

# Planning**News**

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## Does size matter?

### A discussion on apartment size

Nicola Smith MPIA CPP

Melbourne prides itself on the title of ‘world’s most liveable city’; however, with increasing demand for inner city addresses, coupled with a somewhat flexible approach to apartment codes, we now find ourselves faced with the prospect of smaller apartments, with minimal natural light and lack of landscape relief.

To respond to this, the State Government recently released a Discussion Paper on Better Apartments to which there has been a strong response within our industry. Thinking on this topic was prompted more than twelve months ago with initial research undertaken by the Office of the Victorian Government Architect (OVGA), loosely based on NSW’s comparable standards for apartments – SEPP65. At the same time, Niche Planning Studio was appointed by Stonnington City Council to investigate the issues surrounding amenity for apartments including the potential impact of imposing minimum unit sizes on new apartment buildings, specifically in rapidly growing precincts such as Forrest Hill, South Yarra. Key outcomes from our investigations are covered in this article and should be used to supplement further thinking in regard to the Better Apartments Discussion Paper.

### Increasing interest in apartment size requirements

With the introduction of the reformed Residential Zones and Plan Melbourne – Metropolitan Planning Strategy in 2014, interest in apartment design, specifically minimum unit sizes, and the impact on quality of life, has increased. In particular, the trend towards smaller dwelling sizes has brought the following key issues into focus:

- Inability to furnish small and poorly designed internal spaces
- Lack of sufficient storage space
- Introduction of single-aspect dwelling designs with generally poor natural light and ventilation provisions
- Over reliance on artificial lighting and ventilation
- Lack of adequate and useable private open space.

These issues have been successfully addressed in both interstate and international jurisdictions. Within Victoria we should be looking to these examples to provide us with policy guidance.

### International context

With growing population, changing family structure and more awareness of the impact of residential sprawl on the environment, apartment living has become increasingly common the world-over.

Two examples from Auckland NZ and Southwark Council UK highlight various situations where local government authorities have taken the lead on regulating or providing guidance on minimum unit sizes within high-density residential apartments, with great success.

Interestingly, a number of examples from more traditional apartment cities, such as Singapore, were also researched. In the majority of these cases it was found that a minimum apartment size was not regulated, resulting in poor quality apartments being provided at low market cost.

## Auckland Council, New Zealand

The amalgamated Auckland Council produced the Auckland Design Manual (‘the Manual’), which provides practical advice, best practice processes and detailed design guidance for new residential construction. The Manual provides a range of qualitative and quantitative measures for new unit buildings within the municipality, which seek to achieve high quality design and siting outcomes, including achieving minimum dwelling sizes. The Manual is a non-statutory resource that sits outside of the Planning Scheme, intended to allow for flexible adaptability to change and to engender greater engagement with the community.

With regards to minimum unit size, qualitative statements implicitly require a minimum floor area:

- *Allowing for sufficient space for standard sized beds;*
- *Providing enough storage for the full range of day-to-day items; and*
- *Providing a deck large enough for occupants to sit together around a table.*

In order to provide substance to these design statements, the manual also includes recommended minimum unit sizes:

Table 1: Auckland Council Design Manual

DWELLING TYPE	MINIMUM UNIT SIZE
Studio (up to two persons)	40m <sup>2</sup>
One bedroom unit s (two persons)	50m <sup>2</sup>
2 bedroom dwelling/unit (four persons)	75m <sup>2</sup>
3+ bedroom dwelling/unit (six persons)	100m <sup>2</sup>

The Auckland example offers a novel approach, wherein statutory requirements are supplemented through the use of a non-binding set of guidelines. The Design Manual is currently undergoing implementation and will likely undergo significant refinement in response to user input and practical built form outcomes.

## Southwark Council, United Kingdom

The Residential Design Standards Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) is a statutory document adopted by Southwark Council in September 2011 that assists development to achieve a high standard of residential amenity and design. In contrast to the Auckland Design Manual, the SPD is a material consideration for Council when assessing all new residential construction, providing a clear set of guidelines for applicants to achieve Core Strategies and Policy relating to built form outcomes.

Strategic Policy 7 of the Southwark Council Core Strategy highlights the ‘importance of ensuring that all new development is of a high quality with good living conditions’. Minimum floor area standards ensure that an ‘adequate amount of space is provided in residential development to achieve a pleasant and healthy living environment’.

Table 2: Southwark Council Residential Design Standards

DWELLING TYPE	MINIMUM UNIT SIZE
Studio	> 36m <sup>2</sup>
One Bedroom (average)	> 50m <sup>2</sup>
Two Bedrooms (average)	> 66m <sup>2</sup>
Three Bedrooms (average)	> 85m <sup>2</sup>
Four Bedrooms (average)	> 95m <sup>2</sup>

The Design Standards relate to numerous different classes of residential construction and provide guidance relating to dwelling mix, outdoor amenity space and residential amenity. The Design Standards also instruct new development to exceed minimum requirements, of which the Responsible Authority can approve variations. In order to receive a variation to the following standards, an applicant provides an Access and Design Statement that demonstrates the measures that have not been met, provides justification and shows strategies employed to compensate for any shortfalls.

## National context

Within Australia, each state has approached the issue of high density apartment design slightly differently, with nuances evident through variations in market forces, population and land use pressures.

Across the country, best practice can be drawn from NSW, SA and WA examples. The Better Apartment Discussion Paper refers to the NSW State Government control of minimum unit size through the *Residential Flat Design Code* and *State Environmental Planning Policy No. 65 – Design Quality of Residential Flat Development* (SEPP 65). These requirements were introduced into the NSW planning system over ten years ago and have resulted in a proliferation of apartments within the inner city area.

Further examples from WA and SA are also provided below highlighting the guiding role that a State Government can take in regulating minimum apartment size with varying degrees of local government input.

## South Australia (SA)

Urban planning within SA is conducted at the local level through local government specific Development Plans. These highly detailed documents utilise a framework of Objectives, Principles of Development Control, illustrative Design Techniques and diagrammatic explanations in order to guide the assessment of Planning Applications.

The City of Adelaide has sought to provide prescriptive standards relating to minimum unit sizes in medium to high scale residential development. Principle of Development Control 71 of the Development Plan indicates that higher density residential buildings should ‘provide a high quality living environment’, through the minimum internal floor areas outlined below.

**Table 3: City of Adelaide Minimum Unit Size**

DWELLING TYPE	MINIMUM UNIT SIZE
Studio (where there is no separate bedroom)	35m <sup>2</sup>
1 bedroom dwelling/unit	50m <sup>2</sup>
2 bedroom dwelling/unit	65m <sup>2</sup>
3+ bedroom dwelling/unit	80m <sup>2</sup> plus an additional 15m <sup>2</sup> for every additional bedroom over 3 bedrooms

These design techniques provide a quantitative or measureable performance standard that indicates how compliance with a Principle of Development Control may be achieved. It is important to note that these minimum areas are not mandatory, but are central to Council's assessment of a proposal's compliance with the Development Plan.

## Western Australia (WA)

Residential building design within WA is directed by Residential Design Codes (R-Codes), which are enacted through State

Planning Policy 3.1, pursuant to Part 3 of the *Planning and Development Act*, 2005. Although R-Codes are prepared at a State Government level, they are administered and applied by various local authorities and are subject to modification and exemption, through Ministerial approval.

Relevant R-Codes relating to minimum unit sizes have undergone significant refinement. The measures have altered from highly prescriptive, quantitative measurements dictated by site-specific density based zoning, to a broader suite of qualitative and design based standards relating to building envelopes, plot ratios, setbacks and amenity standards. These qualitative statements seek to influence minimum size without dictating an explicit figure, by directing new development to achieve high standards of amenity, internal access and layout. This approach has been adopted in response to a number of motivations, including increased reliance on allowing market forces to establish a minimum standard and a desire to avoid blanket adherence to minimum unit sizes, regardless of site and locality specific design considerations.

## Summary

A review of these international and national case studies highlights a number of key messages:

- Non-statutory guidelines that sit outside of the planning scheme (Auckland Design Manual) provide a novel approach to achieving minimum unit size that are able to adapt swiftly to change and user feedback; however, the lack of mandatory enforcement is a significant drawback
- Specific Local Government planning scheme controls (City of Adelaide Development Plan) achieve a high level of certainty and enforceability, however, are very rigid and slow to adapt to change
- Statutory reference documents produced at the Local Government level (Southwark Residential Design Standards) are able to respond to local site specific situations but would do well to sit within a state-wide framework
- Statutory reference documents and other policy measures enforced at a state-wide level (Western Australian R-Codes, NSW SEPP 65 and Residential Flat Design Code) have the ability to be adapted at the local level through more specific local policy or structure plans where required.

And in regard to whether size matters: preliminary research shows that in NSW and SA, a minimum unit size of 50m<sup>2</sup> for a one-bedroom unit with a separate bedroom is recommended as a guideline, but is not regulated. This minimum unit size for a one-bedroom unit has also been used as a control internationally within Auckland and Southwark Councils.

Quality design should not, however, be based solely on minimum unit size. Apartment design should instead depend on standards relating to the depth of rooms, provision of adequate ventilation, solar access, window placement and other such measures.

Based on international and national examples, we would guide the Government to include more qualitative assessments within the Scheme that would result in higher quality design apartments and improved liveability standards for new residential buildings within Victoria. ●

**Nicola Smith is Director of Niche Planning Studio and can be contacted at [planning@nicheplanningstudio.com.au](mailto:planning@nicheplanningstudio.com.au)**

