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High-rise apartments are bad to live in and bad for society, says respected architect

Australia is building too many poor-quality high-rise apartment towers that are alienating to live in and have low environmental performance, one of the nation's most widely respected residential architects has warned.

It comes as an author of a new book on planning in Melbourne warns the city's concentration of high-rise towers in the city centre is going to lead to a "city that is unliveable within a generation".

Sydney-based architect Kerry Clare, who designed Melbourne's award-winning Docklands Library, has warned that sky-high living is harming the nation's urban fabric.

"High-rise living has a number of drawbacks including social isolation and diminished public realm amenity," said Professor Clare, who with partner Lindsay Clare won the 2010 Gold Medal for Architecture, the nation's highest honour from the Australian Institute of Architects.



Architect Kerry Clare, pictured in 2013. *Photo: Dean Osland*

"Current high-rise building practices in Australia make for poor environmental performance and reduced liveability," Professor Clare has told a [conference staged in Sydney](#) by Architecture Media, *Housing Futures*.

Professor Clare questioned why Australia was building so many apartment towers that saw residents living as high as 60 floors above ground.

Living in a high-rise building radically reduced the sort of chance encounters that lower-rise dwellings ensured were inevitable, as residents were on the street more often, she said.

"High-rises diminish people's participation in public spaces," she said, citing the work of another architect, Taz Looman, who has argued towers "create silos – physical, social and psychological".



The Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, designed by Kerry Clare and partner Lindsay. *Photo: John Gollings*

An economic bubble?

Professor Clare said high-rise towers were largely "built during economic bubbles", and many were empty, investor-owned properties.

She said while there were many types of housing, what was appropriate in each context was different, and was affected by "finance, politics, design and market".

"My concern is that high-rise living is a model too easily adopted by finance and politics," she said.

There was also a question over whether high-rise construction was leading to a greater divide between the haves and have-nots, with luxury units in higher end developments aimed at global investors.

In Melbourne, the phenomenon has had the knock-on effect of drastically inflating the price of adjacent CBD and city fringe land in particular.



Kerry Clare and partner Lindsay, in 2010 after they were awarded the Australian Institute of Architects Gold Medal, their profession's highest award. *Photo: Brendan Esposito*

Not so green after all

High towers were less environmentally sustainable than was believed, because they needed constant air conditioning and heating. High wind velocities meant windows could often not be opened above certain heights.

Professor Clare said the widespread use of glass curtain wall systems on Australian skyscrapers meant they heated up too easily in the hot climate. "The vast majority pay lip service only to environmental design," she said.

High-rise apartment towers also used more energy due to central plants, pools and spas, while the embedded energy in concrete was far higher than timber, which could be used for lower-rise housing.

Tall buildings also created large shadows, wind tunnels and poor street environment, which in turn made activities such as jogging or cycling "much less enjoyable creating less amenity, life and activity", Professor Clare said.



Melbourne is experiencing an unprecedented high-rise apartment construction boom. *Photo: Penny Stephens*

Call backed by local experts

Professor Clare's damning comments on the nation's high-rise construction phenomenon was mirrored by a group of RMIT planners who recently released a book on the city's growth.

The book, *Planning Melbourne*, found Melbourne was building too many central-city high-rises, while its suburbs continue to sprawl outwards. Meanwhile, not enough medium density was being built in the middle-ring suburbs.

"It is really going to lead the city to a classic case of the city failing," said one of the book's authors, Professor Michael Buxton.

"Much of the high-rise that is being constructed, we think is going to be unliveable within a generation," Professor Buxton said, because the standard of construction was poor and came with high energy prices.

Not family friendly

He said too many Australian apartments suited only singles or couples with no children.

"It's not that apartments aren't suitable for families – it's that the model Melbourne has adopted of small, poorly constructed apartments aren't suitable."

These apartments were being lived in by short-term visitors, students or those staying only months in one spot.

"That's a very poor model for long-term city sustainability," he said.

The book identifies Melbourne as one of the top 10 locations worldwide for construction of high-rise towers.

Landscape architects concerned too

The landscape architecture industry has also voiced its concerns over the large numbers of high-rise apartment projects being built in Melbourne. One member of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architect's advocacy committee said the group supported Melbourne moving to become a higher density city.

"However, we are concerned by the recent proliferation of low quality residential developments that have poor internal amenity, fail to cater for larger families, and negatively impact the public realm," said the group's Mark Skiba, a landscape architect.

Stronger controls on apartment design in Sydney – in place since 2002 – meant that Melbourne had damaged its reputation as a liveable city, he said.

Mr Skiba said there needed to be more green infrastructure – large parks and natural landscapes, and quality public streets and urban spaces – adding to features in apartments like communal rooftop and private balconies.

Commentators unhelpful: developers

But groups representing the development sector said that commentary like this was unhelpful, because the market was already moving away from poor quality housing.

Asher Judah, acting Victorian executive director of the Property Council, said Melbourne was experiencing solid demand for high-rise apartments locally and internationally. He argued there was no apartment bubble. "Just a high degree of supply which is being absorbed."

Developers had delivered some good and some bad apartments, he said, and was now working with the Andrews government to lift design standards without adding drastically to costs.

There has been discussion about imposing minimum size standards on apartments in Melbourne. Mr Judah said that this was not the answer.

"Good design can be both big and small. The community is growing tired of housing commentators claiming to have a monopoly on good taste."

More demand for boutique apartments

Another developer group, the Urban Development Institute of Australia, argued that new developments were largely next to existing services and infrastructure, meaning they were positives for society.

Danni Addison, the institute's Victorian chief executive, said the apartment market was seeing more boutique and better designed developments built. She said it was crucial for the health of the property market that apartments kept being built "at affordable prices".

"This often comes down to the time and cost spent through our planning system," she said.