

Post-Suburban Sydney: Concluding Remarks

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Is it possible, at the present juncture, to give a positive definition to the complex transformations affecting the city of Sydney? The title of the conference from which the current collection of papers springs, 'Postsuburban Sydney: The City in Transformation', suggests the difficulty of answering this question in anything but elusive terms. A never-accomplished transformation seems the only way to grasp the present condition of the metropolis. We seem to live in a 'post' time: postmodern, postcolonial, post-Fordist and now, when it comes to questions of the city, postsuburban. Let us admit the awkwardness of this term, which, as many of the contributors to this volume note, was initially coined by US cultural geographers and critical theorists to describe the complex transformations of Southern California's Orange County in the 1990s (Kling, Olin and Poster, 1995).

Far from suggesting the possibility of blindly transporting West Coast US modes of analysis to Australia's Eastern seaboard, the impetus behind the use of the word postsuburban was provocative and highly contextual. In other words, the accent was as much upon the Sydney as the postsuburban, with the two terms understood to interact and turn upon each other in complex ways. Above all, the term postsuburban seemed to suggest a way of shifting the debate surrounding Sydney's urban development beyond entrenched perspectives, either pro- or anti-suburban. It also promised to question the persistence of equally entrenched centre/periphery or east/west divides, not only in urban planning and public policy discourses but also in everyday talk about the city. One register of the success of this strategy was the proliferation of new and inventive terms that conference participants introduced to describe the changing socio-spatial terrain of Sydney: castellisation, defiant centres, fossilisation, territories of insurgency, just to name a few. Without ever congealing into a coherent 'school of thought,' this multiplication of terms suggested that imported concepts are not fully adequate for the task of analysis at hand and marked the possibility, if not the need, for the invention of new concepts and terms of analysis.

Although not specifically announced in any single paper, there was a cumulative emphasis on the combined local effects of two powerful imported schools of thought about the contemporary city. Let us call them for convenience 'the global city' and 'the creative city'. Associated respectively with the names of Saskia Sassen and Richard Florida, these approaches have different trajectories of influence. Sassen's notion of the global city, developed most fully in her 1991 book of that name, began to impact upon academic analyses of Sydney's transformation in the early 1990s. Emphasising at once the role of the city as a node in the global network of finance capitalism and its concentrated cultural diversity, the influence of Sassen's work became evident in texts such as Katherine Gibson and Sophie Watson's edited volume *Metropolis Now* (1994). By 1996, the term had begun to circulate in policy discourses, for instance in the NSW Planning publication *Sydney as a Global City*. By contrast, Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) had a more immediate impact in policy circles. While its uptake among academics was much cooler (see Frow, 2004), the book was touted by the

NSW Deputy Premier (Refshauge, 2003) and taken up by local governments not only in Sydney but also in other Australian cities. Florida's correlation of urban economic prosperity with the rise of 'creative industries' won him a high profile visit to Sydney in 2004 (sponsored by the Sydney City Council, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the Year of the Built Environment). It is no exaggeration to say that, in combination with Sassen's notion of the global city, Florida's self-styled cross of academic argument and business consultancy currently exercises a powerful influence on policy directions for Sydney's urban development.

One consequence of this convergence of the notions of the global city and the creative city has been the reinforcement of entrenched centre/periphery or east/west distinctions in both official and popular discourses about Sydney (McNeill, Dowling and Fagan, 2005). One index of this is the persistence of the notion of Sydney's *global arc*, a socio-spatial construct first introduced in a 2001 report by National Economics and subsequently enshrined in the NSW Government's Metropolitan Strategy (2004). Stretching from Macquarie Park in the north through St Leonards and the CBD to Port Botany in the south, this curve-like construct passes through vast sections of the city's east and purportedly contains nearly a quarter of all Sydney's jobs and half of the region's professional jobs. While the construct obviously attempts to provide a simple graphic representation of empirically complex social phenomena, it does register the extent to which claims for Sydney's status as a global and/or creative city fail to escape time-honoured notions that divide the city according to social distinctions, cultural capital and electoral behaviour.

In seeking to question this divide and provide a more nuanced account of Sydney's complex disunity, the papers collected above seek not only to document transformations that have occurred in Sydney's suburbs but also to question the ongoing utility of traditional centre/periphery divides in understanding the challenges for the city's future development. By way of conclusion, I wish to identify five distinct themes that stream through these discussions. In practice these are always complexly interweaved, but there is a heuristic benefit to parsing them apart if only because it allows the identification of key issues that must continue to be discussed if Sydney's transformations are to be understood in an appropriately holistic and multifaceted manner.

1. One key characteristic of postsuburban Sydney is its cosmopolitan cultural diversity. Contrary to those arguments that correlate a high degree of cultural diversity with global economic performance, it is the traditionally poorer region of Western Sydney that boasts Australia's highest concentration of cultural diversity. This can be conceived as a cosmopolitanism-from-below which, to be understood in its everyday complexity, requires fine-grained qualitative research. Approaching the Sydney suburb as a site of cosmopolitan diversity turns the familiar discourses that associate the city's globality with its historical centre on their head. From this perspective, suburbia itself becomes a site of dense global connections, marked by the passage of flows associated with its variously overlapping diasporic communities. Whether such cosmopolitan diversity can be understood as a peculiarly urbanised version of a wider Australian multiculturalism or whether its analysis requires a more extensive transnational view (which implicitly questions the applicability of national, nationalised and/or nationalist categories to on-the-ground instances of cross-cultural interaction) remains a pressing issue. This is particularly the case at a time when Australia is a willing participant in wider global conflicts that, as evidenced by the Cronulla 'riots' of December 2005, impact upon its

internal racial dynamics and the various issues of border control and labour market transformation associated with them (Mitropoulos 2006).

2. If creativity is an important aspect of urban development, how is it to be understood or positioned with respect to the communities that inhabit the city? The ubiquity of the term community, not only in academic and policy discourses but also in everyday discussions about the city (particularly in the print and broadcast media), should not obscure the difficulty of understanding this concept or the uses to which it is put. While often understood as a warm and fuzzy word invoking notions of human togetherness or interdependency, community is also a unitary and exclusive category that pins subjects to identities (whether encoded in formal citizenship or not) and acts as a blunt conceptual instrument for capturing the multiplicity of potential relations and forms of collectivity possible in the contemporary city. What does it mean that community is at once the fragile entity promoted by practitioners of 'community cultural development' and the scarce commodity marketed by the developers of master planned suburban estates? Furthermore, how are we to understand the significance of communities in the postsuburban environment vis-à-vis the growing social power of networks, another form of human collectivity that does not imply membership, entails unstable patterns of involvement, and poses problems of sustainability?

3. What is the place of the aesthetic in discussions about postsuburban Sydney and how can this concept be mobilised without falling into stereotypical characterisations of the ugliness of suburban architecture, McMansions, and so on? While typically (at least since the days of Kant) the aesthetic has been understood as a disinterested category that stands in negative relation to matters of social and cultural concern, there remains a problem as to how aesthetic judgements can be understood with respect to wider questions of value, both in the cultural and economic senses (Karatani 2005). This is a particularly sharp issue in the postsuburban context where criticism of supposedly homogeneous suburban environments on the part of inner city inhabitants is matched by suburban hostility to the perceived pretentiousness of metropolitan lifestyles, again conceived homogeneously and reduced to icons such as the *caffè latte*. If we are to avoid the return to centre/periphery divides in this regard, there is a need to move beyond approaches that conceive the aesthetic solely as a matter of individual taste or class distinction. This means understanding questions of urban form, planning and design not only in terms of poetics but also in relation to the complex social and cultural formation of aesthetic judgements.

4. The question of the ecological sustainability of suburban lifestyles is a global issue with distinct local ramifications. In the Sydney context, these environmental factors pose many challenges, among the most pressing being the need for water conservation, the need to reduce the reliance on fossil fuels, and the benefits of medium density housing. One barrier in the realisation of these ends is the ongoing preference of many Australians for suburban lifestyles based on the low density quarter acre lot (with water-using backyard and/or garden) and the internal combustion engine. There is an urgent need to conceive of means to achieve environmentally beneficial outcomes in ways that do not involve the complete subordination of cultural issues to imperatives understood as wholly natural. Attempts to lecture suburban dwellers about the negative effects of their lifestyles or to negatively enforce environmentally beneficial practices upon them have, in any case, proved unsuccessful (at least in the long run). There is a need to conceive of measures, such as 'cultural impact statements', that might integrate more complex

understandings of the nature/culture relationship into ongoing planning and/or legislative efforts to improve Sydney's postsuburban ecology.

5. Housing affordability remains a consistent problem in Sydney. While clearly an economic and social issue, this situation also has important cultural dimensions that pierce to the heart of contemporary Australian political subjectivity. In her contribution to this collection of essays, Fiona Allon invokes an ongoing theme in modern political philosophy with the claim that home ownership in Sydney has become the very condition of citizenship, the passport to being considered a worthy and fully contributing member of society. This claim acquires particular relevance with respect to the history of landed property in Australia and especially the legal fiction of *terra nullius* that formed the basis of the colonial possession of the continent. From the first days of colonisation, there were distinct anxieties about the possibility of asserting political control over a land deemed to be empty, godless, and unsusceptible to the kind of cultivation that, most clearly in the writings of John Locke, provided the basis for landed property and sovereign possession. For this reason, the peculiar relation between property ownership and citizenship in postsuburban Sydney needs to be understood not only in relation to the 'interest rate subjectivity' that emerged as a decisive factor in the 2004 election but also with respect to the dual histories of settler and Indigenous communities. In this regard, it is salutary to recall Theodor Adorno's gloss on Nietzsche's famous comment that he considered himself lucky not to be a home owner: 'Today we should have to add: it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home' (1997: 38-39).

While each of these themes could warrant lengthy exploration and exposition, it is in their complex combination that the lineaments of a distinctive approach to contemporary urban form in Sydney begin to emerge. The need to develop further such an approach stems not from the desire to circulate a viable academic commodity within the growing international literature on global cities (or creative cities for that matter) but from the need to confront urgent cultural and political problems on the ground. The essays collected here mark only the beginning of such a project. The real work must be reserved for another place and time.

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