

# A City of Two Tales: Distinction, Dispersal and Dissociation in Western Sydney

**George Morgan**

*Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney*

Two competing narratives frame perceptions of Western Sydney. The first views the Cumberland Plain as accommodating the city's working class and migrants, the battlers in the bungalows who contrast with the affluent denizens of the Eastern and Northern suburbs. A more nuanced narrative has recently emerged recognising a more variegated social landscape, a patchwork of poor and prosperous places. Many residents of Western Sydney have enjoyed increased real incomes and have seen their houses increase enormously in value. At the same time those who are poor, unemployed, welfare-dependent have missed out on the fruits of the boom and been cut adrift from what Mark Latham called the 'aspirational classes'. The West is no longer the homogeneous landscape of the Australian Dream but a place of social polarisation and tensions, a microcosm of global processes. This paper will consider the role of public housing in this social mix. I will look at the egalitarian social engineering ambitions of those who planned this housing in the postwar years and how it has become residual accommodation for those on welfare rather than working class housing. I will take the example of Mt Druitt and explore the way in which the lines of social distinction are drawn, how locals experience and respond to the popular stigma that their region attracts. I will then consider current strategies to redevelop clusters of 'problem' public housing as 'mixed developments' under public/ private partnership arrangements and whether (as is the official conviction) this form of urban renewal is likely to confer more life opportunities on state tenants.

## **The Post-war Suburban Vision**

Suburban Sydney is the product of the social, political and cultural forces that prevailed after WWII (Johnson, 1995). During the first half of the twentieth century the public pressure for slum clearance and urban reform had accumulated but the city's development had been largely unplanned, piecemeal and guided by the vagaries of local government decision-making. The forties and fifties saw a severe housing shortage, accentuated by immigration and increased fertility rates. Most Australians wished to be recompensed for the privations suffered during the depression and the war. The inertia of the wartime command-economy created the conditions for a postwar social democratic settlement, a central component of which was the promise of 'homes for heroes'. The NSW Housing Commission had been formed in 1942 to provide affordable housing for low-income people and the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement of 1945 channelled federal funds into public housing. Between the end of the war and 1957, in a state building program of unprecedented scale, the Commission constructed 42,686 dwellings (ANZ, 1958: 24-26). The Federal and State governments financed a third of the approximately 900,000 dwellings that were built in Australia between 1945 and 1960

(Greig, 1995: 36). This pattern continued in the sixties. The postwar vision for Sydney expressed in the Cumberland County Plan had been one of a medium density city surrounded (like London) by an inviolable green belt and connected to satellite cities like Gosford and Campbelltown (Johnson, 1995; Winston, 1957). This guided development until in 1957 the State Labor government rezoned farming land for housing to allow for the construction of the Green Valley estate near Liverpool and allowed the city to take the low-density broadacre shape. Although the private sector, both building companies and owner builders, was responsible for most housing in Western Sydney the pump of urban growth was primed by the state.

Areas of public housing were not built simply to accommodate the population overflow of postwar Australia. They were also social laboratories, part of a modernist reconstruction of urban space (Morgan, 2000). Prospective Housing Commission tenants from all social backgrounds – Anglo working class, migrant, indigenous - had to present themselves as worthy. They had to demonstrate they were capable of living in a manner deemed respectable by those petty officials who assessed their applications (for an account of the general assessment procedures of the Commission and their consequences for Aboriginal applicants, see Morgan, 2006: ch. 4). After each aspiring tenant had lodged their application a Commission officer was sent out to inspect the dwelling in which the applicant family lived. Eligible applicants were vetted according to need - only families with children and the elderly or disabled could apply – and officers had considerable discretionary powers in assessing applicants' suitability. Those seeking housing firstly had to show that they were not adequately accommodated where they were and could not afford to rent better housing. Secondly they had to demonstrate they were capable of meeting the Commission standards in the areas of 'civic pride' (in maintaining the exterior of the dwelling and the garden), neighbourliness, living a modest and respectable domestic life and ability to meet regular rental payments.

The suburban expansion of Sydney was not, however, just a top-down process. Suburban bungalows on new estates were popular with many of those living in cramped inner-city dwellings, particularly young families sharing houses with relatives (Spearritt, 1978). These places were invested with fantasies of languid consumerism and idyllic family life (Duruz, 1994). While some intellectuals and cultural commentators derided the suburbs as places of insipid moral and cultural conformity (Rowse, 1992) or unsightly architecture and streetscapes (Boyd, 1968), this view was not widely shared (Stretton, 1975). Until the middle classes discovered the heritage values and lifestyle benefits of the inner city in the late sixties, few besides the bohemian fringe appreciated its shambolic charm. Indeed many of the old dwellings later prized and renovated had been slated for demolition through slum clearance. Gentrification has transformed many of the 'festering ghettos' of early twentieth century Sydney into trendy neighbourhoods. At the high point of the modernist planning mania in the sixties it appeared that the new suburban estates formed the panacea for Sydney's ills. Their expansion allowed the deserving poor to discover the pleasures of respectable middle class family life.

The contemporary social map of Western Sydney has been influenced by the shifting patterns of public investment in housing. Very little new public housing has been built since the mid-1970s (Randolph and Holloway, 2005). The rise in unemployment, single-parent families and general welfare dependency since then has led to the tightening of the eligibility requirements as the housing stock has shrunk relative to need. The public housing constituency is now vastly different to that envisaged by postwar planners. It is

no longer accommodation for low income working people but has become residual housing with 98% of those occupying the 145,000 of the Housing Commission's dwellings receiving social security payments of some sort. Only 13.1 % of Sydney public housing tenants are employed full time as compared with 39% for Sydney as a whole (Randolph and Murray, 2004). This has turned clusters of public housing into what the English call 'sink estates', pockets of social disadvantage, places struggling to develop local pride and community leadership. Here the idyllic suburban vision has curdled. While the new estates were meant to be a remedy for inner city slums, by the late 70s the popular media were depicting many such places as suburban ghettos (Dowling and Mee, 2000; Powell, 1993). Recent moves by the State Labor government to remove the lifetime tenure rights of public housing tenants will further accentuate the trend towards turning public housing into residual housing<sup>1</sup>.

### **Social Distinction in Western Sydney**

Social trends of the last twenty years belie the conventional egalitarian image of the Western Suburbs. Fagan has shown that, contrary to the popular perception of Western Sydney as a depressed area, it has been one of Australia's main growth regions in the last twenty years (Fagan, 2000). The growth in prosperity is evident not just in the established middle class areas like Baulkham Hill but in the proliferation of McMansion estates across the region. The social cleavages have become embedded in the discourses of politics and policing, in the forms of urban design and architecture and in the popular stigmatisation of certain areas especially those containing clusters of public housing.

Over the last twenty years the Liberal Party has won considerable gains from Labor in the West. In the increasingly tense struggle for the allegiance of suburban voters politicians have engaged with local social divisions, sometimes openly and sometimes in a coded 'dog-whistle' fashion. In the '01 election this was played out over the issue of immigrants and asylum seekers as the Liberal Party effectively used the Tampa Incident to connect with racial tensions, connecting the global and the local as Burchell's reportage effectively illustrates (Burchell, 2003). In the subsequent '04 election the ground shifted towards class (although race remained a subtext). Mark Latham's spectacularly unsuccessful 'third way' pitch for the 'aspirational' vote during the 2004 election campaign was, as Ian Watson argued, premised on abandoning the poorest and most vulnerable (Watson, 2004). The Labor leader's crude taxonomy of the suburbs as comprised of 'slackers and workers' and his promise that a Labor government would restore the 'ladder of opportunity' threatened to accentuate existing social divisions.

The forms of policing that are used in the Western Suburbs are symptomatic of broader social divisions. As sociologists of crime have long argued, the differential geographical spread of policing has the effect of 'producing' criminal behaviour or at least accentuating its incidence (Black, 1970). In areas seen as respectable and middle class there is less chance of young people getting into trouble because police resources are concentrated in other areas. Street tensions between police and young people are endemic in poor areas largely because of the heavy presence of the former, a presence that is an outcome of the local application of the discourses of zero tolerance policing (White,

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/PARLMENT/hansArt.nsf/V3Key/LC20051019007>

2004). Occasionally there will be an escalation of these tensions between young people and police that occasionally spill over into riots, as was the case in Macquarie Fields in 2005. Such events reinforce the suburban badlands stereotype. The localised intensification of policing energies is symptomatic of the social gulfs that are opening up in our cities.

These are also illustrated in the exclusive designs of elite suburban estates that are enclosed by gates and walls. This desire to mark the boundary of locality is by no means new: mass home ownership has always produced a tendency to delimit suburban territory. Many of the tangled Radburn-style street layouts of earlier suburban estates were premised on the desire to exclude through traffic and extend the concept of privacy from the domestic realm to the surrounding areas. However, there is an increasing tendency towards insulating and securing middle class residential territory in a manner that is characteristic of societies with more dramatic divisions of wealth (Caldeira, 1999). Much of the marketing of these new estates suggests an enclosed village life. If, as Richard Sennet suggests, cities can be defined as places where one is likely to meet strangers, these new estates are disconnected from the urban realm (Sennett, 1978:38)

### **Mt Druitt – The Other Side of the Walls**

The NSW government established Mt Druitt in 1966 as an area of public and private housing. Within ten years the area 45,000 lived there (Peel, 2003: 45). Although from the outset the estate was a mixture of public and private housing (Dowling and Mee, 2000), its reputation is based on the popular stigmatisation of the large clusters of Housing Commission dwellings. Indeed Mt Druitt has so often been the focus of moral panics – youth riots, crime and violence, single mothers on welfare – that its name has almost become a metonym for social disadvantage (Peel: 17-21). Over the years various experts have been conscripted to ameliorate Mt Druitt's problems and renovate its image. But as Peel wrote in his bittersweet study of Australian poverty *The Lowest Rung*, many locals who have witnessed past failures are cynical of these efforts and resentful of the missionary zeal and condescension of the social workers and researchers who descend upon them (Peel, 2003). When the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper sought to highlight the inequities in public education in the mid-nineties it ran a front page with a photograph of the graduating class from Mt Druitt High with the headline 'The Class We Failed' to highlight the poor results (Morgan and Davies, 2005). Any one of a number of schools could have been chosen for this purpose but the newspaper chose Mt Druitt because of the area's notoriety. The school's poor reputation is of long standing. Sam, a former pupil, considers the teenage years he spent there as the best of his life<sup>2</sup>. He is now on the teaching staff of Mt Druitt Campus of Chifley College, as his old high school has now become, but recalls his trepidation on his first day there after moving to the area in the mid seventies from another part of Sydney:

the last teacher to speak to me at my previous school shook my hand and said. "I hope you can fight". So that was what I came to Mount Druitt with, and I was scared to death.

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<sup>2</sup> Sam (a pseudonym) is one of ten interviewees – including teachers, affected students, administrators and a trade union official - who had some involvement in the Mt Druitt High scandal and the litigation that followed. The interviewees were chosen to present a range of perspectives on both the events of the time and on social relations in Mt Druitt in general.

In more recent times, the increasing affluence of many parts of the Western Suburbs has set up impulses towards social distinction in which Mt Druitt is represented not only, as in the past, as a dangerous and dysfunctional place, but as one of lowbrow taste and cultural mediocrity. An email that has been circulating recently Mt Druitt stated:

A major earthquake measuring 5.8 on the Richter scale hit in the early hours of this morning, with the epicentre in Mt Druitt. Victims were seen wandering around aimlessly muttering, "F\*\*kin ell" and "Whadda carnt". The earthquake decimated the area causing approximately \$30 worth of damage. Several priceless collections of mementos from the Torana Appreciation Society and the Mt Druitt Progress Hall were damaged beyond repair. Three areas of historic burnt out cars were disturbed. Many locals were woken well before their welfare cheques arrived.

... hundreds of residents were confused and bewildered, still trying to come to terms with the fact that something interesting had happened in the area ... a 15-year-old mother of 5 said "It was such a shock, my little Chardonnay Mercedes came running into my bedroom crying. My youngest two, Tyler-Morgan and Megan-Storm slept through it all. I was still shaking when I was watching Jerry Springer the next morning". Apparently though, looting, muggings and car crime carried on as normal. The Red Cross has so far managed to ship 4,000 crates of Vegemite to the area to help the stricken locals. Rescue workers are still searching through the rubble and have found large quantities of personal belongings, which include benefit books, Canterbury shirts, jewellery from Priceline and bone china from Woolworths.

The area's reputation weighs so heavily on locals that many feel like they live in a menagerie. This induces sullen resistance. Some seek to defend the area against stigma. Veronica grew up in Mt Druitt and is enraged by the derision it attracts:

It is unfair, because, like, you find it hard to get jobs anywhere – like, especially, they'll ask where you're from and the first thing, they'll look at you funny... It's like, does it really matter where we're from? ... It's not like we carry guns or anything like that, you know! That's what they think, basically, that we shoot to kill! (laughs) You get some people thinking, like, you know, "Have you got knives in your pockets?"

Others see little point in trying to defend the area from representations like these and will play out the stereotypes that entrap them, exaggerating their poverty and violence, presenting outsiders with the freak show they expect (Peel, 2003: 24-27).

Local people, especially young people, form strong communal bonds in response to this adversity. Many turn the stigma on its head and wear their local affiliations as a badge of resistant pride. Linda, now in her mid-twenties lived in Mt Druitt as a teenager and her family still lives in the area. She recalls going to nightclubs and pubs in the nineties and hearing her contemporaries singing along with songs that were popular at the time and turning them into anthems of defiance:

Linda: Yes, yes! I remember a song going around at the time, something about, "This is how we do it," and people would say, you'd go into the nightclub and they'd be singing, "This is for Mount Druitt! This is for Mount Druitt!" So, for a lot of kids in the area, it was so much a part of who they were, that they attached their identity to the place...

G. Morgan: So, a very territorial – it's almost like a siege mentality, in some ways.

Linda: I guess so ...maybe they were aware of the stigma, but it was – yeah! “We're from Mount Druitt, but we're cool, this is who we are! We're tough, we can stand up, we don't care if you think that Mount Druitt is low, or Mount Druitt people don't get anywhere. We don't care because we know we're legends!...” So they sort of built each other up... They were Westies! They would say it emphatically!

As in the tangled slum communities of an earlier era, the dense and defence social bonds of young people in Mt Druitt can stir respectable fears. As in the past efforts at urban reform are an astringent mixture of amelioration and social engineering.

### **The New Slum Clearance Movement**

Sydney's original 'slums' grew in places where there was little state planning or investment (Mayne, 1995). They were comprised mostly of spec-built habitations on pocket-handkerchief lots built crudely during the city's late nineteenth century growth spurt. Slum clearance advocates had sought to persuade governments to intervene in the processes of urban growth to create areas where worthy workers would be freed from the malign influences of environment (Spearritt, 1974). Postwar public investment in cities consummated this ambition. However, the state has withdrawn from this role in a period in which the number of those in need of government housing has grown rapidly. So ironically, the long-term effect of these earlier remedial interventions has been to displace outcast districts from the inner city to the suburbs. The popular derision that places like Mt Druitt attracts indicates that the broadacre egalitarian vision has failed and that the fruits of the Australian way of life have been unequally apportioned.

In contrast with the urban strategies of the era of social democracy recent state housing policy has been governed neo-liberal principles, in particular the arrangement of public-private partnerships in urban development. In Sydney, for example, this has involved enlisting private capital to demolish and redevelop public housing at Bonnyrigg and Minto - like Mt Druitt stigmatised areas - and to build dwellings at higher densities (Darcy and Manzi, 2004). This allows for 'mixed developments' combining public and private housing ostensibly to break down the spatial concentration of disadvantage. It is not inconsequential, however, that the strategy allows the state and construction companies to realise latent land values. The public relations spin on the rebuilt estates is that they will allow government tenants to discover more life opportunities by living near middle class people. This continues the tradition evident in the postwar years of modernist social engineering that was central to the postwar housing projects and it is likely that more government estates – perhaps parts of Mt Druitt – will be similarly redeveloped.

Changes in the structures of city life, however, raise questions about the efficacy of this strategy. There are many reasons for suspecting that urban locality is a less significant site for social life than has been the case in the past, particularly in low-density cities like Sydney. The zoning of commercial and industrial areas well away from housing has meant that residential and occupational communities are no longer dovetailed in the way that was characteristic of the old inner city. The growth of suburban malls has reduced

the amount of social interaction that takes place in the local shopping street. The tendency for urban social interaction to be mediated by new technologies has meant that people, especially young people, are less dependent on neighbourhood ties and have much more disperse friendship groups than was the case in the past. The emergence of the notion of choice in education, and the deregulation of school zoning, has meant that parents are much more likely today than previously to send their children to distant schools (selective or private). This would most often be the case in 'mixed areas' where middle class parents, who are generally more 'informed consumers' of education, feel that the local school is inadequate. This undermines the neighbourhood networks that often emerge around schools. Where car commuting is central to virtually every aspect of suburban life – leisure, work, education, shopping and so on, the local gathering places in which social mixing can occur. This indicates that it is questionable whether public housing tenants obtain more social opportunities by living near middle class people than where their housing is more clustered and segregated.

## **Conclusion**

The last fifty years has seen dramatic transformations of Western Sydney. Those involved in postwar reconstruction wished to extend to the deserving poor access to a way of life which to that point had been enjoyed largely by the middle classes. The broadacre suburb model was designed to relocate worthy families from the cramped dirty and disorderly streets of the inner-city and, as in much of the United States, profoundly reshaped Australian cities. Only those deemed good citizens were offered dwellings. However the decline in public funding for social housing and the growth in the numbers of those in need of it has meant that such housing now accommodates those who are most socially marginal. The newly prosperous owners of large homes on elite estates stare at those living in clusters of social housing across a widening gulf of wealth and social power. The latter endure reputations as rough/violent, supplicants of the welfare state, and lacking in cultural refinement. The recent response of the NSW government to what are widely viewed as 'failed estates' in Minto and Bonnyrigg has been to recruit private capital to redevelop those estates to create higher population densities and to profit from the land values. The social engineering agenda of modernist town planning remains firmly in place: better environments and neighbours will encourage social mobility and respectability. However, the structure of contemporary urban life means that residential propinquity is a less significant influence than it once was.

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