

New Zealanders are better able to use active transport and public transport, and can waste less time and fossil fuel on commuting when they are able to live at higher densities. They can also be happier and more productive if they can spend less of their money on housing. However higher density housing is severely restricted by the urban planning controls in place in most New Zealand cities. Higher density (and narrower sections) means less length of road is needed per property, transport distances are reduced, and active modes become more pleasant and practical.

Built form in most New Zealand cities is controlled by site coverage limits, boundary setbacks, height limits and sunlight access planes (also known as recession planes). These cause few problems for single storey suburban houses on large sections, but they drastically constrain making efficient use of small sections where higher density is desirable, and in these circumstances do not give any significant improvement in amenity.

The most damaging rules here are side boundary sunlight access planes, followed by side setbacks and height limits. The site coverage rules are generally less problematic. Side boundary sunlight access planes and setback lines prevent building terrace style houses of two or more stories, and on a narrow section mean that upper floors must be much narrower than the floor below, if they are practical at all. This means that for a given size of house the section must be larger, and garden space becomes a less affordable luxury. Without side setbacks and recession planes a simple two or three storey house, perhaps of 100 square metres with three bedrooms and good natural light may be built on a 100 square metre section (say 7.5 metres wide) and still have a pleasant back garden. There is almost nowhere where this done by an individual anywhere in New Zealand, though it is a common urban dwelling type throughout Europe, the Americas and a good bit of Asia as well.

In most of our cities terrace housing type densities and efficient land use can only practically be achieved by developers constructing large blocks of dwellings, giving themselves permission to breach the recession planes between properties, which is of course not an option for an individual family looking to construct their own home to meet their own needs. Developers of course have less incentive to design durable and energy efficient houses, and will tend to design to satisfy perceived norms and marketability rather than to meet the needs of individual residents.

Planning authorities in New Zealand need to be encouraged to develop different density control paradigms than those they are currently using to give people more choice of housing types, especially close to public transport hubs and urban nodes. This will need to include removing sunlight access planes and changing height limit and setback rules in places where higher density is desired, though for obvious reasons it will be politically difficult in places.

Planning authorities should also be encouraged to make it easier for people to separate car parking (including garaging) from residential properties, allowing garage blocks and parking spaces to be some distance from their associated dwelling, even when the development is not the work of one developer. This would mean that residential neighbourhoods could be built with cycle and footpaths to access the dwellings rather than roads sized for cars, reducing construction costs and space requirements. By effectively obliging residents to leave the house on foot or by bicycle, people will be less tempted to drive and more likely to use public transport or active transport modes.