

Don't knock 'great Aussie dream'

IT'S one of those great myths. That urban development is an economic, social and environmental burden on the community. The facts, however, are quite different.

Home ownership is incredibly important in this country. A home is much more than a place to live - it is a place to belong. Our homes reflect who we are and form a vital connection point in our lives for family, friends and, thanks to technology, the wider world.

Home ownership is also vital to our sense of wellbeing. It provides us with social, emotional and economic security and stability and beats renting hands down.

But how are people supposed to enter the housing market? Affordability is everything. Young people on low incomes must be given a realistic opportunity to purchase their own house or they'll be forced on to the rental merry-go-round forever.

And while it's all very well for professional people who live and work within a few kilometres of the city to criticise development on the fringe, that is where the affordable housing market is. And note I said "affordable" - not cheap.

Opponents of fringe development often use the environment as a reason to curb urban growth. However, those who advocate retaining our fringe

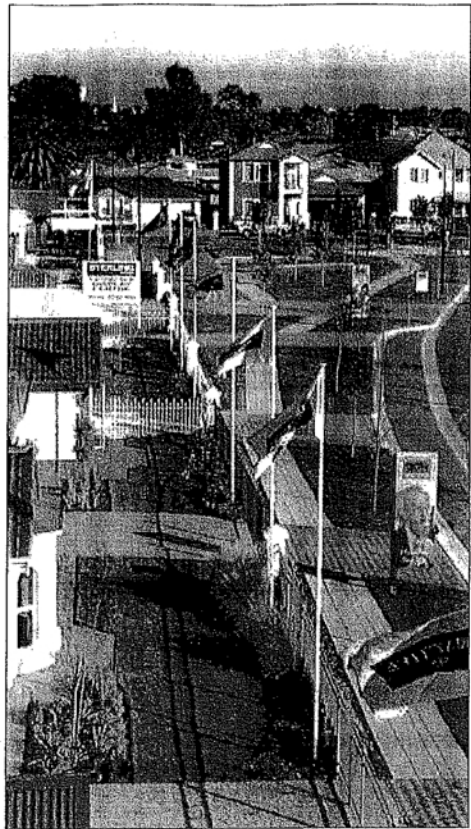
Bob



land as farms or market gardens or vineyards obviously have not considered the environmental benefits of housing. Unlike rural activity, housing estates do not use massive amounts of insecticides or pesticides or fertilisers. Householders also carefully place their sewage in pipes, unlike their four-legged friends which discharge their waste directly on to the ground and pollute the ground water. Another objection which is often raised is the cost of infrastructure.

However, a state parliamentary report a few years ago found that "the cost to the community of urban consolidation could actually be greater than fringe expansion because the cost of upgrading services in the inner suburbs is higher than building them new on the fringe".

In other words, replacing old water and sewer pipes and old electrical cables which were designed to accommodate "X" number of people per square kilometre to now cater for twice that number, is more expensive and more problem-



HOME, SWEET HOME: Much more than just a place to live.

atic than building brand-new services on the fringe. Modern lifestyles also put excessive pressure on inner suburban infrastructure that was never designed for the two-car, two-bathroom, dishwasher and fully automatic washing machine family.

Bear in mind also that new home buyers on the fringe pay hefty up-front contributions for their infrastructure in the price of every new block of land. The argument that fringe development creates a social gap between rich and poor is also flawed. The Berwick Report into lifestyles of the average fringe dweller revealed the following "startling results" (as the media put it):

□ 95 per cent of residents said they were very satisfied with their neighbourhoods.

□ 95 per cent had no concerns about air pollution.

□ 98 per cent said their streets were clean.

□ 88 per cent said they had good TV reception.

□ 82 per cent were satisfied with the amount of open space their children had to play in.

□ 85 per cent were satisfied with the number of trees in their neighbourhood.

The study even found that fringe dwellers smoked less than city dwellers.

One thing is very clear - the people who live on the fringe of our cities are not the people who live on the fringe of society. Somehow we have to get back into the public debate the truth about fringe development and its tremendous social and economic benefits.

Let's not fall into the trap of trying to design the people for the cities instead of the other way around. Australians will never become city dwellers like the Europeans or Middle Easterners. It's just not in us to live that way. A suburban house on a quarter-acre block for many people still represents their idea of "the Australian dream".

It's a great dream and a great life. Don't knock it.

□ **Bob Day builds homes around the country.**