

# Beyond the backyard

As city house prices keep rising, homebuyers are turning to more affordable apartments and making the most of the convenient lifestyle. **STORY JOANNA TOVIA**

**M**ore than 2.5 million Australians already live in apartments, but a wider range of buyers are considering the move in the face of eye-watering real estate prices and a growing desire to live an easier life in a convenient location.

In Sydney, the median house value has already topped \$1.6 million. Although apartment prices are also rising, the median price in the NSW capital is a whole lot more affordable at \$796,000.

Price differentials are similar in Australia's other big cities. In Melbourne, the median house value is now more than \$1 million (apartments \$580,000). Brisbane is catching up, with apartments now costing a median of \$524,202 and houses \$888,285. Overall, houses in Australia's capital cities have a median value of \$1,094,539 and apartments \$638,372, according to CoreLogic.

Apartment living is being considered by growing numbers across the country, from young couples and retirees to parents with teenagers and young, single-parent families.

"The Australian dream of a quarter-acre block is dead, unfortunately," says

Samantha Reece, director of Australian Apartment Advocacy (AAA). "As housing becomes more expensive and families or downsizers don't have the time or desire to maintain large yards, they are turning their eyes to apartments."

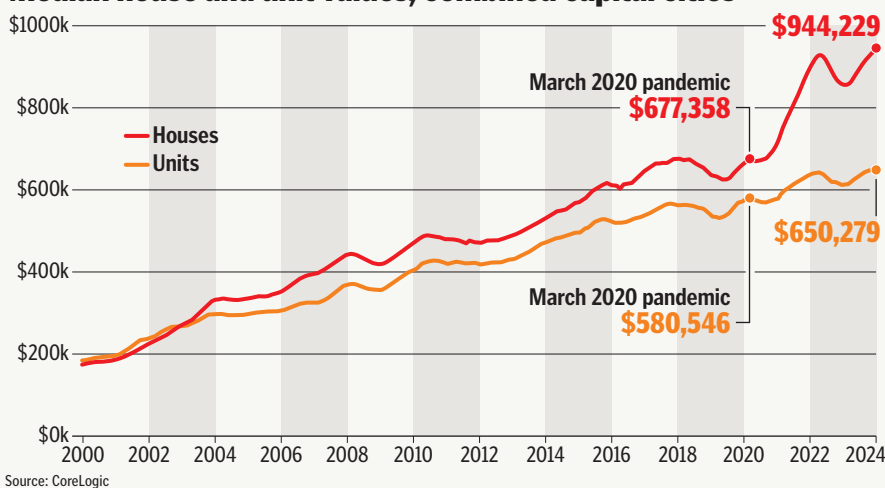
Before the 1990s, newly built blocks of flats tended to be just that – blocks. Balconies were small or non-existent and buildings lacked the amenities of more

modern constructions (gyms, common areas, gardens).

"These days, apartments offer a true lifestyle and there's nothing nicer than swimming in the pool and knowing you don't have to clean it," says Reece.

Convenience and lifestyle are two of the main reasons people want to live in apartments, according to a recent AAA survey of 3300 apartment dwellers. In fact,

**Median house and unit values, combined capital cities**







67% would choose an apartment over another type of property because they are looking for less maintenance. More than two-thirds of respondents were satisfied with their apartment (in NSW, 68% of owners would recommend apartment living to friends and family). Proximity to public transport, shops and cafes was high on the list of what they loved about it.

### Families are moving in

But just who is living in them? In NSW, 57% of owners are professionals and managers and 18% are retirees.

“Around 10% of Australian families live in apartments, but not enough is being done to accommodate this demographic,” says Reece. “In particular, we are seeing families with teenagers moving into apartments because then they can be in the catchment they desire for schools. This is especially so with single-parent families who are also time poor.”

She says families are seeking apartments with three or four bedrooms and amenities such as basketball courts, pools and games rooms that can serve as break-out spaces for the kids.

Other buyer preferences vary from small boutique blocks to high rises with views.

What everyone wants, however, is a place that makes them feel safe and offers them the lifestyle they’re seeking, says Reece. “Ideally they want to be close to shops, cafes, public transport and either parks, rivers, oceans or the CBD so they can fill their time with fun leisure activities.”

While location and proximity to lifestyle amenities matter, apartment design does too if you want to truly enjoy where you live.

Jimmy Thompson, design director at the architectural practice MJA Studio, says apartment living can be every bit as good as living in a house.

“A house is great because you have so much frontage and access to light with few neighbours, but the best of apartment projects do all of this and add a sense of security and opportunity for community that you don’t always get with a house. Plus, you often get a much better view.”

Light and aspect are vital when it comes to apartments, he says. “Even smaller-scale apartments can be imbued with a great sense of generosity when care is taken to ensure the quality of light is optimised.”

MJA Studio, based in Perth and Melbourne, designs multi-residential projects with an emphasis on natural light. “Wherever possible we create dual- and triple-aspect apartments where you have access to light on multiple sides,” says Thompson.

The best apartments give residents passive and active control of light access through screening and balcony overhangs to mitigate unwanted hot summer sun while allowing in winter sun.

“We all spend an inordinate amount of time within buildings, so as designers and architects it’s our responsibility to ensure that the buildings we create are full of positive spaces that support mental health and a sense of community,” says Thompson.

Spaces that prioritise access to natural light and ventilation do just that, as do apartment buildings that respond to their local context, heritage and environment. “They should also incorporate a sense of whimsy and delight,” he says.

### What to look for

When it comes to choosing an apartment, Thompson recommends thinking about what’s missing in your current home or ►



what annoys you about it, as well as how you want to live.

“Once you’ve established these criteria, it’s much easier to review your options against one another,” he says.

Along with considering natural light, ventilation and ceiling heights, Thompson suggests finding out whether or not low-volatile materials have been used inside. If not, the apartment could be harmful to your health.

“Pay special attention to the track history of the developer, architect and builder,” adds Thompson. “The proof is always in the pudding.”

Storage space, parking, soundproofing (can you hear people talking through the walls?), security and outdoor space are other considerations, along with a layout that flows and maximises living space.

If you’re into greenery, a balcony with a hose attachment to easily water your plants can also be a real bonus.

### Calculate the costs

Strata fees can add substantial costs to apartment ownership, so factor these in when you’re working out how much you can afford to borrow. These fees cover the cost of repairs and maintenance.

Although an apartment building that has a pool, gym and expansive common areas is appealing, keep in mind that owners will inevitably have to pay higher strata fees to maintain amenities like these.

The owners corporation or body corporate (the group of owners managing what gets spent on the building) will likely have set up a sinking fund to pay for repairs. If not, residents will have to pay out of pocket whenever renovations are needed. Check if there are any plans to carry out maintenance or renovations on the building before you sign on the dotted line.

It’s also smart to check if there are any legal proceedings under way in relation to the owners corporation. If there are, it could be a red flag that the apartment is being poorly managed.

Asking to see the owners corporation minutes from the last annual general meeting can give you a clearer understanding of the building’s history and how it’s being run.

### Buying off the plan

Being able to take your pick of apartments in a building that is yet to be constructed is one of the advantages of buying off the plan, and you may even be able to customise the floorplan. You can also secure the apartment purchase at a fixed price, allowing you to benefit from capital growth if properties go up in the area (the opposite will happen if prices fall).

AAA recommends checking how long the developer has been building apartments and recommends visiting their previous projects (get the lowdown on the building’s quality from the strata manager if you can). Conduct similar checks on the appointed builder.

NSW Fair Trading advises potential buyers to carefully check contract conditions and seek legal advice on the terms and restrictions it contains. It’s also crucial to understand what you become liable for if you withdraw from the contract and what you can do if there are building defects. ■

### Is apartment living right for you?

If you’re used to living in a house with a backyard and room to move, it can be quite an adjustment relocating to an apartment (not least working out what to do with all your belongings). Renting first is a good idea if you’ve never lived in an apartment – the reality can be quite different from what you imagined.

Samantha Reece, from Australian Apartment Advocacy, says it’s important to keep in mind that apartments have their own community, as with the more traditional neighbourhoods – it’s just vertical rather than horizontal.

Although buildings are being designed with better acoustics and resident comfort in mind, Reece says anyone considering living in an apartment needs to be tolerant, good at sharing and community minded.

“As with any community, it takes more than a building to create harmony – it is the members themselves who ensure positive relationships.”