

new homes & land

US wakes up to issues

I have just returned from an industry delegation tour which included the US and wow, what an interesting time to be there.

The US is reeling from the economic crisis that has made a mockery of the country's finances.

But, as ironic as it may seem, I was actually impressed during my visit.

The last time I visited the US on a similar delegation with Victorian property developers was in the early 2000s. At that time, developers there had not heard of the words public transport, affordable/social housing or sustainable development.

However, in less than eight years, much of the development industry has woken up to these serious issues and is making lightning progress. Most residential projects we saw had bicycle tracks leading to railway stations and/or light rail where masses of bicycles could be seen. New light rail lines were being built into not only new communities, but established ones too.

The environment has finally come to the forefront of American thinking. Once it was every American's right to own



RORY'S RANT
by
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and drive a huge gas-guzzler, but today they are warming to smaller, more economical cars and have even embraced the 'hybrid' car.

Outdoors, they are using water sensitive urban design principles, and indoors, they have developed and incorporated what they call LEED certification, whereby buildings are rated either silver, gold or platinum depending on the level of water and energy savings. Examples are:

- On-site treatment of water and sewage for reuse in toilet flushing and gardens.
- Underground heat exchanges to heat and cool buildings and minimise the use of air-conditioning.
- Solar panels as window shutters for sustainable double use.

There is a total change of attitude by developers, architects, planners and residents. Americans have really embraced medium- to high-density living with some

fantastic examples of communities ranging from 40 to 100 dwellings to the hectare. These developments provide high-quality and fully landscaped open public space with minimal to no private open space (i.e no backyards). Interestingly, these projects would almost certainly not get permits in Australia, as our Rescode is so prescriptive in terms of overlooking (of neighbours) and private space requirements.

The upside of minimal fenced side and back yards is that streetscapes are attractive, easily maintained and encourage greater neighbourly interaction in the public open spaces.

The US has also progressed in its ideas on affordable/social housing with many projects having a percentage of affordable product mainly funded by grants and tax breaks. All these things are fantastic; it's just a shame that they haven't been able to do the same for their economy.