Do you want size with that? The McMansion malaise


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Australia has long prided itself on being an equal society, and for most of the 20th century our housing was a mirror of that value or belief.

Almost all houses were single-storey detached and, with the exception of the Tooraks and Vaucluses, the dwellings of the affluent were not greatly larger than those of people on more moderate incomes.

But in the last decade of the twentieth century a new housing product began to emerge: the very large two-storey dwellings now labelled McMansions.

How has a dwelling form which cuts across all good principles of environmental sustainability come to dominate the growth suburbs of Australian cities? What does it say about us?

One thing that can be said about McMansions is that they are not an outgrowth of the traditional detached house that was built in the millions in the 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s.

These had large gardens which were active play areas for children and locations for tool sheds and growing vegetables.

Most McMansions do not have this capacity. The dwellings are squeezed onto much smaller allotments and there is no room for the activities of that earlier period – they represent a break with our past, not an extension of it.

They are all about a lifestyle lived in the house (around the home theatre, the PlayStation and the computer), not outside the house.

There is little doubt that McMansions are a physical manifestation of Australia’s transition from a fair and equitable society to a less equitable and more status-conscious ones.

They are a conspicuous display of affluence, even if those who are purchasing them are not actually affluent, as they are designed to impress and send a signal of aspirationalism.

Together with private schools and four wheel drives, they send an “up yours” message to the world in a way that this “trilogy of entitlement” could not have done in the past.

That, of course, is the harsh side of the explanation.

The other is that as a purchase (but not necessarily in terms of ongoing costs) they are incredibly good value.

Australians may not be very good at getting land onto the market at an affordable price, but they can build the houses that go on the land very cheaply.

And the marginal cost of building a two-storey rather than a single-storey house, particularly over the lifetime of a mortgage, is not much at all. So why not go the whole hog?

This point takes on even more resonance when related to the restructuring of Australian cities whereby gentrification and changed locational preferences have converted the inner city and middle ring suburbs into the places.

The effect has been to push up prices in these areas such that houses are more often in excess of a million dollars and apartments half a million.

Most young families simply cannot afford these locations, and the alternative of a McMansion for less than an
inner urban apartment has its appeal.

But the McMansions are problematic even beyond the poor aesthetics that often characterise them.

The obvious issue is environmental sustainability: they are air conditioning-dependent, high-energy consumers, without gardens the water run-off is high, and they are vehicles for consumerism, with all those rooms having to be furnished.

But there are other, less tangible problems.

As the occupants’ children age they may have four or five cars per house but, unlike the old detached house where yards were large, these are small and most cars must park on the streets which are often narrower than in old subdivisions.

And where does the caravan or power boat go?

And the ageing problem manifests itself in another form. Outer urban areas are monolithic providers of the detached house, but they have no diversity of dwelling type, which means that a single person or childless couple living in a McMansions in, say, twenty years time cannot trade across or down to a house size more suitable for their lifecycle stage.

Probably the most fundamental problem – although not exclusively one with McMansions, but more one that they are swept up in – is that the areas where they are built.

These are poorly provided with public transport, lacking services, facilities and employment opportunities. They are metaphorically “beyond the city walls”.

In addition to creating a diminution in wellbeing as petrol and utility prices soar over the years, the properties may take on even less value relative to those of the inner city and middle ring, more so as ageing of the population cuts in and this dwelling form becomes increasingly irrelevant to demographic and social needs.

The ability to move to areas of stronger labour markets and better amenity will be constrained and thus many residents will become trapped in space in two senses: internally in dwellings too big for their needs, and externally in environments poorly equipped for the times.