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Committee Secretary  
Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
AUSTRALIA

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Dear Committee

**RE: INQUIRY INTO SUSTAINABLE CITIES 2025**

In compiling this submission, I have chosen to respond to the Discussion Paper's opening comments, which I think address the basis on which we must found our future efforts for sustainability. While we are actually rich in ideas and design solutions, we lack the overarching framework on which to build the institutional and cultural commitment required to make these happen. This presents us with an ideal opportunity to articulate such a vision. As the Discussion Paper states,

The sustainable city of the future will integrate the built and natural environment. The sustainable city will assist in retaining the biodiversity of Australia, have a developed infrastructure that gives efficient and equitable access to services and utilities, preserve the essentials of the 'Australian lifestyle' and contribute to the economic wealth of the nation.

*This future vision will not be achieved without planning and without a clearly articulated strategy.*

The guidelines and practices of ecocity and urban ecological design address the integration of the natural and built environment, biodiversity concerns and issues of social equity and access. These design frameworks reflect a wealth of research, design philosophy, literature and practice currently addressing the issues tabled in the discussion paper, applying principles of ecological theory to the city as a broadscale ecosystem. Perhaps the most comprehensive integration of these design and conceptual issues is presented by the publications and developments surrounding urban ecology and ecocity design<sup>1</sup>. This is the framework guiding the Christie Walk development, documented by the Discussion Paper as a model for medium density development. The aim of this submission is not to elaborate these philosophies and practices, as the original authors do so with a thoroughness and passion that cannot be done justice to here, and I refer the Committee to those texts for detail.

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<sup>1</sup> see Register (2002); Todd and Todd (1994) and Engwicht (1992)

In brief, the long term vision of ecocity design is to move toward compact, integrated, nodal cities geared primarily for pedestrian and cycle access and linked by heavy and/or light rail, with increased green areas freed up between these centres. To facilitate this, mechanisms such as Transfer of Development Rights are proposed for freeing up areas of low density suburbia and/or industrial areas and relocating that development to more appropriate forms in more appropriate areas. Hence the intention is to increase the amount of green space while concentrating our urban centres into compact, appropriately designed forms. **This runs counter to the current dynamics of urban design in Australia and it is to the bridging of this difference that I will now turn.**

The Discussion Paper refers to the need to "preserve the essentials of the 'Australian lifestyle'". If we are to articulate a guiding vision for sustainable Australian cities, we need to critically and dynamically engage with what an Australian lifestyle is.

Historically, characteristics contributing to Australian culture have included the traditions of the Great Australian Dream and rugged individualism, as well as a great abiding love of beaches, the bush and outdoor living. The ecological realities of our continent and planet, are now bringing the first two into conflict with the very spaces we cherish and which make our nation unique. Australian society is constantly changing and our culture evolving and diversifying; the one thing which remains constant and unites us as Australians is the fact that we dwell in this physical landscape. It is possible therefore to establish a vision for this country which embraces and celebrates our love affair with nature as the basis for weaning ourselves off an outdated and inappropriate model of home and self. That is, it is possible through education, legislation and campaigning to steer the consciousness which has favoured and enshrined sprawl and the rights of the individual, into understanding that the protection of the rights of all of us to the unique areas Australia possesses, is a collective responsibility. So that this doesn't merely become a mechanism for berating homeowners, an overhaul of the encouragement and construction of the housing market and the urban form more broadly by government and industry is pivotal in this redress.

Further to this, Australian lifestyles to this point have been increasingly defined by gross levels of individualism, overconsumption and waste generation, and numerous studies have emerged revealing that unease and dissatisfaction with such ecologically exploitative and personally unfulfilling lifestyles, is growing. This suggests there is growing awareness that the things we value most about Australia may be threatened by our current modes of behaviour and development, and that it is not unrealistic to think strong and innovative leadership and co-ordination on these issues will be timely. It may be time to critically discuss our quality of life in its broadest sense and establish future visions for this country which enshrine the rights of all Australians to a clean, accessible and healthy environment.

In addition to the above, this consideration of the sustainability of Australian cities broadens the scope of the Inquiry in three ways: firstly, by establishing food production as an integral part of our urban spaces; secondly, by asserting that the affordability and accessibility of our cities are core components of the sustainability of these spaces and thirdly, by highlighting the need for critical engagement of with our economic systems. The former highlights a notable absence in the Discussion Paper, and a crucial factor to be incorporated if cities are to take responsibility for their ecological footprint. The incorporation of food growing spaces into cities has positive implications for economic self-determination, food security, health, welfare, land degradation (urban and rural), air quality, urban heat island effects, greenhouse gas emissions, water management, and myriad others. The second issue speaks of social sustainability and again is crucial to the sustainability of our cities. Currently housing and property speculation undermines both environmental and social sustainability and mechanisms must be sought which seek to curb this. Ecologically designed cities will not be sustainable if they move increasingly beyond the reach of low and moderate income households. This requires a broadening of our tenure base, a reconsideration of 50 years of policy effort reinforcing home ownership as the single preferred tenure option, and exploration of models such as co-operatives, dual mortgages and community land trusts, which seek to take the heat off

speculative markets and act as mechanisms for the embodiment of socially and environmentally sustainable housing. The third echoes the earlier discussion of Australian society as perhaps starting to move beyond materialism and overconsumption, which are currently key components of our economic system. Hence, as the Discussion Paper calls for sustainable cities to "contribute to the economic wealth of the nation", we must critically evaluate the premises upon which this wealth and our economy rests, as sustainably designed cities which act as components in locally, nationally and/or globally unsustainable markets will impact on the sustainability of other areas and may themselves be undermined by the unsustainability of broader market forces. This requires that we take a firm stand on maintaining principles of ecological and social sustainability in the face of pressure to remove barriers to free trade and grant unfettered market access; the market needs to be reminded of and bound by, its context.

In all, this Inquiry represents the opportunity to establish a coherent and bold vision for Australian cities which would embody sustainability in myriad forms. It would seem timely for strong leadership on these issues to come to the fore. I congratulate the Committee on its Terms of Reference and objectives, and wish the Committee all the best in its inquiry.

Sincerely,

Louise Crabtree

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#### **References**

Engwicht, D. (1992) *Towards an Ecocity: Calming the Traffic*. Envirobook, Sydney

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Todd, N. J. and Todd, J. (1994) *From Eco-Cities to Living Machines: Principles of Ecological Design*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, California