

a piece of paradise

Predictions about the movement of people from cities carry a powerful message for the building industry.

Graham Cooke reports.

There is plenty of vitality left in the sea change—tree change phenomenon, says demographer Bernard Salt, the man who identified the population shift away from the cities to the coast and rural areas.

‘The mid-point age for the Baby Boomers is currently 53 and most Australians retire at 58, so there are five years to go before we even get to the halfway point of the bulge,’ he says.

Even though a survey indicates that 68 per cent of the population would like to escape the rat race, it is the Boomers, at least for the immediate future, who will lead the drive for a more relaxed lifestyle away from the big cities.

They are the ones who, after a lifetime of work and with mortgages on expensive homes paid off, are contemplating being lulled to sleep by the sound of surf on the beach or relaxing amid bucolic tranquillity.

‘I think there are at least another 10 years before things begin to slow down, and I expect it to hype up even more before that from around 2010 to 2013,’ Bernard says. ‘The next few years are going to be dominated by the search for lifestyle living.’

Bernard’s predictions carry a powerful message for builders, developers and designers trying to ascertain the type and location of homes that are to be needed over the next decade, especially as he makes a sharp distinction between what will happen along the coast and in the rural hinterlands.

‘Sea change geography is definitive,’ he says. ‘There is a long, thin line along the coast and the aim is to be on that line. In addition to that, state governments and local authorities, especially in NSW and Victoria and now in south-east Queensland, are

Below: Demographer Bernard Salt.



Photo courtesy NexGen Constructions

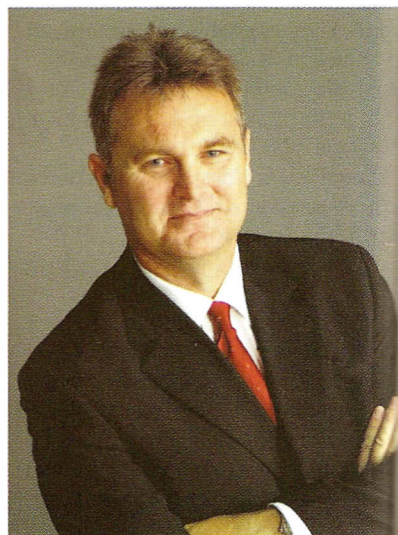




Photo courtesy Glencorp

beginning to guard their remaining undeveloped coastal spaces very jealously. That means housing is becoming more expensive and therefore less affordable.

‘For instance, the most recent real estate information coming out of Noosa suggests unit prices have come off the boil there by as much as 10 per cent. However, it’s probably just a case of the market over-shooting itself and needing a correction and won’t be significant for the medium to long term.’

The siren call of the sea means the search for the perfect piece of maritime paradise will continue. One aspect of this will be a trend towards high rises in the already busy areas as developers seek to satisfy demands for ocean views while complying with zoning requirements designed to protect the environment and prevent urban sprawl. Other sea changers will seek out less populated areas, with Northern Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia targeted in the years to come.

‘Not everyone will be retired and developments will have to have connectivity, that is, broadband access

and home office space, so that people can work from home while staying in touch with the office.’

Bernard says many people who revel in the thought of a cleaner, healthier environment, slower pace, cheaper prices and a sense of community away from the stress of city living, quickly realise that reality is a little different from the Pearl Bay of the ABC television series *Seachange*.

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‘They long for a simpler lifestyle yet they bring their big city values with them, and are shocked when they find the services they took for granted are either absent or of a lower standard,’ he says. ‘In order to accommodate them you find country town icons like the milk bar, a genuine remnant of old Australia, reinventing itself as a latte-producing café. Whether the newcomers

achieve the sense of community they desire is another matter.’

Tree changes need no specific location beyond that demanded by state and local authority zoning laws and as a result are unlikely to see the price inflation that is occurring on the coast. Bernard believes the favoured areas will be within easy commuting distance of cities with tree changers including a significant number of people in transition from work to retirement.

‘There won’t be the same emphasis on high density – you don’t need elevation, the views are all around,’ he says. ‘There will be a greater emphasis on buildings that blend into the environment with sympathetic colours and materials, as well as sustainability in terms of positioning on the block, use of solar energy and so on.’

A spin-off from tree change is the village green with homes grouped around an open space. Long neglected reserves in rural villages and small towns are being renovated to cater for this trend which is a direct borrowing from Western Europe. ‘It was never part of the Australian idiom but a common way of living in Europe whether it was the green, the piazza or the ▶

platz,' Bernard says. 'It's very recent – I don't think you could cite any examples of developments along these lines before the 1990s.'

The affordability crisis is cited as a significant reason for tree change, with areas within reasonable distance of major cities among the most sought after. Working from home is a priority although 100 per cent telecommuting is still rare.

'The idea that you can live in Alice Springs and hold down a high-powered

Winners and losers in the great migration

Using building approvals as a guide, HIA's Economics Group has identified population shifts in two states since the turn of the century.

NSW

Percentage of total building approvals DOWN

Sydney down 10 per cent to 54 per cent

Percentage of total building approvals UP

Hunter up 4.3 per cent to 13.4 per cent

Lismore/Richmond/Tweed up 1.7 per cent to 5 per cent

Tamworth/Armidale up 1.5 per cent to 2.6 per cent

Wagga Wagga/Murrumbidgee up 1 per cent to 2.4 per cent

Albury/Murray up 1.3 per cent to 2.6 per cent

Victoria

Percentage of total building approvals DOWN

Melbourne down 5 per cent to 72 per cent

Percentage of total building approvals UP

Morwell/Traralgon up 1.5 per cent to 4.8 per cent

Shepparton up 1.2 per cent to 4.6 per cent

Bendigo up 1 per cent to 3.8 per cent

HIA Chief Economist Harley Dale says actual numbers of population changes will be available from 2006 Census statistics by the end of the year.

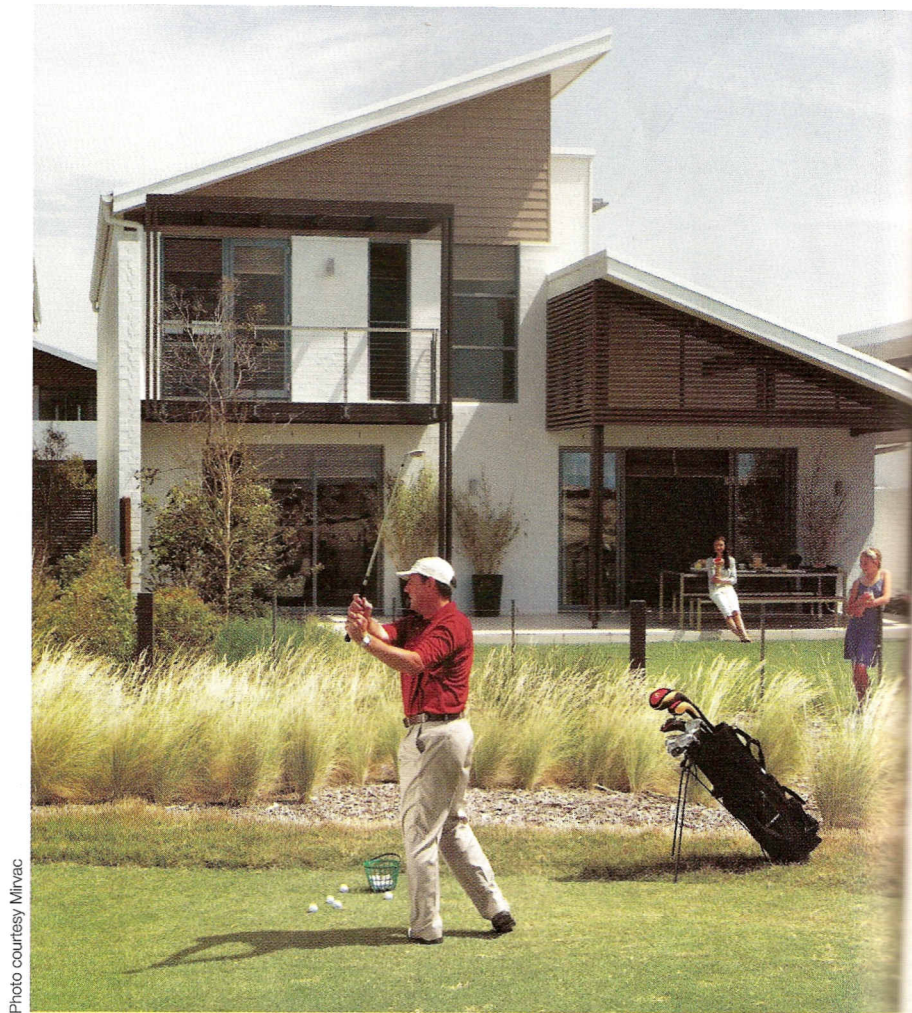


Photo courtesy Mirvac

job in Melbourne hasn't really come to reality, but for someone who is winding down from work, living two hours out of the city, telecommuting for two days and actually commuting on another is rather attractive.'

There is also a counter-cyclical trend of movement into the cities. While there have always been cases of retired farmers and others from remote areas moving closer to the services they may need in their 'golden years', this involves younger age groups looking for a lifestyle change. Bernard says they are often quite wealthy suburbanites who want to sample the vitality of inner city life before it is too late.

'They are typically empty-nesters who have spent their lives trapped in suburbia by early commitments to marriage and raising children,' Bernard says. 'Now in their middle age, with the kids off their hands, owning their homes with all the material assets such as plasma televisions, they don't feel they are ready for the slippers in front of the fire. People are healthier and living longer – they may be retiring from work, but they don't want to retire from life.'

'Kath and Kim from the television series would be prime candidates for this – selling the suburban hacienda and

taking an upmarket apartment close to the sophisticated nightclubs, theatres and restaurants they have been denied all these years.

'Docklands in Melbourne or South Bank in Brisbane will have their fair share of people doing exactly this. Having spoken to developers I have found people who move in this direction say they want to streamline their lives – it is an excuse to purge themselves of all the vast amounts of furniture and other possessions they have collected and to downsize, but at the same time reinvent themselves.'

'The next few years are going to be dominated by the search for lifestyle living'

The days when the family home was home for life have faded into history. A more mobile society means that older people are more likely to contemplate moves that are not out of necessity. Sea changes and tree changes are well-established trends that will dominate in years to come, but lifestyles and design change and the building industry must be ready to change with them. □