

CHAPTER 4

CITIES AND SUBURBS

ALAN D. GILBERT

‘**B**ESSIE DREW’ was the heroine in Kylie Tennant’s *Time enough later*, a novel set in the Sydney of early 1940s. She lived in a Redfern street which ‘just missed being a slum by a narrow margin’, a street afflicted by a ‘respectable squalor’ which ‘had not made up its mind whether it was a busy industrial thoroughfare or a quiet stretch of working-men’s terraces’. Her world was that of Sydney’s poor inner-city suburbs,

with its walls, its acceptance of factory and family; its S.P. betting on Wednesdays and Saturdays; its children screaming at hide-and-seek round the back lanes; its Saturday afternoon drunks; its rigid attempts at decency; its constant fear of being out of work, of owing the grocer and the rent man, of being put out of the house and losing the furniture . . .

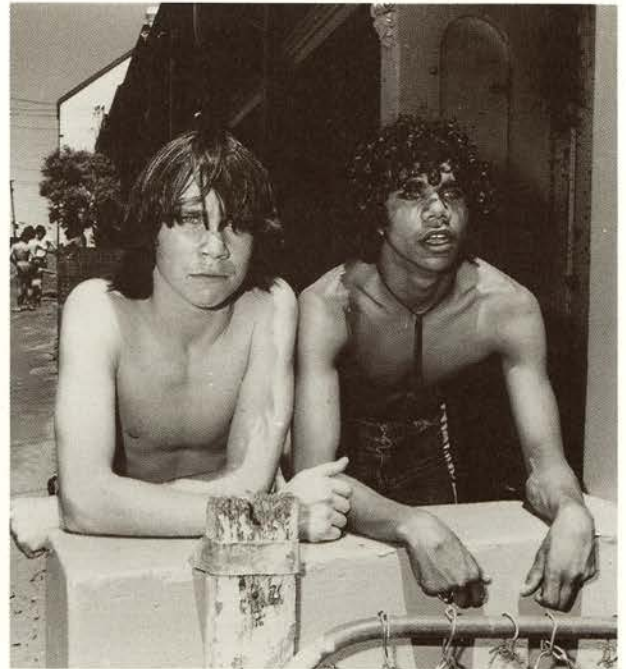
The picture was authentic, and to Kylie Tennant it also seemed permanent. She described a Redfern street in the story as ‘one of those back streets that remain the same century after century’. Yet for all her powers of observation and description, she mistook the nature of modern urban life. A city, viewed at any one time, looks like a mosaic of social types and human activities: a complex of industry and commerce, politics and administration, education, welfare, recreation, residence and domestic life. Settlement patterns within it vary with the occupation, class, wealth, age, ethnic background, family arrangements, social relationships and housing preferences of its people. But because none of these factors is constant, the city itself constantly changes. Over time, it looks more like a shifting kaleidoscope than a fixed mosaic.

While Kylie Tennant was writing *Time enough later* in 1944, the Commonwealth Housing Commission was recommending ways of transforming Australia’s inner-city areas. ‘In practice’, explains Max Neutze, the head of the Urban Research Unit at the Australian National University, ‘there are very real constraints on the extent to which both local and metropolitan or state planning authorities can influence the way a city grows and develops’. But whether planned or unplanned, change came to the world of ‘Bessie Drew’ soon after the war.



Collins Street, Melbourne, in 1949—before the motor car had brought chronic congestion to urban Australia. Melbourne was still Australia’s major financial centre, a role soon to be challenged by Sydney; and with Sydney, it accounted for about 40 per cent of the national population.

BOOROWA PRODUCTIONS



Against the background of TNT's new glass and concrete office complex, a five-year-old Aboriginal child, Bradley Smith, sits on a decaying wall beside Sydney's southern railway line in December 1985.

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Above right. Aboriginal teenagers, Robert Roberts and Reed Smith, in the depressed environment of Eveleigh Street, Redfern, in 1983.

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Slum clearance schemes undertaken by the Housing Commission and by state housing authorities replaced many rambling, derelict city dwellings with high-rise, high-density accommodation. The resulting urban landscape looked new, but often remained haunted by the social and economic problems of the vanished slums. Elsewhere, while streets and buildings looked much the same, the style and atmosphere of urban life were transformed. Italian and Greek migrants flocked into the inner city, bringing with them the sights and sounds of a Mediterranean world. Aborigines, the most deprived of Australia's peoples, established themselves in parts of Redfern, and in the 1980s many of them still live there in desperate poverty. But since about 1960, other, larger areas of the once-depressed inner suburbs have been 'gentrified'. Middle-class people attracted by the convenience and cosmopolitan promise of city living have moved into the old terraces, renovated them, and pushed house prices and rents in suburbs such as Paddington, Glebe, Balmain and Petersham beyond the means of the kinds of people Kylie Tennant described.

This chapter is about such transformations. Its purpose is to trace the history of Australian urban and suburban society during the past half-century, and to examine the place of cities and suburbs in modern Australian life.



Australia is one of the most urbanised societies on earth. In 1939, 40 of every 100 Australians lived in either Sydney or Melbourne, another ten lived in one of the smaller state capitals, and a further seventeen lived in a provincial city or a country town. Only one in three lived in a rural area. After 150 years of European settlement, white Australians were still overwhelmingly a people of the coastal plains. Their swollen capital ports were sophisticated staging-posts in a profitable commerce between the agricultural and mineral resources of the hinterland and the markets of Britain and North America. As centres of government, trade,



An aerial view from the northeast in 1985 shows Sydney's central business district dominated by the steel, glass and concrete of skyscrapers. Australian property, 1985.

finance and local manufacturing, these cities dominated a series of highly centralised regions. As centres of rail, road, sea and air transport they monopolised economic activities which under different circumstances might have produced a more dispersed pattern of urban growth.

This social and economic predominance of the coastal capitals had been growing since about 1860. Melbourne had only 23 per cent of the Victorian population in 1861, but 50 years later 45 per cent of Victorians lived there, and the census of 1947 would show that the figure had risen to 60 per cent. In New South Wales only 27 per cent of the population had lived in Sydney in 1861, but in 1911 the figure was 47 per cent, and in 1947 it would be 63 per cent. Since World War II the trend has slowed down, but in the 1980s about two Australians in every three lived in the capital city of their state or territory. The great predominance of the coastal capitals remains a fundamental feature of Australian society.

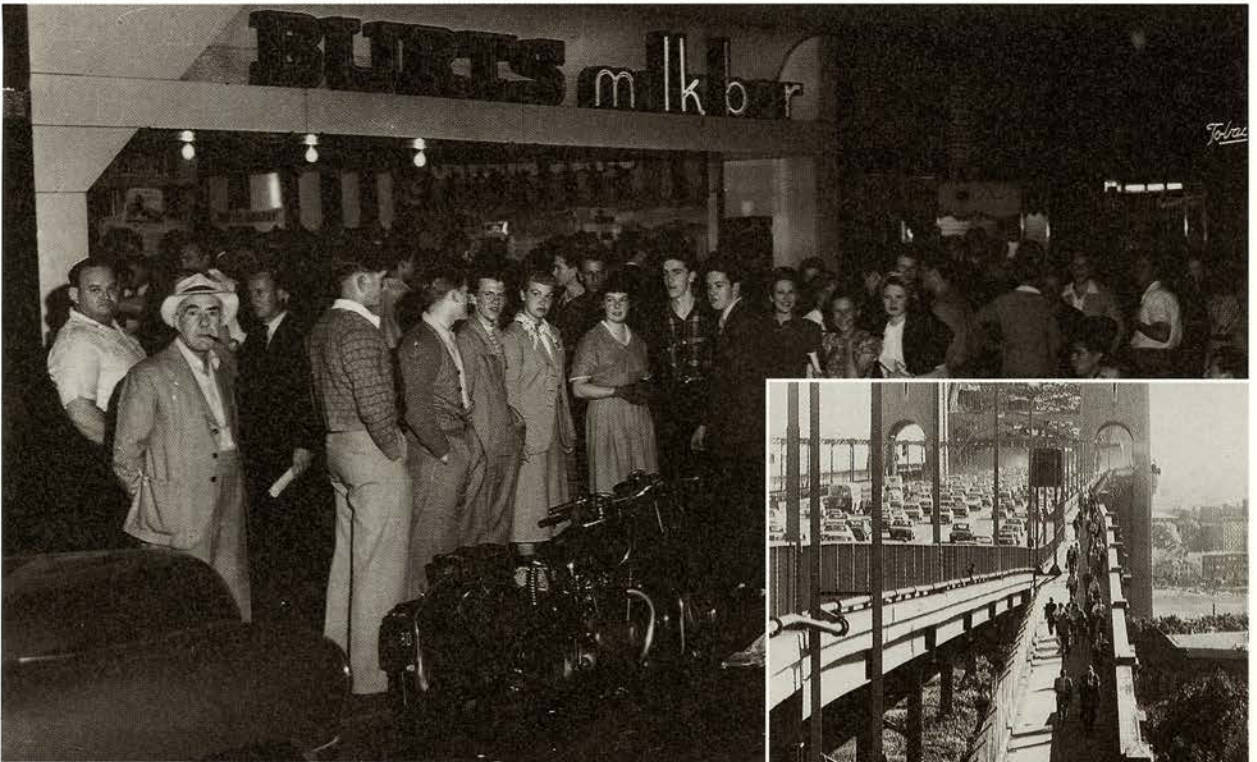
The bias towards Sydney and Melbourne has diminished slightly since 1939, although in absolute terms the two cities have grown rapidly, especially up to the early 1970s. They have declined in proportion to the national population because urbanisation has been even more rapid elsewhere, particularly in the smaller capital cities. The 1981 census showed that over 20 per cent of Australians lived in Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth or Hobart—twice the proportion living in these state capitals before World War II.

In every capital, natural increase has accounted for less than half the expansion since 1945. Only in Brisbane has it slightly outstripped immigration from overseas as the greatest single source of urban growth. Migration from within Australia has varied in importance from city to city and period to period. Since 1945 Melbourne has lost almost as many native-born Australians as it has gained; Sydney has grown only slowly from internal migration. On the other hand, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart owe a significant proportion of their postwar growth to transfers of native-born Australians from other parts of the country.

The attraction of the coastal capitals is understandable. They are the great centres of economic activity and opportunity. Each dominates the economy of its state



In Melbourne the Rialto Building, shown here half-finished in 1984, became, at 242 metres, the tallest building in Australia when completed in 1985. Its 56 levels included an international hotel, 86 thousand square metres of office space, a 260-seat conference auditorium and parking for 650 cars. Australian property, 1985.



A crowd of teenagers enjoys the juke box in a Sydney milk bar in 1949.

MAGAZINE PROMOTIONS

Far right.

The cities are places of opportunity—for work, entertainment, excitement, culture. Here, in September 1971, people pour across the Harbour Bridge into Sydney while the morning sun still casts long shadows.

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Centre.

Hawthorn fans celebrate their team's victory over Essendon in the 1983 VFL Grand Final in Melbourne.

AUSTRALIAN INFORMATION SERVICE

Being within commuter range of a capital city gives ready access to the major events, preoccupations and institutions of Australian life. The Australian cricket team plays England at the Sydney Cricket Ground, Jan 1987. Photograph by Kevin Diletti.



even more comprehensively than it dominates the pattern of population distribution. In 1960, for example, Sydney had 56 per cent of the population of New South Wales but 73 per cent of the manufacturing jobs. The same pattern existed in the other states; and every state capital had an even greater share of retailing than of population.

Such cities offered migrants the social advantages of established, sizeable ethnic communities as well as the best chance of economic security in the new land. They also attracted country families whose employment opportunities were declining as agriculture became more capital intensive, and the cities lured young people from the country for social reasons as well as jobs. Australia's rural population, 33 per cent of the total in 1939, has fallen to 14 per cent in the 1980s. Some of the decline simply reflects new ways of classifying 'rural' areas, but the figures also indicate a continuing drift of Australians into the cities.

Urbanisation has also increased outside the capital cities, primarily in coastal areas. Before World War II there had been only a sprinkling of holiday shacks and tiny settlements along the south Queensland coast between the small towns of Southport and Tweed Heads; but in 1981 this area—the Gold Coast—had 155 000 people, and was the ninth largest of Australia's urban areas. Brisbane Waters (Gosford), The Entrance-Terrigal and Budgewoi Lake in New South Wales, all virtually undeveloped in 1939, had also grown rapidly, and were among the 32 Australian urban centres with populations of more than 25 000 in 1981. Similar ribbon developments of urban and suburban settlement had occurred along the Mornington Peninsula near Melbourne, along the Sunshine Coast north of Brisbane, around the western shores of Gulf St Vincent near Adelaide, and, near Perth, along the coast north of Wanneroo and Yanchep Beach and south to Rockingham and Mandurah.

Such places were within commuting distances of the capital cities, and close enough to serve as retirement areas for elderly people wishing to retain links with the city. Improved transport, higher living standards and the retirement preferences of an ageing population all contributed to their development. But the bias of Australian settlement towards the coast has also intensified in areas well beyond commuter range of the state capitals. Suburban development has crept along the coasts around smaller cities such as Cairns, Townsville, Mackay, Rockhampton, Gladstone, and Bundaberg in Queensland; Coffs Harbour, Port Macquarie and Nowra in New South Wales; Lakes Entrance, Geelong and Warrnambool in Victoria; Port Pirie, Port Augusta and Port Lincoln in South Australia; and Albany, Busselton, Bunbury and Geraldton in Western Australia. And between such places, recreation and retirement preferences and related service industries are producing still narrower ribbons of coastal settlement.

The trends of the past half-century have thus accentuated a traditional concentration of European settlement along the eastern, southeastern and southwestern coastlines. Newer, alternative patterns involving inland urban development and remote coastal settlements remain minor. Tourism and recreation have stimulated the growth in snowfield towns in New South Wales and Victoria, and contributed to the growth of Alice Springs in central Australia. As the national capital and the centre of the commonwealth public service, Canberra has grown prodigiously, from 7050 in 1931 and 15 156 in 1947 to more than 100 000 in 1966 and 219 331 in 1981. Darwin and Alice Springs in the Northern Territory have grown considerably as government agencies have increased, and the growth of Bathurst and Orange in New South Wales and Albury–Wodonga on the New South Wales–Victorian border has also been stimulated by government activity.

New mining industries have created small, remote towns. The remote Pilbara



Mining has carried urban settlement into remote regions such as the Pilbara in Western Australia. Here, in 1974, residents of Goldsworthy, a Pilbara town developed in a joint venture by Australian and American mining companies, watch a game of Australian football between the Goldsworthy team and visitors from the Mount Goldsworthy Mining Associates Finucane Island export point.

AUSTRALIAN INFORMATION SERVICE

The town hall in the busy centre of Rockhampton, Qld, photographed by Harold J. Pollock, c1960.

NATIONAL LIBRARY



town of Port Hedland had almost 13 000 people in 1981, nearby Karratha had more than 8000, Dampier and Wickham together had almost 5000 and further inland, Newman with 5500, and Tom Price and Paraburdoo with just under 5000 between them, had all grown virtually from nothing in less than twenty years as a result of the development of rich iron ore and manganese deposits inland and natural gas from the northwest shelf off the Western Australian coast. Uranium around Katherine in the Northern Territory and aluminium at Weipa on the western side of Cape York had attracted smaller populations into other equally remote areas. The development of coal deposits had drawn 13 000 people to Moranbah, Dysart and Blackwater in Queensland's Bowen Basin. Oil exploration and mining in the Roma and Moomba fields of southern and southwest Queensland, in the Galilee Basin further north, and in the Lake Eyre and Cooper Basin region of South Australia, were also bringing people into very lightly populated areas, though not yet in the numbers that offshore fields in Bass Strait had brought to the area around Sale in Victoria's Gippsland.

Yet as a map of population density confirms, the concentration of population in a narrow southeastern coastal strip of the continent remains one of the most arresting features of Australian life. About 57 per cent of the entire population lives in just 0.24 per cent of Australia's total area—the Sydney basin stretching from Newcastle to Wollongong, the Port Phillip Bay area in Victoria and the area around the lower reaches of the Brisbane River in southern Queensland. Most of the rest lives along the eastern and southeastern coastal plains, or in tiny areas on Gulf St Vincent and in the Swan River area of Western Australia. Aborigines, with smaller overall numbers, have spread more evenly through the continent; for Europeans, most of Australia still seems proverbially 'empty'.

Such a map may be read as evidence of a European presence in Australia essentially marginal and tenuous. In 1939 a young poet, Alec Hope, saw his country this way when he composed a poem called 'Australia'. He mused:

They call her a young country, but they lie:
She is the last of lands, the emptiest . . .
And her five cities, like five teeming sores
Each drains her, a vast parasite robber-state
Where second-hand Europeans pullulate
Timidly on the edge of alien shores.

These are arresting metaphors. Australian cities, Hope told his readers 50 years ago, were 'teeming sores', 'parasites', 'robber-states' draining off the plunder of a continent still alien and hostile. The meagre roots of a new urban civilisation clung tenuously to the coastal fringe; the exotic plant budding and flowering only timidly in the Antipodes.

As Australian society reaches the bicentenary of European settlement, this melancholy vision remains powerful and in many ways appropriate. Yet there is another way to look at Australian urban civilisation. A population so overwhelmingly urban and coastal, and a continental interior so underpopulated in comparison, does not necessarily indicate a sense of alienation from the land or signify the failure of the new civilisation. Images of cities clinging to the coast can give a misleading view of the way in which a modern urban society works. For a city is not just a *place*, physically located within spatial boundaries; it is also a social system, a network of human activities. A city is the hub of social and economic relationships which spread out far beyond its spatial boundaries.

The combine header harvesting wheat on the western plains of New South Wales is locked into the economic system that makes Sydney a centre of railway



Aerial view of the centre of Hobart, capital of Tasmania. Photograph by Leo Meier.

WELDON TRANNIES

and road transport, banking, shipping and a host of related mercantile and financial operations. The oil rig in Queensland's Galilee Basin is a telex away from pandemonium in the stock exchanges of distant capital cities. Life for the people of the Pilbara towns is influenced by trade negotiations in Perth, Canberra or Tokyo. Satellite communications and the availability of technologies of work and recreation to those who can afford them—more or less irrespective of where they live—carry modern urban civilisation into the distant corners of the continent, and not at all timidly. The second-hand Europeans—many now with deep roots in this 'last of lands'—have built an urban civilisation which is at home, for better or for worse, with the whole continent.



It is a civilisation much more diverse culturally in the 1980s that it was before World War II. Urban Australia in 1939 had been fashioned mainly by English-speaking immigrants from the British islands, and by their native-born descendants. It was provincial, not cosmopolitan: a society fearful of Asia and isolated by distance and British imperial associations from the influences of continental or Mediterranean Europe. The coming of considerable numbers of Germans and Chinese to colonial Australia, and the arrival of almost 50 000 Italians in the twenty years after World War I, had altered the essentially British character of the society only marginally. The immigration mainstream, flowing from the British Isles for 150 years, had created and reinforced an insular British–Australian culture.

As the chapter on 'People' has shown, a flood of 'New Australians' began to arrive after World War II, altering the composition of the Australian population. Of the 2 855 000 immigrants arriving between 1947 and 1971, about 17 per cent eventually returned home, but of those who stayed only about four in every ten



Australia's large urban areas are coastal—entry points for people and goods from overseas, magnets for the wealth and resources of the rest of the continent. Here, in 1985, the Riverside Centre, under construction, rises above the Brisbane River.

Australian property, 1985.

were from the British Isles. About 60 per cent were not Anglo-Celts, and English was not their first language. Half were from continental Europe, including Italians (11.7 per cent), Greeks (7.7), Yugoslavs (6.3), Dutch (4.6), Germans (3.9), Poles (3.5), Maltese (2.4), and many others from smaller national groups.

The great majority of these newcomers settled in Australia's capital cities. By the middle of the 1970s more Greeks lived in Melbourne than in any other city in the world outside Greece. After establishing strong ethnic communities in the poorer inner-city districts of Fitzroy, Collingwood, Richmond, Prahran and Port Melbourne, Greek-Australians had moved north into the better working-class suburbs of Brunswick, Northcote and Preston, west into Footscray, and south into Caulfield and Oakleigh. Some among the more successful of the original migrants and their wealthier, better educated children, had begun to prefer outer-suburban middle-class areas and to depend less on the existence of tightly knit Greek-Australian communities. By the 1970s, however, the Greeks had contributed so much to Melbourne's urban kaleidoscope that increasing integration could never involve the assimilation of Greek-Australians into traditional Australian urban culture. A multicultural melding had transformed the postwar city.

In Sydney the pattern was similar. Greek-Australians concentrated in central Sydney, South Sydney, Marrickville and Botany—all older industrial districts—and their communities gradually extended west along railway routes from Marrickville towards Bankstown and from South Sydney into Ashfield, Burwood and Strathfield. Postwar Sydney also attracted a large community of Italians, who settled mainly in the inner western suburbs of Leichhardt, Ashfield, Drummoyne and Concord, adjacent to the western fringes of the Greek-Australian community, as well as in the outer western suburb of Fairfield. Of the other capitals, Perth acquired the strongest Greek and Italian ethnic communities; but wherever they settled, such communities added a distinctive element to Australian urban culture. Along with smaller numbers of Maltese and Lebanese immigrants, they maintained communities more cohesive than those of other ethnic groups, and more obviously foreign and exotic.

Often the newcomers had no choice but to settle in one of the larger cities. Three in every four Greek and Cypriot migrants arriving from 1947 to 1971 were unskilled, as were almost half the immigrants from Italy; and while 86.2 per cent of British migrants during this period received assisted passages, more than 70 per cent of all southern European migrants had to find their own fares. To add to their language difficulties, such people often arrived already in debt and with financial obligations at home to add to the costs of establishing themselves in Australia. So they sought out cheap urban districts close to workplaces and public transport; accepted meagre, crowded living space as a means of saving money; where possible worked at second and even third jobs; and relied on ethnic and family networks to survive. Decaying inner-city slums were the only landfall they could make in what, for them, was still 'terra Australis incognita': an unknown south land in which they would have to struggle to make good.

Like earlier pioneers, these new Australians set out to rebuild a familiar world in an alien environment. Urban life was itself a challenge. Remembering the hardships of the early postwar Greek immigrants, Archbishop Stylianos, the Greek Orthodox Primate of Australia, pointed out in 1983:

They came mostly from the country rather than the towns; they were not wealthy but simple people, and had to face an entirely different civilisation and way of life—all the difficulties associated with moving from an agricultural to an industrial kind of life.

Rebuilding a familiar world in a new land and enriching the traditions of urban life in Australia. Here, on the Man O'War Steps of Sydney's Opera House, the Mediterranean custom of blessing the fishing fleet is observed in 1979 by Bishop Bede Heather, while his largely Italian-Australian audience watch from the Nuovo-S-Guiseppe and other vessels.

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Orthodox Christianity became a vital source of continuity with the past and a focus of community sense and ethnic identity for Greek-Australians. Its arresting, often massive ecclesiastical architecture symbolised the arrival of new cultural traditions in Australian society. And among southern European migrants generally, patterns of language and pronunciation, styles of dress, cuisine, recreation and entertainment all persisted in the ethnic communities, bringing new kinds of restaurants, cafes, theatres, clubs and shops into Australian cities.

Since the early 1970s two further changes have complicated the impact of ethnic groups on Australian urban society. Firstly, while migration from continental Europe virtually ceased, immigrants from Asia made up 30.8 per cent of arrivals between 1971 and 1981. Like earlier waves of southern European migration, they created cohesive ethnic communities in poorer areas of Australian cities and maintained strong attachments to the political loyalties, divisions and cultural traditions of their home countries.

The second change has involved the impact of 'New Australians' on the traditional Anglo-Celtic mainstream of Australian urban life. When 'Nino Culotta', the Italian migrant hero of John O'Grady's *They're a weird mob*, continued to behave like an Italian in the Sydney of the mid-1950s, he was warned: 'Cut it out. There is no better way of life than that of the Australian.' In time, however, the Australian way of life was influenced deeply by such people. Australian cities may have had a less authentically urban culture had it not been for the enrichment brought by thousands of 'New Australians'.

In his famous history of Australia in World War I, C.E.W. Bean observed that even city-bred Australians were at heart 'bushmen' in their values, virtues and vices, implying that no strong, independent urban culture had developed in Australia. This view still persisted when the novelist and literary critic, Vance Palmer, explained in 1930 that he did not write about cities because 'the life of our cities has been definitely inferior to that of the country ... the life of our cities is provincial and colourless'. Five years later, in an attempt to explain the absence of urban themes in Australian literature, Frank Wilmot, a Melbourne poet who wrote as 'Furnley Maurice', argued that urban culture remained derivative. '[T]he backblocks are the basis of authentic Australian life and character', he wrote. 'They mean an independent development compared with the easily influenced and imitative development of the cities.' More recently, another writer, Frank Moorhouse, has remarked that the 'bush' still provided the 'inner landscape' of his own generation. Moorhouse was born in Nowra on the New South Wales south coast in 1938 and grew up there believing that the evocation of the 'bush' in the works of writers such as Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, Miles Franklin and Steele Rudd captured something 'desirably "Australian" in a way that my coastal life was not'. Only in his late twenties, he says, did he rebel against the idea that rural life alone was 'authentically "Australian"' and recognise the reality that Australians were 'city people'.

By then, in the 1960s, ethnic influences were among the forces challenging the traditional values. The Australian masculine cult figure, 'mateship', with its origins in the rudimentary, male-oriented societies of shearing-sheds, gold-diggings and pioneer settlements, was like a rustic character lounging in urban society. Southern Europeans, in particular, often found the atmosphere of an Australian pub no substitute for the intimacy of a Mediterranean tavern. Its apparent social antipathy towards women, and its suspicion of male emotional or intellectual self-revelation, seemed to many of them alien and unsatisfactory. A short story written in 1983 by Giampaolo Pertosi, a naturalised Australian, tells of 'Adriano', an Italian migrant, who fails to find in the pubs or clubs of Sydney the sense of community,

Reshaping suburbia. 'New Australians' moving out into the suburbs have introduced new styles and symbols. There are nuances of Mediterranean living in the entrance to the Riccio family's home in Winchcombe Street, Haberfield, Sydney, photographed in 1984.

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At 40 Lawrence Street, Woonona, near Wollongong, Jack Zuiderwyk evokes the landscape of his native Holland in the front garden of an Australian weatherboard and fibro cottage.

RUTH WALLER

camaraderie and genuine human contact which he remembered from his homeland. Sometimes, according to Pertosi, Adriano doubts that Australians are capable of genuine human feelings and wonders whether 'Lawson's idealised mateship' is not 'just a password to the freemasonry of soulless machismo or the much-labored bond of what is basically a superficial relationship?'

Yet it is a measure of the transformation of Australian urban culture that this Italian–Australian critique of 'mateship' appeared in the *Bulletin*, the very medium through which Lawson, publishing his poems and prose in praise of mateship almost a century earlier, had helped to fix the spirit of the 'bush' in Australian urban consciousness. When in July 1983 the *Bulletin* devoted a literary supplement to the life of ethnic groups in Australia, the new preoccupation was specifically urban. It portrayed Australian cities as the crucial arenas in which a future Australian national character was being shaped. The supplement was introduced by Angelo Loukakis, a Greek–Australian writer from Sydney, who argued that 'At present and for a long time to come, what "Australian" means is open to negotiation . . . In a society as young as Australia's nothing can be fixed and final on this subject.' Loukakis was referring especially to Australian literature, and what he said applied also to many other aspects of Australian life and culture. The great migration of the past half-century has altered the urban kaleidoscope, and if the new pattern will take many years to emerge, it seems certain to be richer, more diverse, more complex, than the old.

The first shadowy outlines may perhaps be appearing in places like Wollongong and Port Kembla, New South Wales south coast industrial cities with exceptionally high proportions of foreign-born Australians. The Wollongong Municipal Gallery contains an art collection named for Bronius ('Bob') Sredersas, its donor, a Lithuanian-born labourer who worked in the Port Kembla steelworks after his arrival in Australia at the end of the war. After investing what he could save from a labourer's wages in the purchase of 31 pieces of antique china and 76 paintings (including works by Australian artists Hans Heysen, Ernest Buckmaster, Norman Lindsay, A.H. Fullwood and Will Ashton), Sredersas turned up at the town hall in July 1976 and donated them to the local community. He was an exceptional man, even in Cringila, the Illawarra hill suburb close to the BHP–Australian Iron and Steelworks, which became known as Wollongong's 'Little Europe'. But his cultural background perhaps helps explain the unselfconscious appreciation of art and high culture which he carried across a class barrier that such appreciation breached rarely in traditional Australian society. The Illawarra remains among the most depressed areas in the country, with high unemployment and living standards low by comparison with other parts of Australia. Yet in some ways its urban communities are unusually rich. There are more than 100 ethnic associations, clubs and church groups in Wollongong alone, and the festivals, languages, customs and cuisine of Europe and Asia have been Australianised there, and in the process have changed the meaning of being Australian.



Australians emerged from the 1930s depression sensitive about poor housing conditions, especially in inner-city slums. There was agitation for slum clearance in Melbourne and Sydney in the late 1930s, and in New South Wales the Labor government under William McKell set up a state Housing Commission in 1941. Two years later the Commonwealth Housing Commission recommended a national program of public housing for the disadvantaged and advised the federal

government to make commonwealth housing grants to the states contingent on the implementation of this and other measures of urban planning. Its report was a milestone in Australian urban history. As well as calling for public housing, it advocated slum clearance, the decentralisation of urban commercial and industrial zones and the provision of city parks and recreational reserves—all important issues in subsequent urban planning.

Frenetic home building became a feature of Australian life in the late 1940s and 1950s. Governments, developers, small contractors and owner-builders confronted the chronic housing shortage produced partly by the decline in home building during the depression and in wartime, and partly by the high rate of postwar immigration. In this construction boom the program of public housing for the disadvantaged, envisaged in the report of the Housing Commission in 1944, had to take second place to the aspirations of average Australian families. Australians generally placed more value on owning their own homes than did people in North America or Europe, and regarded long-term residential leasing as a poor alternative. The Menzies government was sensitive to these strong national values, hoping that home ownership would strengthen social and political conservatism. Commonwealth housing policy thus placed increasing emphasis on assisting low income earners to *buy* homes. The original idea of providing subsidised rental accommodation was not abandoned, but schemes for promoting home buying were paramount.

The results, as census figures on the nature of occupancy of private dwellings in Australia since 1947 show, were impressive.

The great value Australians placed on home ownership produced a postwar housing boom. Here, in Whyalla, South Australia, a family works together to realise the 'Australian dream'.

MAGAZINE PROMOTIONS



OCCUPIED PRIVATE DWELLINGS IN AUSTRALIA, 1947–81

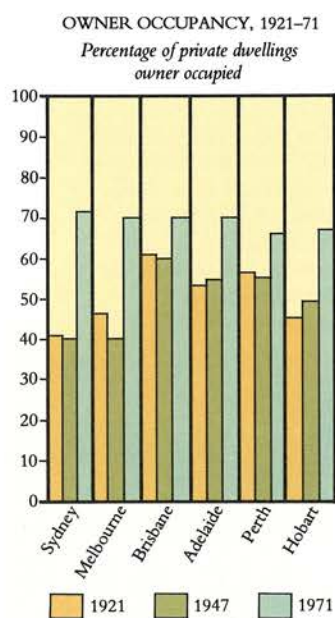
| Year | <i>Total occupied private dwellings ('000)</i> | | | |
|-------|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | 1947 | 1954 | 1961 | 1966 |
| Total | 1 874 000 | 2 343 000 | 2 782 000 | 3 152 000 |

| Year | 1971 | 1976 | 1981 |
|-------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Total | 3 671 000 | 4 141 000 | 4 669 000 |

| Year | <i>Nature of occupancy (per cent)</i> | | | | | | |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | 1947 | 1954 | 1961 | 1966 | 1971 | 1976 | 1981 |
| Owner or purchaser | 53.4 | 63.3 | 70.3 | 71.4 | 68.8 | 68.4 | 70.1 |
| Tenant | 44.0 | 34.3 | 27.6 | 27.6 | 27.9 | 25.9 | 25.7 |
| government | na | 4.3 | 4.2 | 5.2 | 5.6 | 5.2 | 5.1 |
| private | na | 30.0 | 23.3 | 21.5 | 22.3 | 20.7 | 20.6 |
| Other | 2.6 | 2.4 | 2.2 | 1.9 | 3.3 | 5.8 | 4.2 |

NB 'Government' tenants include those in dwellings owned by government housing authorities; 'Other' includes rent-free accommodation.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Social indicators: Australia*, no 4, 1984, table 8.3, p 282.



These figures trace one of the most important social developments in postwar Australian society: a significant increase in rates of home ownership. There had been a brief, sharp increase in owner-occupation in the 1920s, followed by a drop in the 1930s. The end result had been a situation in 1947 not substantially different from that 36 years earlier. Then, in the quarter-century after about 1947, a much higher proportion of Australians than ever before managed to realise the dream of a home of their own. Figures for the capital cities indicate that the change was more pronounced in some places than in others:

In Sydney and Melbourne especially, owner-occupancy increased greatly in just 24 years, as individuals, families, financial institutions and governments placed immense emphasis on improving the social and economic circumstances of urban domestic life. The change involved more than increased security of tenure. Living conditions became less cramped. The number of persons per room in houses, flats and other private dwellings in Australia fell from 0.77 in 1947 to 0.54 in 1981—a major change. Occupancy rates fell from 4.5 persons per house in 1947 to only 2.9 in 1981. Domestic facilities also improved. The number of houses and flats in urban areas without electricity fell from 28 per thousand in 1947 to only one per thousand in 1971; and although about one home in five in the major cities remained without mains sewerage in 1971, the proportion without flush toilets had fallen from about 25 per cent in 1947 to below 5 per cent.

But the obsession with ownership had brought problems as well as satisfactions. People were often too ready to make sacrifices to own a home, and financial over-commitments led to economic and domestic trauma for many families. Some who were not owner-occupiers in the 1970s and 1980s had *chosen* to be tenants; many, however, were among the poor and socially disadvantaged of the urban population. They were caught in a vicious circle. A family too poor to buy a home could often ill-afford to rent one: chronic housing shortages and competition for homes created a highly inflationary real estate market, and higher prices meant rising rents. The families caught in this predicament were precisely those for whom public housing had been envisaged in 1944. But while the provision of Housing Commission accommodation in postwar Australian cities certainly helped some of them, many others were excluded. When the Henderson Poverty Commission reported in 1975 that fewer than one-third of Australia's poor could be accommodated in public housing, its findings shocked urban planners, many of whom had come to regard postwar housing policy as a success story.

The casualties of the system came from social groups that included the young, the unskilled, the unemployed, and those who lacked—or had lost—financial security in their domestic arrangements. Of the 1 888 000 Australian heads of households who owned their home outright in 1982, only 5.6 per cent were younger than 34 years of age yet more than a third of those paying off homes were in this age group. With recent mortgages, they were often burdened with the highest loan repayments. But others were even worse off. For families on low incomes, or with a breadwinner experiencing prolonged unemployment, home ownership in many cases remained a forlorn dream. Government statistics for 1982 showed that among young families (with a household head under 30 years of age), those in the lowest income bracket were only a third as likely to be purchasing a home as were otherwise similar families on average incomes.

Female heads of households have always been less likely than male heads to own or be buying the family home. In 1982 only 25 per cent of households headed by males lived in rented or rent-free accommodation, compared with almost 40 per cent of households headed by females; and of households with *dependants*, 78.2 per cent of those headed by males were owned outright or being purchased, compared



Tenants unable to afford homes could become casualties in an inflationary real estate market. On 26 November 1972, anxiety is etched on the faces of Woolloomooloo tenants as they listen to Reverend Father Edmund Campion, secretary of the Woolloomooloo Residents' Action Group, outline plans for fighting to keep the 'Loo' a residential area.

FAIRFAX PHOTO LIBRARY

with only 37.2 per cent of those headed by females. Because banks, building societies and other financial institutions designed their lending policies to meet the circumstances of married-couple families headed by males, women separated from husbands were especially likely to be living in rented accommodation. These policies discriminated not only against women, but also against one-parent families generally, and against individuals living outside families—all household types that have grown in number since the late 1960s.

HOUSEHOLD TYPES, 1969–82

| | 1969 | % | 1982 | % |
|-------------------------|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|
| All families | 3 155 200 | 100.0 | 4 002 600 | 100.0 |
| married-couple families | 2 809 900 | 89.1 | 3 466 400 | 86.6 |
| one-parent families | 124 600 | 3.9 | 306 200 | 7.7 |
| other families | 220 700 | 7.0 | 230 000 | 5.7 |
| Non-family individuals | 806 000 | | 1 699 000 | |

Source: *Social indicators: Australia*, no 4, 1984, table 2.16, p 44.



Urban poverty. With little access to housing finance and often unable to afford home loan repayments or normal rents, urban Aborigines are among the most disadvantaged of all Australians. Here a group of Aborigines is pictured in the crowded terrace houses of Caroline Street, Redfern, in 1983.

FAIRFAX PHOTO LIBRARY

This growing diversity in the types of households in which Australians have been living helps explain why the rise in owner-occupancy between 1947 and 1971 has given way to more or less stationary levels of home ownership in the 1970s and early 1980s. More than 1.5 million Australians lived outside families in the early 1980s, and a small but growing percentage lived in the kinds of families that experienced lower than average levels of owner-occupancy. Together with continuing problems of poverty and unemployment, the slowness of financial institutions in adjusting lending policies to new social realities denied a considerable minority of Australians access to the dream of home ownership.

Yet the central change of the past half-century in the way Australians live remains the growth of home ownership. The high levels reached by the early 1970s appeared to have stabilised in the mid-1980s, leaving Australians with what is probably the highest rate of owner-occupancy in the world.



Most of these home owners live in houses, not in flats or units. Many flats had been built in Australian cities in the 1920s, but during the late 1940s and early 1950s the home building boom was confined largely to the provision of detached houses in new suburbs around the capital cities. Only in the late 1950s did rapid flat and home unit building resume.

In some areas flats have been built to provide cheap rental accommodation for people unable to buy houses; elsewhere, people have preferred flats or units because they seem more convenient or because they are close to the amenities of a city centre. Despite such considerations, however, the demand for detached houses remains paramount among Australian home-seekers, and suburbia remains the characteristic habitat of Australian families.

The suburban pattern of detached houses on individual allotments, normal for most Australians since colonial times, has become more entrenched than ever since the war. If Sydney, for example, is considered as a series of concentric rings, with the city at the centre, suburbs such as Mosman, Drummoyne, Marrickville, Botany,

Randwick and Woollahra forming an inner rings, suburbs such as Manly, Lane Cove, Ryde, Auburn, Strathfield, Bankstown and Hurstville forming a middle ring, and areas such as Warringah, Hornsby, Baulkham Hills, Blacktown, Penrith, Liverpool, Campbelltown and Sutherland forming the outer ring, the postwar growth pattern has been one of outward expansion. The population of the city centre fell sharply, from 214 000 in 1947 to 145 000 in 1971; and the population of the inner ring fell slightly, from 582 000 to 567 000. But the middle ring grew rapidly, from 635 000 to 960 000; and the outer ring spectacularly, from 262 000 in 1947 to more than 1.1 million in 1971. The depopulation of the centre and the inner ring was slowing by 1971, for although many older residents continued to leave there was a compensating movement back into some inner suburbs. But the mushrooming of outer suburbia remained the dominant trend.

While higher living standards made this boom possible, other considerations made the suburban way of life attractive. For one thing, the construction and finance industries were geared to it. More positively, the lure of the suburbs involved the prospect of a 'good investment', the attractions of greater privacy, the promise of being able to combine some of the values of rural living with the practical advantages of urban life, and the belief, deeply felt, that the quieter, less hectic environment of suburbia was the best place for families. Cities were for major shopping, for work, for special entertainment; suburbs were places to live in.

Townhouses in a new development at Emu Ridge, near the Belconnen town centre, ACT, in 1978.

AUSTRALIAN INFORMATION SERVICE

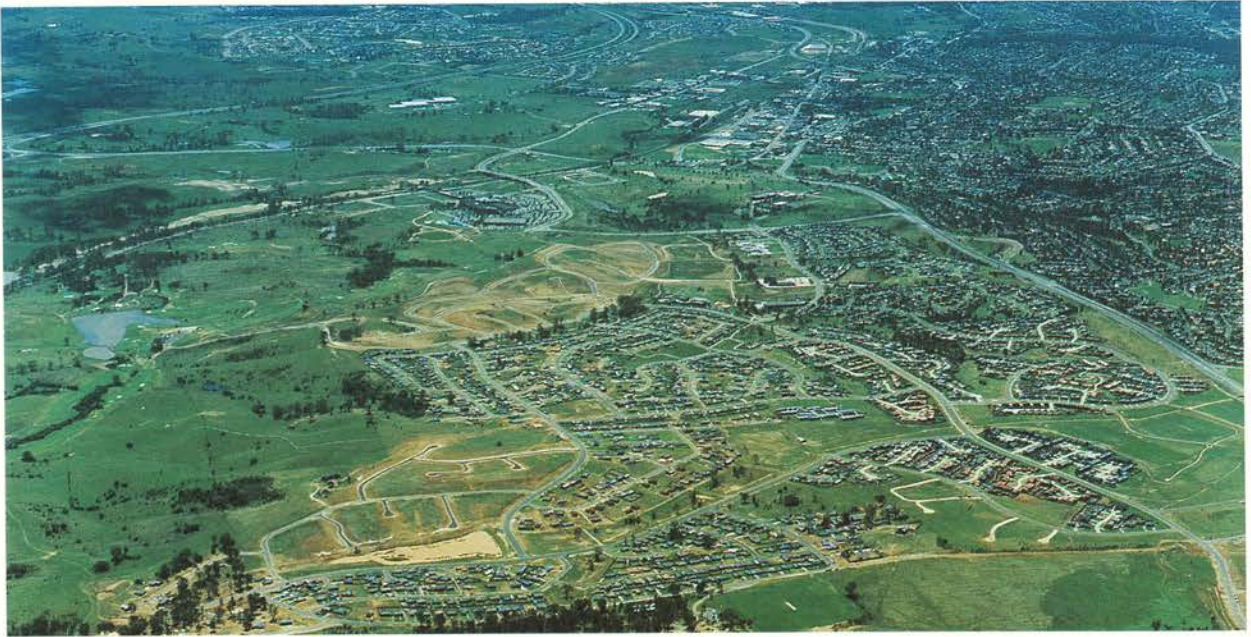


FLATS AND PRIVATE HOUSES IN AUSTRALIA, 1947-71

| | 1947 | 1954 | 1961 | 1966 | 1971 | 1981 |
|----------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Private houses | 1 538 000 | 2 008 000 | 2 293 000 | 2 683 000 | 3 119 000 | 3 716 000 |
| Flats | 111 000 | 27 000 | 218 000 | 346 000 | 453 000 | 686 000 |
| Flats per 100 houses | 7.2 | 6.3 | 9.1 | 12.9 | 14.5 | 18.5 |

Sources: Neutze, *Urban development in Australia*, p 144; *Social indicators: Australia*, no 4, 1984, table 8.1, p 282.

Historically, most Australians appear to have thought this way, preferring the suburban alternative whenever it has been practicable. Just as a superior railway system had permitted colonial Melbourne to spread more widely than any other



colonial city, so, three-quarters of a century later, the motor car permitted millions of Australians to live out of city centres and to cope with diffuse patterns of work, residence, commerce, education and recreation. A study conducted in Newcastle in the mid-1960s confirmed the existence of a basic suburban preference. When asked what things were of 'major importance' in choosing where to live, the 676 respondents stressed environmental considerations. They wanted a home, 'Not in a high density area' (113 respondents), 'Not close to industries' (308), in a 'bush setting' (200), with 'good views' (199) and with a 'good atmosphere for children' (181). Many preferred new suburban developments, presumably because there they could get a new house. But they also wanted urban comforts. The availability of sewerage reticulation was considered of 'major importance' by the second highest group's response (211 respondents), and such things as the availability of public transport (121) and proximity to employment (187), shopping centres (129) and schools (167) were also stressed. The only other considerations mentioned by at least a hundred people were the nature of the house itself (101) and the desirability of locations away from main roads (also 101). These overall figures disguised significant differences between people from different socio-occupational and income levels. Those of higher occupational status, income and education placed more emphasis on bush surroundings and good views, and greatly disliked high-density housing; unskilled or semi-skilled workers and people on lower incomes tended to emphasise proximity to public transport and shops. The main difference between them which influenced their housing preferences was probably car ownership. In 1974 70 per cent of Australians journeyed to work by car, while 18 per cent used public transport. In Sydney and Melbourne, with the best public transport systems, the figures were 62 per cent and 66 per cent respectively; in Perth and Canberra more than three-quarters of all journeys to work were by car.

While the motor car helped resolve the dilemma by combining access to work and to other city amenities with a preference for lower density suburban residence, it also created new problems of urban pollution and traffic congestion which neither freeway construction, emissions control legislation nor improved public

The growth of an outer ring area like Campbelltown, in Sydney's western suburbs, depends partly on good transport links with other parts of the city. The picture shows arterial road and freeway developments cutting through new suburbs, c1980.

MACARTHUR DEVELOPMENT BOARD

Regional shopping complexes, promising 'one-stop shopping', have become the modern suburban equivalent of the village store. The Carindale Regional Shopping Centre in outer suburban Brisbane in 1985 has parking areas already crowded by customers from the new suburbs nearby. Australian property, 1985.



transport has entirely overcome. Such problems have contributed to a decline of the city centre as the location of industry, commerce, employment and entertainment, although in Perth, with shorter distances and an accessible centre, the process has been less pronounced than in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney. In 1945, 55 per cent of jobs available in Sydney were in the city centre, but by 1971 the proportion had fallen to 33 per cent. In some types of employment, especially retailing and community services, the suburbanisation of work had been particularly pronounced.

Decentralisation also occurred in entertainment and recreation. Licensed clubs set up by sporting bodies, ethnic groups and associations such as the RSL and trade union or workers' organisations proliferated in postwar urban communities. The Leagues Clubs in Sydney, with their huge memberships, ostentatious premises, lavish entertainments and (since 1956) ubiquitous poker machines, are well-known examples of the suburbanisation of amenities previously more or less confined to city centres and restricted to exclusive clienteles. The absence of poker machines contributed to the smaller scale of club development outside New South Wales, but the distribution of good restaurants, theatres and evening entertainments were part of a common process. The golden age of the licensed clubs stretched from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. Rising wages in the service and entertainment industries then made them less viable economically, and growing access to the domestic spa, swimming pool and video recorder in the 1980s has reinforced the earlier tendency of television to make the family home the primary centre of recreation and entertainment. As the secretary of the Balmain Leagues Club remarked in 1982, explaining the club's difficulties, the membership of 17 500 was not falling, but the members were spending less time and money on the premises. 'Our biggest problem is with entertainment', he said. It was 'just not attracting people as much as it used to'.



The depopulation of city centres and the decentralisation of manufacturing and commerce removed some of the squalor from Australian inner-city environments. At the same time, although many of the migrant settlers had joined the exodus to the suburbs once they could afford to, others had remained, and their growing wealth and leisure were invested creatively in their much-maligned surroundings. By the early 1960s a growing minority of Australians, native-born as well as

immigrants, prized an inner-city address. Just as nostalgia for rural living was part of the suburban dream, so a new nostalgia for the inner city, for quaint terraces, ancient sandstone or basalt, cosmopolitan associations and the widest possible choice of amenities, wreathed dreams about names like Carlton and Paddington.

It had long been fashionable to denigrate the suburban way of life. In *The lucky country* Donald Horne wrote that

‘suburbanism’, one way or another, is likely to be the target of practically all intellectuals. And since most Australians live in the suburbs of cities this means that intellectuals hate almost the whole community.

Anti-suburbanism had become part of the conventional wisdom of the socially sophisticated in modern Australia, and because the majority of such people were themselves suburbanites, their anti-suburbanism often took on an apologetic and self-mocking tone. It also managed to become simultaneously an orthodoxy of liberal and left-wing thought and a favourite theme in conservative circles. The conservative journal *Quadrant* often portrayed suburban culture as mediocre, complacent and conformist. In the summer of 1957–58 *Quadrant* carried an article entitled, ‘Suburbia: a cultural defeat’. A few months later it published the architect Robin Boyd’s view that while the suburban ‘cult of bald brick-veneerdom’ had ‘twisted natural instincts’, it somehow remained ‘typical of the non-committal conservative-contemporary dreariness of today’. Meanwhile, Barry Humphries was beginning his famous career using an archetypal suburbanite, ‘Edna Everage’, as a vehicle for biting satire.

From the left of politics, critics have attacked suburbia not only because it seems dull, mediocre and narrowly domestic, but for the very things which the conservative Menzies government welcomed and encouraged. There is a deep ambiguity in Australian politics. The ownership and control of economic activity is restricted to a small minority, and most people work for wages, dependent on economic developments over which they have little influence. Yet such people seem to lack a deep class consciousness. They rarely react in class terms. Other influences seem to blunt class divisions and maintain social homogeneity.

Suburbanism must take a good deal of the praise or blame for this. It is an environment free from obvious signs of class difference, in which the conflicts and solidarities of the workplace are reduced to secondary importance. The workplace is divorced from the rest of life. For many suburbanites, status and self-respect reside primarily in the roles of husband, wife, homemaker, parent, handyman and neighbour. Such people react emotionally as consumers, concerned about changes in wages, incomes or taxes which might affect their living standards, but remain unmoved by the alleged fundamental contradictions in capitalism. Work is something to be left at the office or forgotten with the punching of the time clock: ‘workaholics’ have their priorities wrong. As Tim Rowse wrote in 1978, while latent class divisions might be strong, there is in Australia ‘an undeniably strong tendency for these divisions to be obscured in the forms of life led outside the workplace’. People who believed that Australian society would improve if shaken out of its suburban complacency welcomed—and sometimes joined—the drift back to the inner city. The trend was in part a reaction to the postwar suburban boom, a quest for fuller, more creative, lifestyles, a rejection of suburbia as narrow, conformist and complacently conservative.

There has been a feminist as well as a class basis to such anti-suburbanism, a perception that women suffer most from the separation between the arena of business and industry and the arena of family life. Most men have opportunities to participate in both areas, but many women who live in the suburbs are locked into

A renovated terrace in Sydney's Paddington offers, to those people who can afford it, elegant living close to the city centre. Photograph by Kevin Diletti, 1986.



Gentrification. A cartoonist looks at the social transformation that occurs as professional people replace working-class occupants of inner-city areas. Nation Review, 17–23 Aug 1973.

Opposite:

The suburban dream of a family home means different things to different Australians. Working-class couples with a minimum deposit and a mortgage may aspire to a two-bedroomed, flat fibro cottage, whereas for the wealthy, family life often begins in an architect-designed house in a 'desirable' suburb. As mortgages are paid off, or incomes rise, some families seek a larger home in a better suburb; others improve their existing home by brick-veneering or building extensions. Here, in Kalgoorlie Place, Sutherland, in Sydney's outer ring, a basic double-fronted brick house (left) stands beside a once-similar house now with a popular 'Cape Cod' extension. On the right is a large, architect-designed home with balconies, built-in garage and extensive living areas.

a narrowly domestic form of existence. In *Damned whores and God's police* (1975), an influential contribution to Australian feminist history, Anne Summers wrote of the suburban dream as a housewife's nightmare:

after a few years of marriage, [a young woman] could be isolated and marooned in a remote suburb in an under-furnished house with a couple of tiny children whose constant demands left her continually feeling tired and depressed. Her husband could be away for twelve or more hours a day if he had long distances to travel to work and also tried to fit in part-time study or a few beers with his friends at the end of the day. Far from feeling fulfilled, a young woman might start to feel cheated ... as she watched herself disintegrate from loneliness, overwork and boredom.

As such anti-suburban arguments might suggest, many of the people who began to show a preference for inner-city living were young, well-educated professional couples, progressive in their social views, with both partners pursuing a career. Those unable to afford the spiralling costs of Paddington or Carlton carried a similar outlook into less expensive inner-city areas. Many preferred a flat or home unit close to the city to a detached house in the outer suburbs.

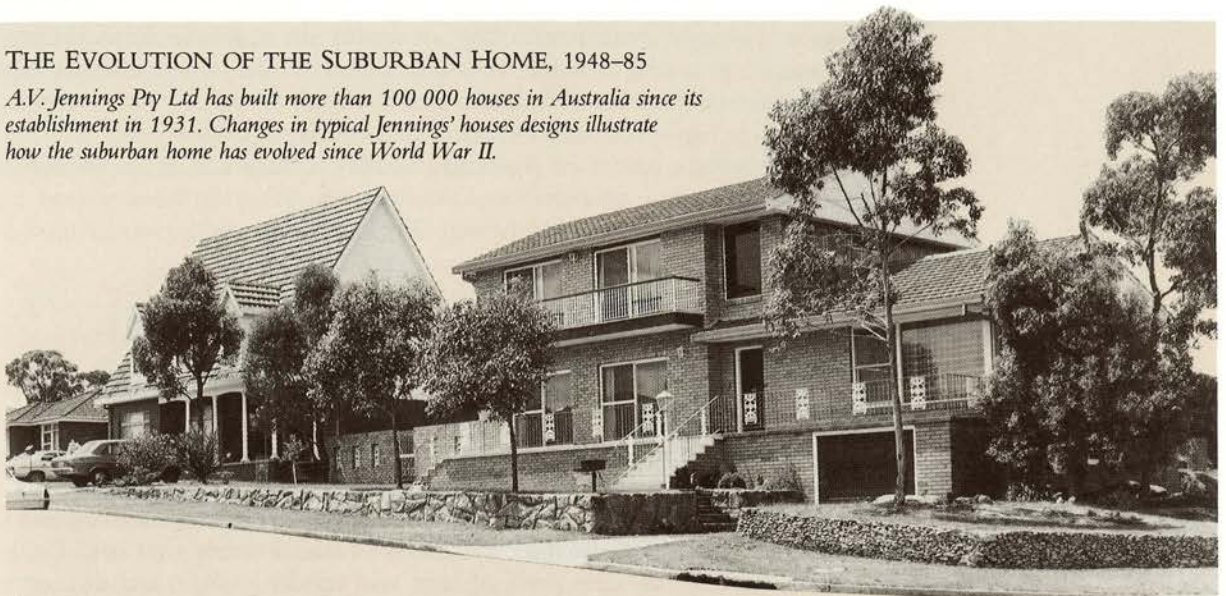
But 'gentrification' was not the only transformation occurring in the inner-city areas from the late 1950s. There were slum clearance projects in Sydney and Melbourne involving the building of high-density housing commission accommodation, as well as rapid private building of home units in inner-ring suburbs. By 1971, flats and home units completed in Sydney within the previous thirteen years accounted for more than a third of all residential accommodation in Mosman, North Sydney and Botany, and about a quarter in some middle-ring suburbs. Young people who could not afford an inner-city house and retired people wanting the convenience of unit living, with shops and hospitals nearby, created strong demand for such accommodation, both as owners and as tenants.

Less conventional impulses were also at work. Lifestyles and social arrangements incongruous in the domestic world of suburbia could flourish openly in large cities, and had done so in Sydney and Melbourne for decades. But the more tolerant, pluralistic social environment of the 1960s encouraged social experimentation. 'Alternative lifestyles' emerged from the counter culture of the anti-Vietnam protest, from feminism, from the new candour with which Australians regarded homosexuality, and from religious cults such as the 'Moonies' and Hare Krishna. The resulting social patterns included group housing, communes, squatting, vagrancy and various kinds of charitable and welfare refuges. Gay communities emerged in particular areas of Sydney and Melbourne, and in both cities other parts of the inner city became home to the sinister world of drug addicts and pushers, prostitutes and illegal casinos, a world of transient people, exploiters and exploited, living on their wits around Kings Cross or Fitzroy Street, St Kilda.

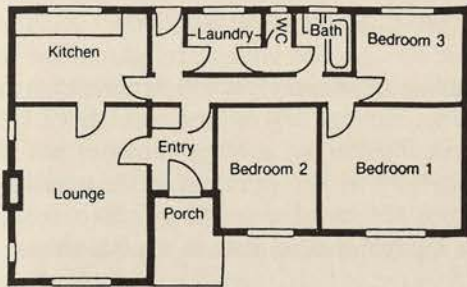
Yet most Australians who can afford to live in the suburbs still choose to. Like any other social arrangement, suburban living demands compromises and restricts individual freedoms, sometimes unfairly. Women are perhaps its most frequent victims; children its main beneficiaries. But suburban culture is not static. The number of married women marooned miserably in a suburban home may or may not be large, but proportionately it has fallen: whereas only 12.6 per cent of married women had paid employment in 1954, over 40 per cent had jobs in 1974, and the proportion was still rising. Some were still regarded as 'working wives', and their income as a 'second income', but it is hard not to view the change as a widening of opportunity. At the same time, some women remain at home by choice. When the University of Sydney's Community Research Centre studied the Baulkham

THE EVOLUTION OF THE SUBURBAN HOME, 1948-85

A.V. Jennings Pty Ltd has built more than 100 000 houses in Australia since its establishment in 1931. Changes in typical Jennings' houses designs illustrate how the suburban home has evolved since World War II.

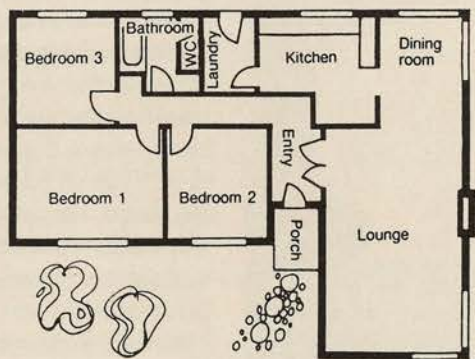


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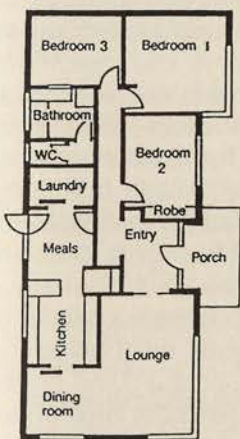
(1) A 1948-style house dominated by relatively large bedrooms and kitchen. The lounge is the only entertaining and recreation area.

2



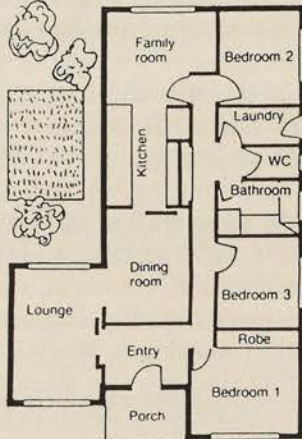
(2) A Jennings design in 1960. The kitchen is smaller, the lounge larger, and there is a dining room.

3



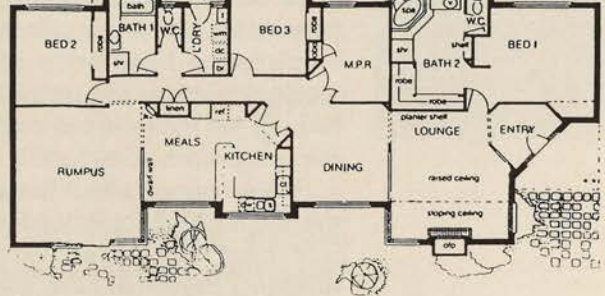
(3) A Jennings plan typical of 1965-70. The bedrooms are smaller and isolated from the expanded living areas. The meals room is the forerunner of the family rooms of later designs and venue for TV dinners.

4



(4) A Jennings home of 1975 is designed for increasingly complex living arrangements. The family room is separated from the formal entertainment areas, and the expanded living areas take advantage of the outdoor patio.

5



(5) In 1980-85, bedrooms take up a much smaller proportion of domestic space than in 1948, and parents' and children's bedrooms are now at opposite ends of the house. The main bedroom has an 'en suite' with built-in wardrobes, shower, spa and toilet. The allocation of living space reflects an increased variety of uses, confirming Hugh Stretton's perception that Australians have learnt to make ingenious uses of their domestic space. Note: Four of these designs were examined by David Elias in 'Changing dreams', Age, 11 Mar 1986. A.V. JENNINGS PTY LTD

Hills Shire in Sydney's northwest in 1981, it found that in this fairly wealthy area where economic pressures to work were fewer than in many other suburbs, wives generally 'preferred their suburban roles as full-time mothers'. Few wanted to work, although 'a high proportion of them had tertiary qualifications'.

From the suburban nature of Australian society it does not necessarily follow that Australians are dull, philistine and conservative. 'You do not have to be a mindless conformist to choose suburban life', Hugh Stretton has written in a deft rebuttal of the caricature, pointing out that

Most of the best poets and painters and inventors and protestors choose it too. It reconciles access to work and city with private, adaptable, self-expressive living space at home. Plenty of adults love that living space, and sub-divide it ingeniously. For children it really has no rivals.

Certainly, the worst tragedies of Australian suburbia involve not its inhabitants, but rather the people who dream the suburban dream in vain.

The median cost of a block of land in Sydney in 1950 was less than \$700, and for every home selling for more than \$4670 there was another that sold for less. Sixteen years later the median price of land was \$5020 a block, and the median price of house and land \$13 040. The figures had risen to \$20 200 and \$30 500 by 1974, and in 1985 a median-priced home was costing about \$90 000.

Income levels alone do not provide a fair comparison with such figures. The real cost of housing also varies with interest rates and taxation levels. After twenty years of generally low interest rates for housing, average borrowing rates have risen significantly since the mid-1960s. The tax burden on average incomes has also risen—from 5 per cent of earnings in 1954–55 to 17.3 per cent in the middle of the 1970s. If interest charges are considered, the trend over the past two decades has been for both rent and mortgage repayments to rise as a proportion of disposable income.

As the economy slumped after 1985, real incomes began to decline. Interest rates remained high in an increasingly deregulated financial market, and although the Hawke government seemed determined not to scrap its 13.5 per cent ceiling on home loan interest rates in the banking sector, levels of home loan repayments crept higher. There were two related problems. Higher interest rates threatened to place home ownership beyond the reach of many Australians who would previously have been able to afford homes; on the other hand, the continuing regulation of bank lending for home buying, by creating a drought in housing funds, threatened to precipitate the same crisis in a different way. These problems had not yet shown up in overall rates of owner-occupancy, but experts looked to the future with considerable apprehension.

Public concern about housing costs is certainly a feature of Australian politics. In the late 1970s Leonie Sandercock, a sociologist, wrote a bluntly titled book, *The land racket*, which explained soaring land costs by pointing out that 'Land on the suburban fringe has been bought up ahead of urban development at rural prices, mostly by the big insurance and finance and development companies—then sold to homeseekers and public authorities at massive profits'.

There was as much rhetoric as substance in such claims. Speculation has not always led to a bonanza. In Sydney, for example, the New South Wales Housing Commission has on occasions been able to buy land from a developer for less than the developer paid for it. Nor has speculation been the main force pushing prices up. A more important cost factor in urban land in Sydney and Melbourne since 1975 has been increased government charges for serving new housing development with sewerage, water, roads and electricity.



Few joys', says the caption of 1949, can match 'the first rapture of individual ownership'. It has been a force in Australian life which neither land speculators nor politicians have been able to ignore. Australia to-day, 26 Oct 1949.

But speculation was, to use a British phrase, 'the unacceptable face of capitalism'. It permitted people who felt exploited to attribute blame and gave a moral dimension to a serious social problem. It was something that could perhaps be remedied. For speculation not only defied rational urban planning; in certain basic ways, as Sandercock argued, it worked through the manipulation and corruption of urban planning processes, and thus had a political dimension. In the type of land market that operates in Australian cities the price of land varies with the purposes for which it has been zoned. Rural land is more valuable when rezoned for residential use. Low density residential property becomes more valuable if high-rise development is permitted. Rezoning for commercial purposes is often the most lucrative change of all. In such circumstances, not only do the agencies responsible for planning—often local government bodies—have great power, but individuals able to influence their decisions, or with prior access to them, can readily turn knowledge into profit.

This explains why local government has so often been associated with insinuations of corruption, but municipal politics have in any case changed greatly in the past twenty years, for the Liberal party has followed Labor's lead and entered the arena of local government. As a result, in urban areas especially, the old 'main street' councils are being replaced gradually by bodies that largely reflect the party politics of the municipality, and councils have become forums where aspiring politicians angle for party preselection. Corruption, where it does occur in urban councils, is more often prompted by political considerations than by the temptation of personal financial profit: a situation that only the very large developers can exploit effectively. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the big land and development scandals now originate at the level of state politics and involve local government only secondarily. The struggle that lasted from 1971 to 1975, in which local citizen groups and trade unionists placed 'green bans' on plans to develop inner Sydney at the Rocks and in Kings Cross in Sydney, shook the state government of the day; just as later the Hamer Liberal government in Victoria was embarrassed by accusations that the Victorian Housing Commission and the Urban Land Council had overpaid developers in the northwestern suburbs of Melbourne and in Ballarat.

If Australians appear complacent—even ambivalent—about apparent abuses of urban development, it is partly because so many of them have themselves benefited from real estate speculation. On a small scale, everyone who can afford to buy a suburban block of land can hope to profit from the inflation which speculation fuels. The wealthy few are the big winners; but the great suburban majority feels comfortably ahead of the game. The losers in the speculation stakes are a minority without the capital or borrowing capacity to enter the game, a minority lacking political power or social visibility.

In *The Australian ugliness* Robin Boyd remarked in 1960 that

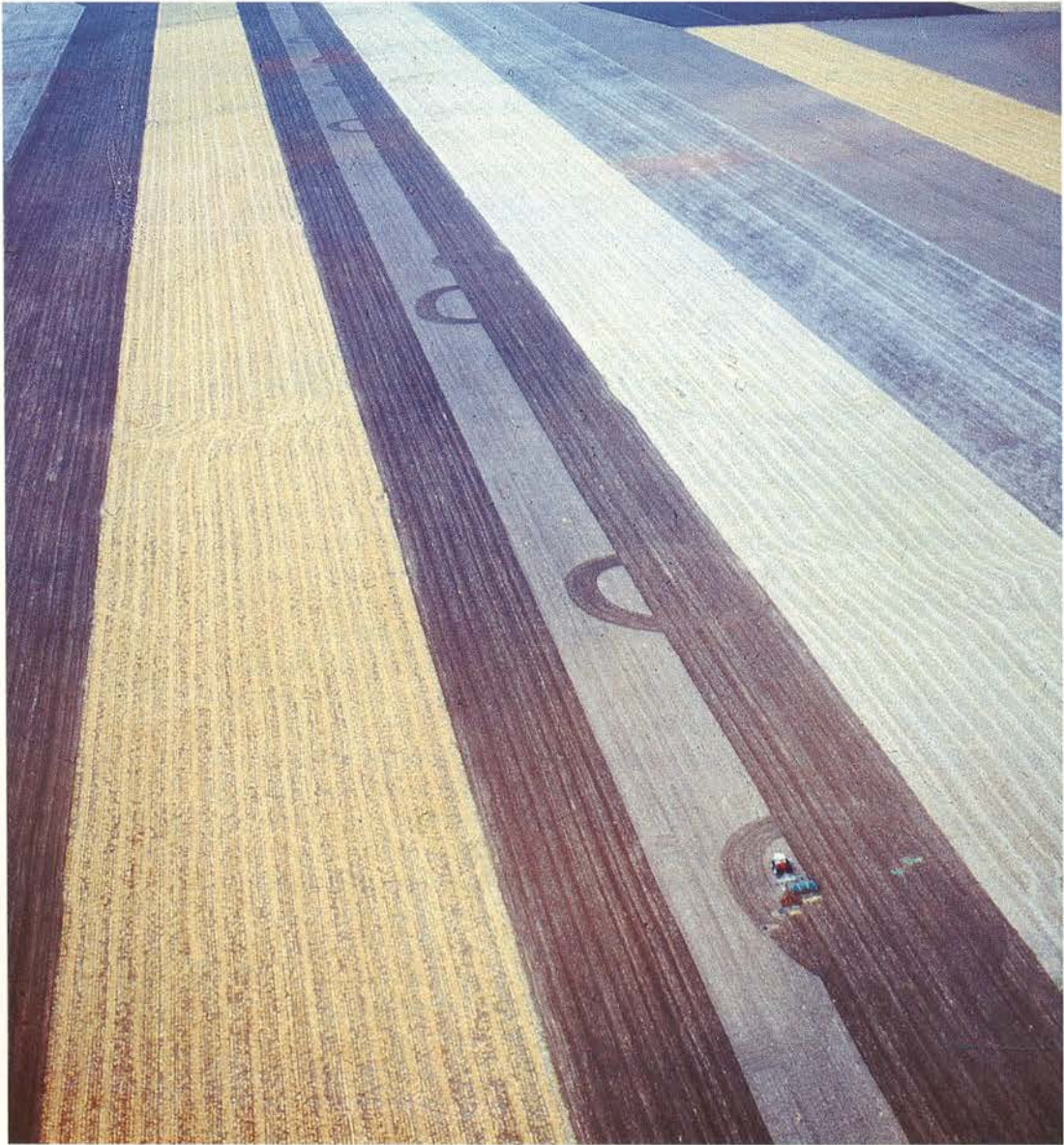
good and bad muddled together, sophistication and schoolboyishness, toughness and genteelness, all strongly marked and clearly isolated, and so cut up and mixed up that no one can be quite sure which in the long run predominates. Much the same can be said about the collective qualities of the Australian people.

A lot has changed since 1960. Visitors returning to the Australia of the 1980s would find the skylines of the larger cities virtually unrecognisable. The pace of life, the numbers of people, the volume of traffic, the sweep of urban freeways might astound them. But an examination of the history of urban Australia might leave them with the same kind of verdict which Boyd passed on the visual environment in 1960. There has been much inconsistency, good and bad muddled together. What eventually predominates is not likely to be decided until well beyond 1988.

The greatest visual changes in modern Australia have been in the central business districts of Australian cities, a process fuelled by and fuelling inner-city land speculation. Here the Adelaide Festival Centre, by the banks of the Torrens River, is dwarfed by insurance, banking and commercial buildings in the city centre.

COLOUR OFFSET MARKETING





*Strip cropping to counter erosion, Gunnedah, NSW, 1985.
Water is prevented from cutting gullies by alternating crop,
fallow and stubble across the downward slope of the land.*

NSW DEPARTMENT OF PRIMARY INDUSTRY