards for new housing of up to two storeys.

If these standards were met, planning approval would be given within 15 days. In return, the code would ensure that new buildings were better designed and respected the privacy of neighbours and the area's character. The code would focus on the things that neighbours worry about most: overlooking, overshadowing, the appearance of bulk, and privacy in their backyards.

Finally, the report proposes the creation of an association to enable small builders and developers to construct better housing more cheaply.

Many small developers struggle to adopt new ideas or try new building technologies for non-detached housing. This can result in housing that is poorly designed, the worst of which is distressing to residents. An association that links developers, architects and university research could help spread innovation, making this housing cheaper and better designed.

Our cities will keep growing. If we do not make choices about the way they grow, they will become less sustainable and more polarised, and fewer Australians will get the housing they want. But if we make the right decisions, our cities can grow while retaining the qualities that make them great places in which to live.

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