

INQUIRY INTO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT'S ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CITIES

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To: Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport and Cities

RE: Inquiry into the Australian Government's role in the Development of Cities

Based on the Urban Informatics Lab at Queensland University of Technology's experience and expertise in research and development at the intersection of people, places, and technologies in Australian and global contexts for over 10 years, we wish to bring forth the following matters to the Committee.

SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS IN EXISTING CITIES

As aptly conveyed in the media release for this inquiry, the sustainability of Australian cities depends on how it could become a place for everyone. The current era of major political, social, economic, and technological disruptions to everyday lives of Australians calls for new, impactful approaches to urban development, planning, and governance. This provides an impetus for transdisciplinary research and development regarding the perceptions and experiences of "home." In particular, two aspects pose imminent and critical challenges to Australia's aspirations for a sustainable future that builds on the wellbeing of individuals and communities: 1) the rise of single-person households, and; 2) homeliness.

1. Single-person Households

The number of Single-person Households (SPHs) has steadily increased around the world, helped by increased standards of living and life longevity. However, the rate and degree of growth in cities over the past several decades calls for a close examination. SPHs are predicted to consist of 30-40% or more of all households in the majority of developed countries, including Australia, by 2025-30 (OECD, 2013). This is primarily due to the growth in ageing population as well as people increasingly choosing to live alone for social and economic reasons.

Governments and research organisations have started to highlight the rise of SPHs as a critical feature of the global urban future, with implications ranging from environmental sustainability to health and wellbeing (ibid.; Palmer, 2006). Recent studies in household consumption patterns and their environmental impact share the unanimous view that SPHs increasingly generate serious environmental impacts because of the low resource sharing in their everyday consumption of food, commodities, energy, and spaces (cf. Dey et al., 2007; Williams, 2007). Facing not only living but also dying alone fundamentally threatens ethical, social, and wellbeing of individuals and communities (Ozawa-de Silva, 2008)

Overlooking the challenges and opportunities stemming from this historic demographic shift is likely to result in major social, cultural, and environmental repercussions in the future. However, despite this critical change, we have "failed to redesign cities and suburbs to meet the needs of a singleton society"

(Klinenberg, 2013). While analysing large-scale quantitative datasets such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census may enable some insights into SPHs, this analysis presents a rather fragmented view. Thick, comparative, transdisciplinary research and development is crucial to create social, technological, and physical environments that are conducive to the individual wellness of SPHs and broader communities. It is vital to investigate this knowledge gap and explore new design and development opportunities now.

2. Homelessness

Living and dying alone presents further challenges to people who are experiencing homelessness. The 2011 [census data](#) shows that 1 in 200 Australians are homeless. Policy measures to ensure housing affordability requires urgent attention. At the same time, home is not just the space but also includes various values embedded in the space. Thus, investigating the diversity of homelessness population and of conditions and factors that cause and sustain homelessness is crucial in order to ensure effective prevention. Particularly, rising precarity stemming from income inequality, broader participation in gig economy, and technological unemployment calls for policies and services that are designed to flexibly coalesce and transcends different interrelated domains such as urban and regional planning, education, and social support. Endeavours of various scales to reduce homelessness in Australia can benefit from new forms of collaboration in research and development. Transdisciplinary and transsectorial collaborations are necessary to generate sustainable and impactful outcomes.

BEYOND SMART CITIES: FUTURE CITIES FOR AND WITH CARE

New and emerging digital technologies are often heralded as an automatic enabler of social, economic, and political innovation. Such a thinking is not conducive to exploring the true potential of technologies to enrich lives of humans and more than humans who are the actual change makers for the future. As key thinkers in technologies and society argue, across public, private, and community sectors, we must focus our attention to not only on exploring and encouraging technological possibilities but more importantly, on our capacity “to question the wisdom or propriety of a particular developmental direction” (Greenfield 2017).

Based on our own experience of developing and applying innovative methods of research and practice supported by new and emerging technologies and co-creative engagements, we believe that it is possible identify and address key problems while also engendering new opportunities that are specific to sustainability transitions in existing Australian cities in impactful ways.

We welcome an opportunity to further discuss how we could offer our expertise to create a sustainable and better future for Australia together, with a particular focus on the two interrelated areas that present significant concerns and opportunities, as outlined in this document: single person households and homelessness.

AUTHOR

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