

Look to the future so we will have one

WHAT would our future built environment be like if we put sustainability as the chief driver? The first major difference to the path that is inherently unsustainable is that we would have a future.

2004 Year of the Built Environment (YBE) is a collaborative initiative promoted by government, industry, environmental and community groups, aimed at fostering awareness about the built environment and its influence on our quality of life.

So it is the right time to ask the question: what would it be like? Let's imagine. There would be a national strategic plan that would help all cities and communities to identify and maintain their true sustainable size. Together as a nation we would seek expert advice to help us work out how many people Australia can really support and the best places for people to live.

The pricing and demand management of all utilities (power, water, petrol, etc) would be set to properly reflect their true environmental cost. This would encourage the growth of industries that can provide

The Year of the Built Environment gives us a chance to imagine how we could live in our cities, writes Caroline Pidcock.

sustainable alternatives to ensure our standards of living are maintained without damaging the environment in the process.

Instead of the linear approach to materials that results in so much waste, we would move to the more cyclical scheme that makes nature so successful. The process where materials are extracted from the ground, manufactured into products, used and then disposed of as waste, would be replaced by one where the outputs of any process would be designed to be inputs into another.

Companies would take a "cradle to cradle" approach to their products and packaging - ensuring long life, recycling and profitability. The word "waste" would be removed from dictionaries and replaced with "resource".

We would recognise the great value of the rare resource called water. Instead of regarding rain as a waste product to be removed from the built environment as quickly and

effectively as possible, we would collect and use it as efficiently as possible. Owners of new and existing buildings would be assisted by way of rebates either to install water tanks to provide water for gardens and toilets or to use larger communal schemes.

It would be impossible to purchase power- and water-inefficient appliances and equipment. Manufacturers would have strong businesses in making efficient and effective hot water services, fridges and freezers and shower heads.

We would set up a think tank to reconsider how food is grown, manufactured and provided to the city. The current situation delivers food whose embodied energy far exceeds its calorific value and is unsustainable. Possible ideas could include converting some council flower gardens into community vegetable patches or planting trees that produce edible fruits and nuts in public spaces.

Ten per cent of road funding would

be reallocated to the creation of bicycle paths and facilities in all city and town centres.

Suitable public transport within and between cities and their connected places will be so successful that the use of private cars would diminish considerably. The excessive car parking spaces of the past would be converted to other uses as people no longer find they need more than one car - or one at all - per household.

All buildings in Australia would undertake an environmental rating each year so that every Australian would have an understanding of the impact of their house and lifestyle on the environment. People would compete with each other to have the most sustainable buildings which offer greatest comfort at least cost. Our concept of personal success would be inherently connected to how sustainable we are in our life as a whole.

I think such a scenario is not only worth imagining - it is well worth pursuing.

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