

After Sprawl: Post-Suburban Sydney

Edited by Kay Anderson, Reena Dobson, Fiona Allon &
Brett Neilson

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Introduction: After Sprawl: Post-Suburban Sydney

Kay Anderson

Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney

The march of the suburban bungalow across the surface of Sydney's metropolitan landscape is – at the beginning of the 21st century – no less a feature of public commentary than it was 100 years ago in the *Royal Commission for the Improvement of Sydney and its Suburbs* (1909). In that report, suburbanisation was held out optimistically as the congested city's counter-ideal. It was the lynchpin of an urban reform agenda geared at low-density living, efficiency, physical and moral health, and family life. Nearly a century later, Sydney's Metropolitan Strategy (Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources, 2004) proposes solutions to the problem of a city (seemingly) without end. It predicts that over the next 25-30 years, Sydney's population will grow by around 40,000 people per year, much of it to be accommodated in existing suburbs, with the rest in new release developments, even 'edge cities' master-minded from scratch.

How are we to conceptualise the spatial order of contemporary Sydney? What models can describe its emergent forms? The conventional land use, land value and population density schema of 'zones' hailing from the Chicago School of Urban Sociology in the 1940s, are increasingly irrelevant and inaccurate. Images of concentric 'rings' of inner, middle, and outer suburb evoke a singular reference point and a false homogeneity of use, status and density. The detail of spatial patterning is significantly more complex. Right across the surface of the Sydney basin, we find that fragmented geographies of class, ethnicity, employment, investment, amenity, and accessibility are producing a highly differentiated landscape form and fabric. Like many other large metropolitan regions abroad, 'Sydney' cannot be conceived as a coherent entity with a binding mechanism linking all parts.

Take, as an example that will be elaborated in more detail throughout these e-proceedings, the region of Greater Western Sydney. Too often characterised as a region of unregulated 'sprawl' that is *residual* to rest of the city, Greater Western Sydney is more accurately conceived as its own dynamic space of population change and residential mobility, economic growth, and cultural innovation – one whose ethnic and religious diversity, class variation, mix of political allegiances, and forms of creative capital are unthinkable through the lens of 1950s 'white suburban dreaming'. This was the Australian version of an ideology circulating in many settings in the western world (eg. on US cities, see Jackson, 1987), that depicted white nuclear families living in areas that were far from their workplaces, in homes they owned, boasting yards or gardens that by urban standards were large.

The vista of urban spatial pattern offered via the satellite map and the vantage point of the aeroplane pilot – of Sydney and cities more generally – communicates little about the dynamics of lived experience that have interested urban phenomenologists for decades (eg. Firey, 1945; Suttles, 1968; Ley, 1983; Jackson, 1989; Miles and Hall, 2000). There, at ground level, a multitude of questions arise about the characteristics and everyday worlds of *urbanism* and *suburbanism*.

Taking the latter, which is the key substantive interest of this collection of essays, our focus on Sydney brings some more general analytical and internationally-relevant questions into view: is 21st century suburbanism a mode of city living with its own set of defining cultural and landscape values? Was it ever – including for the postwar US suburbanites that urban historian Lewis Mumford (1961: 63) so disparagingly indicted as ‘conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold’ – so anonymous and unified a cultural formation? Can the noun *sub-urb* ever shed Mumford’s images of subordination, ones which hark back to the origins of the term as a reference to the inhabitants of the slums that ringed medieval London (Fishman, 1987)? In the Australian context, some commentators have described suburbia as the dominant ‘mode of occupying’ the continent (Ferber, Healy and McAuliffe, 1994). In Australia, too, was this human habitus ever so fixed a set of attributes and experiences? By today, for example, is low density housing in Australian cities *necessarily* associated with ‘unsustainable’ living and privatised forms of community on the US model of self-governing enclaves? Provoking such questions is to suggest, at least we hope, that today’s ‘suburbia’ might be as restless, even chaotic, a concept as the urban frontier itself.

Revising a Metropolitan Geography: The Rise of ‘Critical Suburban Studies’

The symposium, whose presentations appear in these refereed e-proceedings, was designed to advance the formulation of the complex cultural configuration we are calling ‘Post-Suburban Sydney’. Although Sydney’s Central Business District (and so-called Global Arc, from Macquarie Park to Botany Bay) may still be Sydney’s pivotal employment and investment ‘engine’, significant *emergent* landscapes and processes characterise contemporary Sydney and invite retheorisation against the prevailing global city discourse that trades in all-too-familiar images of the Opera House, the Harbour Bridge and Centrepoint Tower (see McNeil, Dowling and Fagan, 2006). Such a discourse tends to conflate Sydney to that ‘harbour city’ which even Hugh Stretton (1970) in his call for low-density living some decades ago could not resist calling ‘magical’. It is against this discourse, or at least in productive dialogue with it, that we envisaged this intervention – a city re-branding exercise of sorts that entails not only rewriting the suburbs in the vein of many useful critiques of anti-suburbanism (eg. Ferber, Healy & McAuliffe, 1994; Gilbert, 1988; Rowse, 1978; Schultz, 2004). Our ‘provocation’ also works against a city-centric geography whose mode of differentiation presumes a right to position itself and its suburbs in the very scripting of the city.

Our effort is one that seeks to foreground the possibly less spectacular, but no less complex and dynamic Sydneys that gather together under that name; the other Sydneys beyond the harbour city which can no longer, if they ever could be, read as the standard bearers of the ‘white picket fence ideal’, marooned out there as bedroom adjuncts to the city core. In the case of Greater Western Sydney we know too well that this homogenising tendency has also been accompanied by forms of stigmatisation that are intractably difficult to budge (Powell, 1993; Dowling and Mee, 2000). This complacent denial of urban cultural complexity continues, for example, in media depictions a few years ago of what ‘the terrace-owing classes’ derisively dubbed the ‘McMansion’ – the plot-hungry, homes of western Sydney’s so-called aspirational classes. More recently, a 2005 *Sydney Morning Herald* story about some major arts exhibitions in Western Sydney had as its driving narrative a sense of intrigue at innovative activity in the midst of that ‘cultural wasteland’, to use the piece’s own words (MacDonald, 2005: 28-9). Only

against the stereotypical image of the western suburbs as an endless flatland of fibro homes and fringe dwellers does such an account derive its own coherence and logic.

We conference organisers at the University of Western Sydney's Centre for Cultural Research have for some time thought that this stubbornly binary discourse of 'us/them', 'inner/outer', familiar/foreign, has yet to register the impact and significance of the important transformations restructuring Sydney's urban and suburban landscapes. Such restructurings, operating variously across multiple scales, have shaped Sydney's form and growth for 200 years since 'settlement' (Daly, 1982; Spearritt, 2000). Just as one generation's suburb is a subsequent generation's gentrified precinct, a historical sensitivity also reminds us here that for centuries, the entire Sydney Metropolitan Region has been criss-crossed by indigenous cartographics of presence and possession that derange any neat spatial (and colonial) coordinates of 'inner' and 'outer'. Coming forward to the present, in the language of the new urbanism, areas of Sydney both central and peripheral - ranging across Kings Cross, the city of Ryde, St Mary's, and the new edge city of Bringelly, are planned to house dense built forms or 'urban villages' alongside more detached housing and purpose-built spaces of urban nature. Low and high density forms increasingly co-exist in both inner and outer Sydney, dissolving oppositions of compactness *vs.* sprawl, and conceptions of radially arranged 'rings', into a polycentric 'patchwork quilt' of 'postmodern urbanism' (Gibson & Watson, 1994; Watson & Gibson, 1995; Dear, 2000; Soja, 2000) that is the characteristic feature of the 21st century urban realm.

In the Western Sydney case, the pejorative, homogenising associations of 'the suburban' increasingly belie a range of complexities. In the spirit of a 'critical suburban studies' agenda (for example, in England, we note that the university at Kingston-upon-Thames has a new Suburban Studies Centre), and, in the US, revisionist suburban historians (who, for example, increasingly acknowledge the role of African-Americans and ethnic minorities in the history of suburbanisation in that country, see eg. Sugrue and Kruse, 2006; Lassiter, 2005), we list the following restructurings in the case of Western Sydney:

- its increasingly elaborate ethnic and religious diversities and cosmopolitan worlds, forged often by young, second and third generation 'immigrants' (eg. Poynting, Noble et al., 2004; Butcher, 2003; Poynting and Collins, 2000; Collins and Castillo, 1998);
- its highly differentiated family and household forms against the national backdrop of decreasing household size, an ageing population, and increasingly mixed male and female labour force statuses that do themselves explode the dichotomised conceptions of 'feminised' suburb *vs.* 'masculinised' city (Murphy & Watson, 1997: chap 6);
- Western Sydney's volatile voting patterns, such that Greater Western Sydney is no longer, uniformly, a stable Labor heartland in federal politics (Burchell, 2003);
- the growing socio-economic disparities between the poor, middle west 'old economy' suburbs, and the more affluent new release areas on the fringe (Randolph, 2004);
- forms of creative industry and cultural/technological production that carry on a long regional tradition of arts-based activism (Lee Shoy, 2005); and
- finally here, multiple indigenous communities whose ancestors once occupied our conference site at Parramatta – a city that became Sydney's first major colonial centre and by today is Sydney's geographic heart and third largest business district.

These suburban transformations repay more attention in international cultural and social theory and commentary on megacities, with its rather obsessive focus on the Los Angeles

conurbation. That city, with its variously called ‘edge cities’ (Garreau, 1991), ‘technoburbs’, ‘silicon landscapes’, and ‘cyburbias’ in Ed Soja’s (2000) words and others writing on the new social formation at Orange County some years ago in *Post-suburban California* (Kling, Olin and Poster, 1995), has many international parallels. These include the Greater Sydney Metropolitan Region of some 4-5 million residents, where the global economy is reconfiguring the relations not only among its key centres, but along the entire eastern seaboard of New South Wales. Indeed, the ‘reterritorialisation’ of this increasingly urbanised coastal stretch is itself a study in the multiscale geographies of globalisation and governance (O’Neill and McGuirk 2005). In 2006, the NSW government released six ‘city plans’ for a regional network of centres, taking in Wollongong (to the south), Liverpool, Parramatta and Penrith (in Western Sydney) and Gosford and Newcastle (to the north) (Johnson, 2006). Modelled on the likes of the groupings of cities in Europe around Basel, Zurich, Bern, Lausanne and Geneva – groupings that are increasingly networked by commuter travel and media ranges that defy political boundaries and topography – we are witnessing a ‘recombinant urbanism’ (Shane, 2005) in many parts of the urbanised world. In the Netherlands, it is as if Holland itself has become a ‘city’ so increasingly dense and networked are its regional centres (see Bontje, 2004).

Our intervention is thus intended to unsettle persistent popular imaginings and to advance academic commentary about Sydney’s 21st century urban form, figuration, and future. Neither uncritically anti-city nor pro-suburb; neither *against* (former Mayor) Frank Sartor’s inner city, nor *for* (former federal Opposition leader) Mark Latham’s suburbs (2003); neither for, or against, sprawl, our mix of scholarship and advocacy aims to ‘productively complicate’ prevailing understandings of Sydney. Our point of departure is that both critics of Australian suburbs (suburbs are soulless, banal, politically insular, fearful, reactionary, environmentally indulgent, consumerist and above all, ugly, enactments of the Great Australian Dream) and defenders of suburbs (suburbs are, variously, spaces of democratic achievement, privacy, and moral and physical health) could benefit from more fully registering the *heterogeneity* and *complexity* of the suburban environments or ‘heartlands’ in Gleeson’s (2006) words, where some 70% of Australians now live (Davison, 2005). The need to do so, and to break with overly polarised readings of city and suburb, is pressing when we acknowledge that despite or, more precisely, *in conjunction with* the rapid growth of non-nuclear family forms and cultural diversity in Australian cities, suburban aspirations remain strong (Troy, 2003; Wulff et. al., 2004; Salt, 2001; www.sos.org.au; and on Melbourne, see O’Connor, 1999).

Beyond this conceptual agenda, there is additional relevance in our ‘post-suburban’ paradigm for Sydney at a time when one million extra people are predicted to require accommodation over the next 30 years (DIPNR, 2004). And while our emphasis here is the ever-changing *cultural* dynamics of contemporary Sydney - not sub/urbanism in all its economic, social, political, administrative, and environmental dimensions - there are some relevant public policy-hooks to a venture that attempts to bring a broader regional perspective to the dominant ‘global Sydney’ discourse embraced by urban tourists and theoreticians alike.

After Sprawl

In the spirit of a post-suburban vision of Sydney, a Growth Centre strategy has been devised by the New South Wales State Government for the regional development of

Sydney's dispersed key centres (of Sydney, Parramatta, Liverpool, Blacktown, Bankstown and Penrith). The 'City of Cities' initiative seeks to diversify the metropolitan geography handed to the Growth Centres Commission. It has its variants, too, such that a recently released 25-year plan for '5 river cities' envisages decentralised nodes at North Sydney, Sydney, Parramatta, Liverpool and Penrith (Johnson, 2006). But it is an agenda that is prone to hijack by over-general languages of 'urban sprawl' that like to invoke images of a marching suburban bungalow devouring habitat and community in its relentless and inevitable path.

The assumption that Australian cities can only begin on a transition to 'sustainability' by first rejecting suburban ideals in favour of new forms of low-density urbanism remains widespread within urban environmental discourses (Davison, 2005). This is also the case beyond Australia, registering once again the international relevance of the 'post-suburban paradigm' advanced in this project. Take, for example, American critic Dolores Hayden, whose *Field Guide to Sprawl* (2004) describes 'the visual culture of sprawl' as the 'material representation of a political economy organised around unsustainable growth'. Here, contemptuous views of American suburbia flow into, and accrue to themselves, renewed strength from equally bleak readings of suburbanisation's environmental impact. Jane Jacobs lamented that the 'sprawling suburbs' that characterized post-war American urban planning facilitated *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). For Jacobs, suburbanisation discouraged the economic and social vitality she saw as springing 'organically' from neighbourhoods. Such a dim reading of fringe growth tends today to feed more environmentally-driven critiques of urban expansion, in the likes of the recent Johnson and Klemen's *Nature in Fragments: The Legacy of Sprawl* (2005). Conversely, in the Australian case, an elitist and equally uncritical stereotype of inner city urbanity as a *gemeinschaft* realm of educated environmental and community awareness, underpins a prejudice about 'sprawling suburbs' that is intractably difficult to budge.

In the scripting of culture and nature at the heart of scornful readings of urban growth, city expansion is taken to signal the end, rather than transformation, of nature. The spread of the city is read in terms of a false figure of raw nature (see the critiques of Cronon, 1992; Hinchliffe, 2004 and in the Australian suburban context, Hogan, 2003). In the views of some environmentalists advocating urban consolidation, suburbanisation is seen as antagonistic to sustainability. It is assumed in some unspecified way to be inherently unviable in ways rural and urban forms of life are not (eg. Newman & Kenworthy, 1999). But simplistic languages of 'sustainability' and 'sprawl', seductive as they are for depicting ever-more dispersed cities like Sydney and Los Angeles with their increasingly stressed infrastructures, tend to dismiss the potentialities of new suburban forms, imaginaries, and governance structures. 'Sprawl' overwrites existing suburbs as if they are just larger versions of what went before. The language stifles the energy urgently needed to better network, retrofit, and manage the 'mosaic of cities' that Sydney already is. Such a task need not avert attention from the urgent environmental challenges of urban growth's 'fossil fuel yoke' (see Droege, below). But it does build on the recognition of a differentiated and cosmopolitan suburbia that has the capacity to be part of the solution more so than the problem.

Our conference, with its mix of sponsors, and invited presentations from across industry, practitioner and academic sectors (the latter of which is itself a highly interdisciplinary mix), was intended to foster an engagement with 'the Sydney sub/urban', conceived in its many complex and everyday ways. That the theme of 'the post-suburban' resounds nationally and internationally is underlined by the vigour of the 'urban sprawl' debate

well beyond Australian cities (and by the international and national refereeing of the following papers). We would like to express in writing here our thanks to the University of Western Sydney, Parramatta City Council, and Delfin Lend Lease for the assistance that made this intervention possible. The conference committee and editors of these proceedings would also like to thank the three anonymous referees – including an internationally-based one – for their time and efforts in blind peer-reviewing the papers. The result, we trust, will help promote knowledge transfers among theoreticians, planners, researchers, and other stakeholders regarding the complex dis/unity of metropolitan forms characterising contemporary Sydney.

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