

Navigating the Archipelago of Medium Density

The Missing Middle in Australian Suburbs

Mirko Guaralda

Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ) Volume 40

Confence hosted by the University of Queensland and the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane 2-4 December 2024

Edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz

Published in Brisbane by SAHANZ, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-7638772-0-7

Copyright of this volume belongs to SAHANZ; authors retain the copyright of the content of their individual papers. All efforts have been undertaken to ensure authors have secured appropriate permissions to reproduce the images illustrating individual contributions. Interested parties may contact the editors.

DOI: 10.55939/a5402pmjvu

Citation:

Guaralda, Mirko. "Navigating the Archipelago of Medium Density: The Missing Middle in Australian Suburbs." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 40, Islands*, edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz, 25-26. Brisbane, Australia: SAHANZ, 2025.

Accepted for publication on 9th June, 2024



SAHANZ Society of Architectural Historians Australia & New Zealand



December 2-4 2024

Brisbane, Australia

Navigating the Archipelago of Medium Density

The Missing Middle in Australian Suburbs

Mirko Guaralda. Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

DOI: 10.55939/a5402pmjvu

Cities are characterised by more than just landmarks; their essence lies in their urban fabric. The identity of a city is shaped by its culture and history, and how these elements influence urban development in response to climate, cultural needs, and community practices. Urban density, a fundamental aspect of city life, is often overlooked despite its growing importance in addressing housing affordability, environmental sustainability, and social equity.¹ A dense urban environment, where people, activities, and services are closely packed, creates a structured and complex society, quite different from the simplicity of village life. This density fosters social interactions, enriching daily experiences with increased opportunities for encounters. The importance of well-connected and resilient communities has become particularly apparent, especially in today's fast-changing world.

Australia, with its relatively young urban history, has cities that developed through limited planning and architectural paradigms. Traditional Euclidean planning has produced a clear division between high-density central business districts and sprawling, low-density suburbs. This stark dichotomy has led to isolated medium-density areas, which

appear rare, self-contained islands amid a sea of suburban sprawl.² Advocates of the “missing middle” call for a shift toward medium-density, mixed-use developments to bridge the gap between high-density urban centres and low-density suburbs. However, these new medium-density developments and the densification of inner-city areas remain contentious and fragmented.³

Australian cities are often defined by lifestyle or iconic landmarks rather than by intricate urban design. Unlike cities such as Paris or Rome, where spontaneous encounters and dispersed urban qualities are a part of everyday life, cities like Sydney, Brisbane, and Perth lack such diversity. Instead, the urban landscape of Australian cities consists of a few highlights – often near water – and large clusters of generic, anonymous developments. This development pattern stems from colonial-era planning, specifically the Shaftesbury system, which imposed standardised designs across different regions, from Australia to Canada, Africa, and the Caribbean. This colonial legacy is still evident in Australian urban centres dominated by commercial towers and high-rise developments.

Over the past 20 years, inner-city suburbs have witnessed the rise of resort-style complexes, with high-rise buildings organised around shared private or semi-private amenities such as pools, plazas, and other lifestyle facilities.⁴ Meanwhile, outer suburbs feature large freestanding houses, starkly contrasting the small, expensive urban apartments in city centres. The suburban ideal, influenced by the garden city movement and car-based development, has created sprawling neighbourhoods that are increasingly unsustainable. In recent years, suburban plots have shrunk while house sizes have grown, significantly reducing private open space.

The long-term sustainability of suburban sprawl has been widely debated, but its feasibility depends on consistent population growth. However, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of these suburban environments. With movement restricted and people confined to their immediate neighbourhoods, the lack of local amenities and services became painfully apparent, highlighting the fragility of this model. The pandemic underscored the need for more integrated, resilient communities that offer diverse living



Figure 1:
Urban densification in Brisbane.
(Photograph by Mirko Guaralda, 2021)

environments and better access to local services.⁵

The primary focus of this paper is to explore how medium-density environments can be better designed for Australia by examining international examples. The study begins with an historical review of how sprawling suburbs emerged in Australia and employs a typomorphological analysis of six global building types. These types include the Shophouse, Terrace House, Courtyard Tenement, Interconnected Courtyard, Perimeter Block, and the Vancouver Model, all offering valuable insights into shaping medium-density, medium-rise, mixed-use urban spaces.

The analysis of these six typologies shows that Shophouses and Terrace Houses, when adapted for multi-family use, foster compact and intimate communities, encouraging social interaction. Courtyard Tenements and Interconnected Courtyards help to build communities with a strong sense of identity. These courtyard designs create human-scale, semi-private spaces that can integrate commercial and communal activities, contributing to vibrant neighbourhoods. Perimeter Blocks provide more privacy

while maintaining a sense of community at the block level, making them suitable for medium-density developments. The Vancouver Model, a hybrid approach, demonstrates how higher density can be achieved without sacrificing the ambience and quality of medium-rise environments.

Australia's focus on local practices and reluctance to adopt successful international models has hindered urban innovation. Learning from the diversity of building types discussed can help Australia shift toward a more resilient, adaptable urban fabric. By embracing a broader range of building typologies, Australian cities can address the missing middle and create more liveable, sustainable environments that better meet contemporary social, environmental, and economic needs.⁶

1.

Eberhard Tröger, *Density & Atmosphere: On Factors Relating to Building Density in the European Cities*, ed. Dietmar Eberle (Basel, Switzerland: Birkhäuser, 2015).

2.

Mirko Guaralda, "Australian Urbanism and the Meaning of Public Space. Placemaking and Urban Design in South-East Queensland," *New Cities and Migration*, ed. R. Bologna (Florence: DIDAPress, 2017), 169–184.

3.

Andrea Sharam, Lyndall Bryant and Tom Alves, "De-Risking Development of Medium Density Housing to Improve Housing Affordability and Boost Supply," *Australian Planner* 52, no. 3 (2015), 210–218.

4.

A. Siksna, "The Study of Urban Form in Australia," *Urban Morphology* 10, no. 2 (2006), 89–100.

5.

Mirko Guaralda, et al. "Towards Australian Regional Turnaround: Insights into Sustainably Accommodating Post-Pandemic Urban Growth in Regional Towns and Cities," *Sustainability: Science Practice and Policy* 12, no. 24 (2020), 10492.

6.

This abstract was finalised using generative AI technology. The author wrote the initial draft of the abstract, which was subsequently summarised within the word limit using ChatGPT. The text was also proofread with the support of Grammarly. The outcome was reviewed and revised to ensure academic rigour and standards.