

# Suburbs for Sale: Buying and Selling the Great Australian Dream

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## Introduction

In January 2005, a so-called ‘cultural terrorist’ group from western Sydney released a manifesto announcing its plan to wreak havoc and revenge on the building of oversized homes on standard blocks of land. The houses they planned to target are of course those that have been dubbed ‘McMansions’: large, two or sometimes even three storey houses with double or triple garages, often designed with ‘themed façades’ such as Regency, Georgian, Federation, Tuscan and Colorado, and mostly associated with the new housing developments in Sydney’s west. Over the last few years, this particular style of domestic suburban architecture has been the focus of a veritable archive of social commentary. The tone of this archive is generally and uniformly similar (this is also the charge levelled against the houses) alternating between scorn and condescension, condemnation and a shrill derision.

The manifesto released by ‘The United People’s Front of Macarthur’ (which apparently borrows its name from a left-wing Nepalese liberation movement) is a surprising and curious cultural artefact in itself and it’s worth quoting from it at length. The manifesto outlines the group’s plan to ‘destroy the existing offending suburbs and dwellings’. It states:

We believe that all human beings carry with them the potential to live harmoniously together without imposed authority. We regard planners and politicians as dangerous animals or worse ... mechanised robots bent on destruction and personal power. We believe that sufficient wealth and technological know-how exists in the world today to provide a happy life for all people and that does not require them to live one meter apart, live in homes that all look the same and that are all the same colour and live in homes where backyards cannot accommodate a Hills hoist (sic) (Cumming 2005).

The group also announced that it was particularly concerned about many of the new housing developments on Sydney’s western fringe, especially those that were seen as ‘an attempt to maximise revenue, rather than an exercise in building sustainable and harmonious communities’. But, in this sense, ‘The United People’s Front of Macarthur’ is not alone. In fact it has much in common with other ‘grassroots’ groups that have been formed recently with the explicit aim of resisting higher-density development in suburban areas. The *Save our Suburbs* movement, for example—formed to contest current metropolitan planning and development strategies favouring dual occupancies, and high and medium density building policies—has also attracted considerable attention and support. These groups defend the character of suburban residential areas and local communities, and invoke the low-density suburban housing model as the ideal form for the Australian *way of life*. Their attacks are not only directed at the building of flats and units in *traditional* suburbs, but also at the new suburban residential locations which are developing in the middle and outer parts of Australia’s metropolitan areas and which

combine medium and sometimes high-density development with the growth of suburban economies and business clusters.

Yet the interests of these groups also intersect with another long line of critique condemning ‘McMansion Land’ and the hyper-consumerist way of life that many have identified as synonymous with suburban sprawl in Sydney, and the western suburbs in particular. In the last couple of years, for example, a series of newspaper articles has addressed what is being called ‘the new suburbia’ found in these areas (see eg Hawley, 2003). The phrase ‘new suburbia’ has been used to describe a particular combination of affluence, consumerism, and conservative, family-oriented low-density suburban living reflected in the many new housing estates currently being rapidly established on the city’s periphery. These articles focus more often than not on what have been termed the ‘new’ or ‘aspirational’ suburbs of outer Sydney (suburbs such as Kellyville, Baulkham Hills, Castle Hill and Macarthur), and they lament the continued decentralised urbanisation of western Sydney—the so-called *problem of sprawl*—and the symbols of conspicuous consumption, such as McMansions, on display.

At first glance, ‘the new suburbia’—a term referring to the perceived latest incarnation of monotonous, sprawling suburban development—seems to be merely continuing a long tradition of railing against the suburbs and the peripheries of the city in general. However, the prefix ‘new’ also suggests that there is more at stake here. The ‘new suburbia’ suggests a shift, transition or break from what has gone before. This begs the question: Is there a recognisably new form of suburbia or a new type of suburban living? How have the city and the suburbs changed? Have they really undergone a marked transformation or has our understanding of the spatial form and way of life we call suburbia merely shifted to enable us to recognise features that have actually been present all along and to allow us to view it differently? While formulating the newness of an environment or object against a background of continuity creates a certain rhetorical power, it also tends to flatten the various continuities and discontinuities, discrepancies and differences that are, and have always been, a part of both the present *and* the past, the old *and* the new.

What I’d like to do here in this essay, therefore, is to explore some of the contours of the changing suburban landscapes across the city of Sydney, while at the same time analysing how conventional understandings and descriptions of ‘the suburbs’ have tended to implicitly endorse an assumption that the outer suburban areas contain little of interest or value, and are therefore to be either viewed negatively or simply ignored. It is on these grounds that suburban landscapes have generally been seen as both geographically and symbolically peripheral to the major dramas and dynamics of urban life. Negative terms such as *suburban sprawl*, *blight*, and *McMansions* follow very much in this tradition of rejection. But rather than simply dismissing these terms and ideas as simply more examples of a long-standing pattern of suburban condemnation, I’d like to see them as essential parts of the ongoing narratives or stories about the city and its diverse spatial existence. Such terms and descriptions, including the manifesto which begins this essay, not only provide important accounts of the way the city is physically changing but clues into the way in which it also being understood. These images, stories, and condemnations of the way some people choose to live their lives, reveal how we both construct and find order in the city in which we live, and the kinds of traditions of thought we draw on in order to do so. They are in this respect ways of trying to understand and to make sense of

the city, that site which, according to Michel de Certeau, is ‘the most immoderate of human texts (De Certeau 1984: 92).

Ironically, pejorative descriptors like ‘sprawl’ and ‘McMansions’ are responses to a form of suburban housing and development which is seen quite literally as most *immoderate*, as ‘excessive’ and ‘overabundant’ and in need of some form of constraint and moderation or management. The repeated use of these terms implies that these forms, and by implication the citizens living in them, are self-indulgent, undisciplined, uncontained and uncontainable (see Bruegmann 2005: 18). The imagery used frequently slides between descriptions of physical features and moral states, fusing together an assessment of urban form and social/personal integrity and value, and finding both to be deficient and lacking. Such contemporary depictions are not entirely new and have both a set of historical precedents and a set of historical assumptions about what the ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ development mean and represent underpinning them. In his classic work, *The City in History*, for example, Lewis Mumford despaired of the ‘sprawling giantism’ of the twentieth-century city. For Mumford, the city should be a container with a finite and bounded space. When the container form is lost, the result is a ‘continuous shapeless mass’ ... an overgrowth of formless new tissue ... becom[ing] ever more aimless and discontinuous, more diffuse and unfocused ... No human eye can take in this metropolitan mass at a glance’ (Mumford 1960: 619-620).

When seen in the light of such historical assumptions about the ‘ideal’ city and its form, it becomes easier to understand the deviant blurring of boundaries that suburbia has always represented (in Ancient Rome, for example, *suburbium* was the indeterminate space that was literally below or outside the walls of the city). My aim here, however, is to be neither for nor against suburbia; neither to bash nor to boost. Rather it is an attempt to understand the complex relationships between economic, social, and political processes and imaginative forms—the dreams of private property and economic security, the fantasies of the planner and developer—that have been formed historically, and continue to still be played out in the spatial form of Sydney. This is to shift the focus on to the intricate connections among property, identity, space and political ideology, as well as the convoluted history of collusion between public and private interests, which have together in effect produced the social and spatial landscapes of the low-density, polycentric city.

This is a history that also includes the complex relationships between real estate entrepreneurs and the wide range of suburban residents, including migrants, who have responded to and invested in the ideal of home-ownership and suburban living. It also includes the history of what M.T. Daly so aptly calls the ‘hooligan developer’ (Daly, 1982: 111) and what Leonie Sandercock has called Australia’s national hobby: land speculation (Sandercock, 1997). And finally, it wouldn’t be complete without the history of spectacular failure surrounding most of the ‘official’ urban planning schemes, from the Cumberland County Council plan onwards, and including of course the most recent Sydney Metropolitan Strategy which began with a bang but most certainly has ended in a paper trail that couldn’t even rustle up a whimper<sup>1</sup>. In summary, then, this is an approach

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<sup>1</sup> The Sydney Metropolitan Strategy is a plan for Sydney’s development over the next thirty years, and addresses the growth of Sydney’s population, including the anticipated one million new residents who will need to be accommodated in the city and its surrounding areas and provided with housing and work opportunities. The Strategy has attracted many criticisms, with many researchers calling into question various aspects of the proposed development. These include the strategy’s focus on ‘high-density’ living and its implications for ‘social sustainability’, and the proposed ‘new release’ areas in outer Sydney and the loss of the ‘green belt’.

that recognises that what is actually at stake are ‘much larger questions about planning and democracy, aesthetics and metaphysics, and differing class-based assumptions about what makes a good urban life’ (Bruegmann, 2005: 8).

This is also an approach that aims to connect the representations, images and symbols commonly used to talk about suburban space (the imagery of *sprawl* in particular), with the actual physical conditions of that space as it is lived, experienced and changing over time. It is an understanding of space that is influenced by Lefebvre’s insistence that ‘each mode of thinking about space, each “field” of human spatiality—the physical, the mental, the social—be seen as simultaneously real and imagined, concrete and abstract, material and metaphorical’ (Soja, 1996: 64-65).

### **The Aesthetics of Ugliness**

In many of the popular newspaper articles on the new housing estates and residential communities in western Sydney particular attention is given to describing the uniform monotony of the sprawling form of development and the style of housing that has been called ‘McMansions’. In one article ‘McMansions’ are described as ‘those corpulent houses shoehorned into tight blocks of land’; and in another, as ‘vulgar and bloated’. When the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s Elizabeth Farrelly chose to write specifically about the suburb of Kellyville, her portrait starts: ‘Desolation row is every street in the new mass-produced suburbs’. She then describes the ‘heartbreakingly, wrist-slittingly obvious fact that this is what people like’. But her main concern, when it comes down to it, is the ‘ugliness’ and the aesthetics of ‘obesity’, all of which serve merely to ‘leaden the soul’ (Farrelly, 2003: 14). Meanwhile, architect Glen Murcutt, renowned for his interpretation of Australian iconography and vernacular styles, commented that suburban sprawl shows a ‘poverty of spirit and a barrenness of mind (cited in Johnson, 2004).

In a similar vein, an article titled ‘The (new) Great Australian Dream’, gave a definition of the ‘new suburbia’ in the following way:

The biggest house on the smallest block for the lowest price ... That’s the rationale behind the new suburbia, complete with triple garages, faux facades and tiny backyards... Join in the mad race to buy a bulldozed-bare, handkerchief-sized lot, lay a concrete slab, build a cavernous trophy home in 20 weeks, and settle into the new heartland of the aspirational voter (Hawley, 2003: 23).

This particular piece went on to describe McMansions as the ‘slums of the future’, and concluded with a series of images not only confirming western Sydney’s status as a monotonous, problematic wasteland but as a space completely given over to the inauthentic, artificial and ersatz: ‘the sizzle without the steak’, as the article put it.

Predominantly negative media representations of Western Sydney have a long history, while anti-suburbanism has an even longer one. In her book, *Out West*, Diane Powell analysed the metropolitan media’s dominant portrayal of the region as a distinct region rife with problems—social, economic and cultural. She concentrated on the manner in which the media has constantly depicted western Sydney in negative terms, as simultaneously a place of excess and lack: with an excess of crime, violence and

unemployment, and lacking nearly everything else, like facilities, infrastructure, culture and good taste. Moreover, she analysed the way in which such media accounts work positively to secure an image of the centre of Sydney as ‘Sydney proper’ as the imagined heartland—the engine of growth and innovation and the hub of culture—by defining the west as everything it is not (Powell, 2003).

But as mentioned earlier, both negative perceptions of suburbia and Sydney’s west are long-standing, and quite often the two intersect. In 1994, for example, a headline in the *Sydney Morning Herald* announced ‘Suburbia in the west has gone feral’, and outlined the various problems of ‘our outer area’ where ‘true dinkum Australian urbanism goes unchecked and unassisted’ (*SMH*, 1994: 7; see also Johnson, 1997). More recently, however, Mark Wakely in the *Griffith Review* writes of the popularity of the neo-Federation style in housing display villages such as ‘Home World’ at Kellyville, and wonders why contemporary suburbanites prefer pref-fab nostalgia to the innovative designs of the individually commissioned architect: ‘What drives this yearning to recapture the past, an unwillingness to let it go and move on? Risk-taking architectural statements are about the city; in the suburbs they want surety’, Wakely states. ‘The impact of this nostalgia on new housing has left architects frustrated. I’ve heard one refer to the spread of the neo-Federation style as a virus’, he adds (Wakely, 2003: 79).

This is a new variation on an old theme: the unprogressive, reactionary and backward-looking suburbs as compared to the progressive, innovative and forward-thinking city. The stubbornly binary nature of this discourse has meant that even the most recent writing on contemporary Australia suburbia rarely strays far from the blanket condemnations of the mundane homogeneity, insularity and blandness of the suburbs that have long been a constant feature of public life, from Robin Boyd to Barry Humphries to Kath and Kim. This binary also tends to reconfirm a similarly stubborn geopolitical divide between the west versus the rest (of Sydney) and other related binaries such as centre versus periphery, high-density versus sprawl, creative production versus docile consumption, community and culture versus materialism and conservatism, and so on. Incidentally, it often seems that one of the rare occasions when the *Sydney Morning Herald* does indeed discover life, vitality, colour and heterogeneity in the outer suburbs is Good Food Month, when it organises bus ‘food tours’ of suburbs such as Bankstown, Marrickville, Fairfield and Cabramatta, when the cosmo-multiculturalists go in search of some exotic, multicultural spice to liven up their taste-buds. We could think of these as the 21<sup>st</sup> century lifestyle equivalent of the tours of the Paris sewers that were so popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the French bourgeoisie would attempt to liven up their lives with the shock and awe of poverty and deprivation (see Stallybrass and White, 1986).

## **Beyond the Core**

In the last couple of decades, though, a number of theorists have attempted to move away from the stereotypical caricatures of Australian suburbia and the usual lens or frame within which the suburb has been understood and constituted as an object of analysis. This body of work has been hugely important as an unmasking of the politics of defining suburbia and as an exercise in establishing a more positive sense of identity for the space in which the majority of Australians actually live their lives (see Ferber, Healy & McCauliffe, 1994; Richards, 1990; Rowse, 1978). But, when one drives across Sydney

today, one soon realises that what has conventionally been called 'suburbia' is hardly recognisable, especially when viewed through the usual frames of reference, and even despite their positive or negative inflection. Traditional city-suburban relationships have been reconfigured to the extent that it is no longer possible to expect density to automatically decrease as one leaves the inner city, following the single-centred pattern of 'rings' – inner, middle, outer and fringe – most enduringly captured in the Chicago School's concentric ring model of urban structure.

The CBD may still hold, so to speak, as a locus of business and financial activity, but metropolitan complexities once assumed to exist only in the so-called urban 'core' are increasingly dispersed across fragmented, decentralised and *multi-centred* metropolitan spaces. Across Sydney, 'cities' such as North Sydney, Parramatta and Penrith are 'centres' in their own right, containing an array of shopping and retail, business and leisure industries and services, and with a diverse demographic make-up. The outer suburb, the cradle of the dream of home-ownership and the Australian 'way of life', formed on the basis of the family unit and clean, healthy low-density living, has also changed. The suburbs that were located on the periphery of urban areas, both physically and symbolically, were assumed to function as dormitory suburbs (or bedroom communities, as they've also been called), from which commuters travelled to workplaces in the city centre. They were also seen in large measure as economically, culturally and socially inert, as highly conformist, parochial and ethnically and racially homogenous.

Contemporary Australian suburbia, however, can no longer be described simply as a residential landscape, if it ever could. Nor can it be viewed as singular or a unity, or as a monolithically homogenous; indeed suburbia has always been physically, socially and culturally diverse. But there are also distinctly new dynamics at play, which challenge even more the suburban clichés of 'white flight' and 'white suburban dreaming' that still persist in the popular imagination. For the authors of *Postsuburban California*, many low-density cities now display a new kind of spatial distribution, which has developed alongside the increasing reliance on the private automobile as a form of transportation. They identify four key characteristics: 1. a postsuburban spatial formation that is decentralised *and* multicentred; 2. cosmopolitanism; 3. information capitalism; 4. consumerism. For the authors, the convergence of these four forces has resulted in a new kind of settlement space, which cannot easily be understood in terms of traditional conceptual categories such as rural, urban and suburban (Kling, Olin & Poster, 1991).

Without wanting to transpose American models onto Australian realities too hastily, I would nonetheless suggest that in most outer suburban areas of Sydney today, some of these trends are readily recognised. Housing estates, neighbourhoods and communities sit next to commercial and shopping spaces, simultaneously separate from and yet linked to nearby agglomerations of business and technology parks, offices, and other industrial activities, with all dispersed yet interconnected by the travel paths of private automobiles. A pattern of intra-regional commuting has also been identified, whereby workers commute *across* suburban regions to their places of employment in other outlying areas (*AFR*, 2002: 81; Randolph, 2004). Within these employment, residential, and shopping patterns, the central city becomes increasingly peripheral to the day-to-day lives of many people (see Freestone, 1994).

Additionally, over the past several decades, the demographic restructurings which most cities around the world have been experiencing have resulted in increasingly more ethnically and culturally complex populations. Sydney is no exception to this rule and its cultural diversity, for example, is abundantly revealed in recent Census reports: in the 2001 Census, for example, over 200 national groups were distinguished in Sydney, with immigrants now comprising more than a third (34.5 per cent) of the city's population—the highest proportion of any capital city in Australia (Connell, 2000). While Sydney generally is now known as a 'multicultural city', western Sydney is the geographic heart of such growth and diversity (Mee and Dowling, 2000). Increasing cultural heterogeneity within the everyday urban fabric is, I would argue, the most important socio-cultural force affecting cities and suburbs today. As a consequence, the suburbs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are 'suburbs of difference': they are multiethnic, multiracial, multiple (Sandercock, 2003). Correspondingly, post-suburban Sydney must in turn be seen as a place that is 'multiple': huge, complicated, multicentred, multicultural and multilingual.

### **The Global Suburb**

In his attempt to understand the material consequences of globalisation on Sydney, Mark Latham identified a 'global arc' that stretched from Ryde to Sydney Airport (Latham, 2003). But a suburb such as Kellyville, whose profile wouldn't be complete without including the large Philipino, Indian, and Sikh communities in the area, and the activities of the well-attended Sikh temple that faces, or perhaps more correctly looms, over a street of brick and fibro bungalows, is as much a part of the global arc as, say, North Sydney. Our understandings of the global city, and of how the world economy is reshaping our cities and regions, are therefore somewhat incomplete without including its most spectacular expression: the global suburb.

Yet to highlight the cultural complexity and diversity of the suburbs, places which were once seen as quiet backwaters of conformity and homogeneity, is not to suggest that there are no problems with much current suburban planning and development, or with inadequately serviced urban expansion that seemingly knows no limit. Nor is it to disavow many of the current critiques of the many new housing estates and master-planned communities that are appearing on the city's fringe. The anomalous situation of building suburbs that possess none of the attributes and benefits of traditional suburbia—the backyard veggie patch, cricket pitch, barbeque, hills hoist, or even just privacy—is, for me, a particularly pertinent lament. It is the parallel history of the suburb as a site of environmental self-sufficiency—the quarte-acre block on which it was possible to cultivate food and dispose of waste on-site—that has led after all to Patrick Troy's recent suggestion that 'the virtues of suburbia may yet turn out to be the saving of our cities' (Troy, 2003: 127). However, my main concern here is that by simply focusing on the environmental and architectural excesses of suburban housing, and the failures of suburbs in general, what has been obscured is an adequate understanding of the multiple forms and multiple meanings of the twentieth century suburb and its twenty first post-suburban equivalent. The demographic dynamism and diversity of suburban places, and the affirmative value of the suburbs for those who live within them, are accounts that are rarely heard. Yet the continuing enthusiasm for the suburban home, especially among some of the more affluent recent migrants who readily embrace the lifestyle package

associated with the new suburban developments—McMansions, automobility, and family-focused—attests to the ongoing appeal of suburban *ways of life*.

Furthermore, in Australian political discourse both home-ownership and suburban living continue to be commonly invoked as synonymous with the ‘Australian way of life’, as guarantees of full Australian citizenship, and as evidence of a ‘stake in the country’. Throughout the twentieth century, the appeal of a ‘home in the sun’—a ‘home of one’s own’ in a new, modernising suburb—was used as an important element in attracting migrants to Australia in government-sponsored migration schemes. Domestically, suburban home-ownership was an aspiration that was widely held (Murphy, 2000). As Murphy argues, home-ownership formed one of the cornerstones of what was gradually being accepted and understood as the Australian ‘way of life’ and created a vital link between the ‘inner values of the autonomous self and the imagined community of the nation (p.67). These strong links between home ownership, individual character, citizenship and the nation underpinned 1950s suburban home and community building; they are associations that are still very much relevant today.

### **Promiscuous Suburbanisation**

Throughout the twentieth century (dubbed by some the ‘suburban century’ see Clapson, 2003), suburban home-ownership was such a popular pursuit, and suburban development had become such a feature of Sydney’s landscape, that by the mid-century commentators warned of the ‘promiscuous suburbanisation’ that threatened the metropolis (Spearritt & de Marco, 1988). Yet while the history of suburbia is on one level synonymous with the development of individual and national identity, citizenship and the Australian ‘way of life’, it is also on another level the history of property speculation, unbridled opportunism and greed. As early as 1915, one commentator suggested that ‘Town planning ought to be taken out of the hands of landlords and their agents, who desire mainly to see how many houses can be got onto a given space’ (cited in Sandercock, 1997: 29). Throughout Sydney’s history, successive cycles of urban land boom and bust have typically resulted in a frenzy of land speculation and hastily executed suburban subdivisions, which have often been well in advance of building and the provision of infrastructure and services. The 1948 Cumberland Plan, for example, had alerted many to the problem that ‘land speculation was rife ... Some of the land was bought by genuine home-builders: much of it was bought as an “investment” ... Land subdivision was little more than a gamble, in which profit, not housing needs, was the first consideration (Spearritt & DeMarco, 1988: 14).

Historically, Australia’s vulnerability within the world economy and international financial system has placed it at the mercy of fluctuations of capital, and the changing fortunes of various industries and capital markets. Meanwhile, the changing roles and natures of institutions such as finance companies, building societies and merchant banks, and their increasing responsibility as the suppliers of funds for home purchasing, combined with inadequate and inefficient planning mechanisms, has also consistently fuelled property investment and speculation. In *Sydney Boom, Sydney Bust*, M.T. Daly provides an analysis of the 1960s as a case in point. He charts the confluence of a rapid international capital influx, land release schemes, bad planning decisions and rampant speculation, and the inevitable rise in property prices. But, he particularly singles out the

role played by the 1968 Sydney Regional Outline plan, a strategic plan to guide the development of Sydney into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By announcing the areas of growth for the following 30 years, the plan was a dream for developers and speculators and quickly became known as ‘the punter’s guide’ (Daly, 1982: 2). As Dolores Hayden has summed it up, ‘contestation—between residents who wish to enjoy suburbia and developers who seek to profit from it—lies at the heart of suburban history’ (Hayden, 2003: 9).

This distinctively Australian set of fiscal and political arrangements supporting suburbia, including the rise of speculative, diversified property investments has of course continued. In recent years, other additional forces have also come into play. Investment has moved from bonds to property in a way it never had before, and the popularity of mortgages with financial institutions has shifted billions of dollars into the homes market, directly contributing to suburban wealth and home values. When combined with tax-minimisation incentives such as negative gearing, and government assistance schemes like *The First Home Owner’s Grant*, home ownership has retained, even increased, its appeal as both an economic and social goal.

What concerns me primarily, therefore, is the way in which most accounts of the new suburbia—focusing on the ‘problem’ of sprawl, McMansions, and conspicuous consumption—actually serve to *obliterate the history of the making of this space*. By concentrating solely on the issue of individual choice of housing and individual responsibility, the misguided dream of privatisation and a ‘home of one’s own’, or the questions of aesthetics and taste (or lack of it), these accounts actually efface the political, economic and historical conditions behind the possibility of their emergence. They reduce both contemporary *and* long-standing problems of urban planning, capital accumulation and political practice into problems arising simply because of the actions of certain individuals; because of who *they* are (Aspirationalists, westies) and what *they* do.

This also fails to recognise that the dreams of home-ownership and suburban living have been themselves, to a great extent, the products of various types of conscious, coordinated planning and political motivation. In other words, they fail to register these landscapes of change and flux, of hopes and desires, of profits and speculation as ‘landscapes of power’, to use Sharon Zukin’s term (Zukin, 1991). In doing so, they continue to enact the denial and marginalisation of the everyday lives of the diverse population residing in the ‘new suburbia’, and in western Sydney in particular, by positioning them as residual, and on the periphery of an authenticity supposedly lived more intensely elsewhere.

## **Conclusion**

In his book *Privatopia* Evan McKenzie argues that ‘The suburb is the last world in privatisation, perhaps even its lethal consummation, and it spells the end of authentic civic life’ (McKenzie, 1994: 188). Perhaps, in the United States this is a legitimate concern. Property rights and property values as the sole focus of community life, as McKenzie describes, *is* a bleak prospect. However it is a strange, misplaced interpretation of the Australian situation where, privatisation, home ownership, and the suburban dream of a home in the sun and a car in the garage is far from a retreat from citizenship; it is *the actual realisation of it*.

In *Postsuburban California*, the authors wonder ‘whether the decentralised lifeways of postsuburbia help engender, or reinforce, what can be called a politics of decentralisation’ (1991: xvi). For me, this is a much more interesting approach, and a much more interesting question. Instead, in the last few years, facile critiques of traditional patterns of suburban home-ownership, and the pecuniary nature of the great Australian suburban dream in general, have increased, most recently intersecting with debates about ‘affluenza’ and the environmental and social costs associated with escalating consumerism. For Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, affluenza is ‘an epidemic of stress, overwork, waste and indebtedness caused by dogged pursuit of the Australian dream’. As a contrast, their book provides a portrait of the great Australian suburban nightmare, illustrated with images of increasingly large houses, in which, the authors state, ‘it is not unknown for one parent to email the other to arrange to meet in the kitchen’, and where individuals suffer from a series of affluenza-related diseases—from debt addiction and deprivation syndrome to a ‘widespread but ill-defined anomie’ (Hamilton & Denniss, 2005). Now, I have a feeling we’ve heard that diagnosis of suburban alienation somewhere before. The book contains little empirical research, and as one astute reviewer pointed out, its most interesting finding is that while 80 per cent of Australians think they personally are careful consumers, the same amount also believes that most of their other fellow citizens are rampant, irresponsible ones.

But, by continuing to simply represent consumption as pathology, and in particular the consumption associated with home ownership, such texts not only demonstrate a surprising lack of critical imagination, they also simultaneously fail to adequately register what is actually ‘new’ about the ‘new suburbia’ they are so quick to bemoan. They also generally fail to account for the kinds of economic, political and cultural transformations producing the cultural complexities of today’s suburbs, transformations that are reconfiguring both urban and suburban landscapes in ways that challenge traditional social/spatial models of metropolitan development, and even, in some instances, render them obsolete.

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