THE PAST AND FUTURE OF
THE AUSTRALIAN SUBURB

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the suburban ideal, explains its historical development and compares the Australian suburb with its counterpart in other countries such as the United States and Great Britain. More importantly it focuses on those features that are peculiar to the Australian suburb and argues that despite the disparaging comments often made about the quality of suburban living, most inhabitants of suburbs express a disconcertingly high level of satisfaction with life in the suburbs and a home in the suburbs is still the goal of most young Australians. In the same vein, it challenges the validity and meaning of the highly subjective concept of 'liveability' often used by 'experts' to discredit the suburban life style and suggests that a home in the suburbs satisfies many important human needs and is a dream that Australians are not likely to easily give up.
THE PAST AND FUTURE OF THE AUSTRALIAN SUBURB
Graeme Davison

In the early 1990s Australian cities have reached a historic turning point. For over two centuries, our dreams of the good life have been shaped by a cluster of interrelated ideas we may loosely describe as the suburban ideal. The owner-occupied, single-storey house standing in its own garden was the standard of domestic comfort to which most Australians have continued to aspire. When Melbourne was recently assessed as 'the world's most liveable city', it achieved that much-disputed title partly on the strength of its performance by criteria that correlate closely with its highly suburbanised form. The suburb has become so closely identified with popular conceptions of the good life that any move away from it, for example towards urban consolidation, is apt to be viewed as an attack upon people's living standards. How this came to be so, and whether the suburban form of our cities is an aid, or a hindrance, to their continued liveability, is now a subject of more than academic interest.

Today Australians are witnessing perhaps the most significant challenge to their suburban way of life in more than a century. The challenge is posed, most formidably, by the decline of those conditions of economic prosperity and benign technological development which we, along with Americans, have enjoyed during the past 150 years. Economic scarcity and the threat of environmental catastrophe have made the suburban sprawl seem as profligate and dangerous as it once seemed safe and boring. If the tide has turned against the suburban way of life, however, it is not only because we can no longer afford it, but because we have also begun to question the social aspirations and political arrangements that so long supported it. Declining levels and changing sources of immigration, declining fertility and smaller government have produced a

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1 Age 20 November 1990. The reference is to a statistical analysis compiled by the Washington-based Population Crisis Committee. The ten basic indicators included food costs (percent income spent on food), traffic flow (kmh in rush hour), public health (infant deaths per thousand births), living space (persons per room), public safety (murders per 100,000 people), services (percent houses with water and electricity), education (percent children in secondary schools), communications (telephones per 100 people) ambient noise, and air pollution. Sydney-siders, miffed that they finished only ninth in the world, complained that indices of climate and excitement were left out of the exercise.
new urban agenda in which urban consolidation comes to seem not only more economical and more virtuous but even more attractive.

In this paper, I wish to look more closely at the historical forces that made Australia so thoroughly and precociously suburban. What were the ideas of the good life that lay behind the establishment of our suburbs, and why were they so widely adopted? How far were these ideas contested by earlier generations of Australians? Which components of the suburban idea have contributed most to their 'liveability' and popularity, and what value have different groups of suburbanites placed upon them? If, as many planners suspect, Australia can no longer afford—if it ever could—to keep all of them, which should we consider trading off?

The Suburban Idea - the logic of avoidance.

Australia was born urban and quickly grew suburban. From the beginnings of European settlement, a high proportion of the population was concentrated in the coastal towns which served both as ports and, in the case of Sydney and Hobart, as urban gaols. In 1789 when Governor Arthur Phillip drew up the first town plan for Sydney, he required that the streets be laid out in such a manner as to afford free circulation of air, and when the houses are built...the land will be granted with a clause that will prevent more than one house being built on the allotment, which will be sixty feet in front and one hundred and fifty feet in depth.

Such an arrangement, he declared, would 'preserve uniformity in its buildings [and] prevent the many inconveniences which the increase of the inhabitants would otherwise occasion thereafter'. It shows too much hindsight to credit Australia's first colonial governor with the invention of that popular Australian institution, the quarter-acre suburban block; but it is significant that, from the outset, Australia's founders anticipated a sprawl of homes and gardens rather than a clumping of terraces and alleys.

Phillip nowhere used the word 'suburb', but his regulations embody some of those aspirations to decency, good order, health and domestic privacy which lay at the heart of the suburban idea. Australia had come into being as a European colony at the very moment when the suburb was emerging as a solution to the urban ills of the Old World. Like a colony, the suburb was a place of escape or refuge, and it was shaped, therefore, largely by the logic of avoidance. The suburb was, in essence, a mirror image of the slum. While the slum was seen as dense, dirty, unnatural, disorderly and disease-ridden, the suburb was seen as open, clean, natural, orderly and healthy.

Four great contemporary ideologies —Evangelicalism, Romanticism, Sanitarianism and Capitalism— strengthened the influence of the suburban idea upon the minds of colonial Australians.

Many of the more respectable colonists had been touched by the influence of the Evangelicals and their call for a revival of the homely virtues. It was the Evangelicals who had most clearly articulated the idea of 'separate spheres' for men and women, and of the suburban home as a kind of temple in which the wife ruled as the 'Angel of the Home'.

The prototype of the modern bourgeois suburb was Clapham on the eastern fringes of London where wealthy Evangelicals like the Wilberforces and the Thorntons settled in the early nineteenth century.

The idea of the suburb as a place of peace and refuge also drew inspiration from Romanticism, for the ideal suburb enabled the care-worn city man to repair his battered spirits through communion with the beauties of nature. J.C.Loudon, the British architect and landscape designer who may be regarded as the father of the modern suburb, declared that 'A suburban residence, with a small portion of land attached, will contain all that is essential to happiness'. It enabled the man of business to retire from the cares and clamour of the city into the country 'where [as he said] man may approach the simplicity of nature

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and attain the enjoyments and pleasures of pristine innocence'. The garden, therefore, was as important a feature of the suburb as the cottage or villa and the ideal suburb attempted, in its planning and architecture, to evoke something of the peace and solitude of the countryside.

The suburbanite found further reason to escape the city in the warnings which doctors and sanitary engineers were sounding about the deadly pollution of the cities. According to the medical science of the day, there was a direct relationship between death rates and the density of the urban environment. Captain Phillip's concern to promote 'the free circulation of air' and his desire to keep building blocks large and streets wide reflected this belief. Suburbs everywhere, but especially in the environs of the new industrial cities, were promoted as much for their safety as their beauty or social exclusiveness.

In its original British context, the suburb was also promoted as a zone of exclusively bourgeois residence. In the pre-industrial city the elite and the plebs had lived in much the same neighborhoods, the elite in the grand houses facing the squares and parks; the plebs in the cramped lanes and backstreets. From the early nineteenth century, however, the middle classes began to show a growing fear and fastidiousness towards their working class neighbours. They sought to insulate themselves, and especially their wives and children, from the uncouth and possibly dangerous life of the streets. Thus began the slow process of class segregation that eventually brought about the distinctive concentric-zones of middle class and working class residence that we associate with the late nineteenth century city. 'Choose a neighbourhood where houses and inhabitants are all, or chiefly, of the same description and class as the house we intend to inhabit, and as ourselves', Loudon advised the prospective suburbanite. In Australia, as we shall see, this aristocratic impulse was considerably weakened, as the suburb, once the exclusive retreat of the rich, eventually became the dominant pattern of urban life.

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5 Loudon, p.32.
This did not happen all at once, and throughout the nineteenth century the house and garden ideal had to compete with more traditional styles of urban living focused around the terrace house, the corner shop, the pub and the vigorous social life of the streets.

Why the suburbs grew

Why did the suburbs flourish so luxuriantly in Australia? I think we may detect four crucial influences. Firstly, as we have seen already, the suburban idea arrived with the country's European founders and it was vigorously promoted by the state during the early colonial period. Secondly, it had strong appeal to immigrants who were themselves largely refugees from urban Britain. Australia may be thought of as the farthest suburb of Britain and ambitions for land, space and independence frustrated in the crowded cities of the homeland were often realised on the suburban frontiers of Australia (or Canada, the United States or New Zealand). Thirdly, throughout the nineteenth century, Australian suburbanites were able to take advantage of relatively high wages, low unemployment, cheap land and extensive, modern public transport services. Finally, suburbanisation was promoted by Australia's system of strong central government and relatively weak local government. By providing new schools, police stations, suburban railways and other infrastructure the colonial governments and their successors, the state governments, shouldered many of the costs which would otherwise have had to be borne by the local community. Already in the nineteenth century, therefore, Australians were effectively subsidising suburban growth from their state treasuries. Some current proposals for privatisation therefore reverse more than a hundred years of state support for suburbanisation.

From Phillip onwards colonial administrators were determined to avoid reproducing the evils of Old World cities. Many of the first settlers - the convicts - were products of the slums of London and other large towns, and the authorities feared that, if the colonial towns were allowed to grow unimpeded, and ex-convicts to gather there, the same vicious subculture of crime and licentiousness would begin to pollute the new society. This was one of the recurrent fears expressed by witnesses to Mr Commissioner Bigge's enquiry into the condition of New South Wales in 1819-20. By the mid-1820s, the growth of crime and poverty in places
like Sydney's notorious Rocks district convinced some respectable colonists that the attempt to ward off the evils of city life was failing.

The first self-conscious movement towards the creation of villa suburbs in the English style came from the circle of wealthy, often Evangelical, officials and businessmen, known appropriately as the 'Exclusives', who came into political and social prominence under the New South Wales governor, Sir Ralph Darling, in the late 1820s. In 1828 Darling authorised the subdivision of Woolloomooloo Hill, a pleasant rise overlooking the Harbour about a mile east of the town, into special 'villa allotments' with a view 'to the ornament and improvement of the suburbs of Sydney'. Fifteen 8-10 acre allotments were granted to wealthy Exclusives, mostly high government officials, subject only to the condition that within three years they construct villa residences to the value of at least 1000 pounds according to designs approved by the Town Surveyor, 'taking care that the front of the building faced toward Sydney'. Soon the pleasant slopes overlooking Double Bay were sprinkled with gothic cottages and Italianate villas, some directly modelled on Loudon's designs. Thus the first Australian suburb was created by government decree as a means of enabling the respectable middle class of Sydney to seek refuge from the dirt, disease and vice of the convict capital.

More remarkable than the aristocratic impulse behind the creation of the Australian suburb, however, was the speed with which it took a more democratic course. Already by the mid-1830s wealthy ex-convicts had begun to build their own villas on private land at Glebe, Balmain and other harbourside suburbs. And very soon real estate agents, those infallible harbingers of suburban development, were inviting 'the mechanics and shopkeepers of Sydney' as well as 'Professional Gentlemen' and 'Opulent Merchants' to enjoy 'repose after the anxiety of

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business' on a cottage or villa estate. As the other colonial capitals - Brisbane, Melbourne and Adelaide - took shape during the 1830s, they grew along largely on suburban lines. The word 'suburb' actually enters Australian parlance through its use by government land agents as a term for those allotments which lay immediately beyond the 'town', that is beyond what we now describe as the central business district. It is perhaps to this circumstance that we owe the peculiarly Australian habit of referring to virtually any part of the city beyond the CBD as 'the suburbs'.

Australia's suburbs were shaped, decisively, by the successive waves of immigrants who pioneered them. The demand for land, for space and for independence have always been prominent in the aspirations of immigrants to Australia. Many looked back upon the experience of living as tenants in their homeland, and longed to be free of the fear of the landlord and the bailiff. 'What can I gain by going to Victoria?', asked James Ballantyne in 1871, anticipating the question of his British working class readers. 'He will be able, whether by economy or saving, or through the help of one of the numerous building societies, to secure a comfortable freehold for himself and thus possess what every Englishman glories in - a house which will be his castle', he replied. But it was not only British immigrants who longed for homes of their own. In postwar Australia immigrants from peasant backgrounds in eastern and southern Europe often acquired their own suburban homes more quickly even than the native-born. It was home ownership, rather than space or family privacy, that these immigrants desired above all, and, in order to achieve it, they were often ready to sacrifice some of the personal space and family privacy that British immigrants held so dear.

Australians have been so inclined to equate suburbanism with the good life that they have too readily assumed that their sprawling cities were a knock-

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8 James Ballantyne, Homes and Homesteads in the Land of Plenty, Mason, Firth and M'Cutcheon, (Melbourne 1871).

down proof of their prosperity. When Donald Horne christened Australia 'the lucky country', he pointed to its status as 'the first suburban nation'. There can be little doubt that the high average incomes enjoyed by Australian wage-earners during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contributed strongly to the growth of the suburbs.\textsuperscript{10} Cheap, easily-serviced urban land, cheap building materials, inexpensive methods of building construction and plentiful housing finance enabled Australians to purchase or rent more house and land for their wages than their counterparts in Britain or North America. 'A working man in Melbourne no doubt pays more for his house or for his lodgings than he would do in London', Anthony Trollope estimated in 1872; but in Melbourne, he believed, 'the labourer or artisan enjoys a home of a better sort than would be within reach of his brother in London doing work of the same nature, and in regard to house-rent gets more for his money than he would do at home'.\textsuperscript{11} Lionel Frost's recent calculations of late nineteenth century wage-rent ratios seem to confirm Trollope's view.\textsuperscript{12} In the twentieth century, however, and especially over the past half century the link between living standards and suburbanisation has grown more complex, as Australia's lead as 'the first suburban nation' has been whittled away by other lands, and as gentrification has created alternative styles and standards of urban prosperity.

Throughout their history, Australia's suburbs have relied, more heavily than those of other lands, on the support of the state. By supplying new schools, police stations, suburban railways and other infrastructure the colonial governments and their successors, the state governments, shouldered many of the costs that elsewhere have been borne by the local community or by private developers. While North Americans paid for most of these services out of locally-based taxation assessed on landed property, colonial Australians paid for them out of general revenues

\textsuperscript{10} N.G. Butlin, 'Long-run Trends in Australian Per Capita Consumption' in Keith Hancock, \textit{The National Income and Social Welfare,} F. W. Cheshire for Australian Council of Social Service, (Melbourne 1965), p.8. While later scholars have underlined the seasonality of the Australian economy and the consequent variability of earnings, the \textit{comparative} prosperity of Australian wage-earners still seems to me to be clear.

\textsuperscript{11} Anthony Trollope, P.D. Edward and B. Joyce, \textit{Australia,} University of Queensland Press, St Lucia [first published in London 1873], Vol.1., p.399p.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{The New Urban Frontier,} University of New South Wales Press, (Sydney 1991), pp.113-7.
furnished largely from sales of Crown lands and customs duties. This had two important effects. Firstly, it lowered the threshold of development costs faced by ratepayers of the brand-new suburb. While the suburb was young, and most of its residents were hard-up young first home buyers, the costs of building local services could be a significant drag upon development, unless the central government came to the rescue. Secondly, by guaranteeing a relatively common standard of state schooling, policing, fire protection etc, across all suburbs, it reduced one of the main motives for class differentiation between them. The Australian suburbanite's choice between one suburb and another may have been a choice between degrees of scenic attractiveness, or between different building codes, but it was not, to the same degree as in other similar countries, a choice between one standard of schooling and policing and another. It is only if we compare these arrangements and the grosser inequalities between the levels of services in American suburbs, and especially between their inner cities and their suburbs, that we will appreciate how much we owe to this distinctively Australian form of urban political economy. Some current proposals for smaller government and 'user pays' principles threaten this century-old tradition of state support for a relatively democratic form of suburbanisation.

Realising the ideal - preferences and trade-offs
From the vantage point of its creators the 'liveability' of the early Australian suburb may be said to have consisted in the satisfaction of five prime wants: domestic privacy; natural, semi-rural surroundings; a healthy environment; private ownership and social exclusiveness. The ideal suburb satisfied all five of these wants, but the value which was placed upon each, and the trade-offs between them, varied a good deal from one country or social class or ethnic group to another.

In general, I think that British and Australian suburbanites have placed a higher value on domestic privacy than Americans. Consider, for example, the continued preference of Australian and British suburbanites for fenced or hedged allotments compared with the American preference for an unbroken sward of lawn between house and house and from the front door to the street. In this sense, the form of our suburbs may reflect more general features of the public life of the two societies, such as the strict Australian and British libel and privacy laws compared with the
almost unfettered freedom which American press and television reporters seem to enjoy to investigate people's private lives.

American and British suburbanites, on the other hand, seem to have placed a higher value on social exclusiveness than Australians. When Professor Edward Morris arrived from London to take up the Chair of English at the University of Melbourne in the late 1880s, he was immediately struck by what he called the 'diversity' of Melbourne's landscape: 'A poor house stands side by side with a good house, a cottage, one might almost say a hovel, in close proximity to a palace'. Statistical comparisons are hard to make - the data is scarce and seldom collected on a base that makes comparison meaningful - but the few historical studies that have been made tend to confirm Morris's impressions. If Australian suburbs were socially less homogeneous than British or American ones, it was probably not just that Australians were less stand-offish than British and American city-dwellers, but that local methods of land subdivision and sale placed fewer restrictions on who could build what. Not everyone approved of these free-and-easy arrangements. A British immigrant, commenting on a proposed model suburb at Kensington near Sydney in the late 1880s, noted how, 'with the silent resolve that imperceptibly moves a well-ordered society', London suburbanites had gravitated to suburbs of a more or less homogeneous class composition. 'Intuitively [he noted] everyone knew his place and dropped into it.' In Sydney, however, 'houses of all sorts and conditions [are] strewn about in a fashion that makes it easier for one to believe that they wandered there of their own accord than that any sane man began in cold blood to rear them'. Blackwell was supported by another observer, James Green, who called for more selectivity to be exercised in the development of new suburban estates: 'However estimable in their own spheres of life may be "the butcher, the baker and the candle-stick maker" we do not wish, with all our boasted democracy, to have them elbowing our comfortable cottage or more ornate villa with their miserable shanties...'


The model suburbs applauded by Green and Blackwell represented an attempt, relatively rare in nineteenth century Australian experience, to plan suburbs along socially exclusive lines. The Grace Park Estate in Hawthorn near Melbourne was a similar contemporary venture. It was one of the first Australian suburbs, so far as I can determine, to adopt the naturalistic curvilinear street plans favoured by contemporary American landscape designers like Frederick Law Olmsted. Like some comparable experiments in Britain and the United States, these model suburbs were based on leasehold principles and required prospective house builders to submit their plans for the approval of the ground landlord who might also require the house itself to be of a specified cost and design. Few such model suburbs retained their strict building controls and leasehold tenure beyond their founding years. Australian suburbanites, it seems, did not care enough for the benefits of exclusiveness, at least to put up with the restrictions of leasehold. It was easier to maintain the character of a suburb by enacting and enforcing building regulations governing setbacks, minimum allotments and brick or timber construction than by the stricter, but more cumbersome, method of covenants or leasehold estates. Only in Canberra, a city of public servants, ruled until recently by public servants, has leasehold been widely adopted as a form of land tenure, and then with results that deviate only marginally from Australian norms of suburban segregation or diversity.

One of the prime social goods that Australians have historically associated with suburbia is home-ownership. The connection, of course, is not a necessary one. You don't have to live in the suburbs to own your house; and you don't necessarily own your house if you do live in the suburbs. But the connection is certainly more than accidental. It derives from the link between the family life-cycle and the cycle of urban development: the edge of the city is the only place where young couples have traditionally been able to afford to buy the amount and kind of accommodation that they have seen, rightly or wrongly, as necessary for child-rearing. One of

17 See for example, Fishman, pp. 126-133.
the reasons that Australian suburbanites have generally resisted the introduction of leaseholds, building regulations, covenants and other planning devices is that they believed, correctly in many instances, that they would frustrate their democratic right to home-ownership. From the 1850s onwards, working class Australians tended to be strongly in favour of a regulated labour market, leading the world, for example, in the adoption of the Eight Hour Day; but they tended to be strongly opposed to a regulated housing market. One of the reasons that residents of Melbourne's inner suburbs resisted their incorporation into the City of Melbourne in the 1850s and 60s was that they feared the imposition of higher rates and irksome building and sanitary regulations.19

Many, perhaps most, working class home-owners at any time until the 1960s acquired their homes by stages. First they put a deposit on a block of land. Then they paid it off in instalments. When they had done so, they borrowed enough to start building. Sometimes they did it themselves, or shared the job with friends or sub-contractors. Often they began with only one or two rooms, then added others as they found the means to do so. When they arrived on the block, it was probably unserviced. The road was unmade, there was no gas or sewerage, possibly not even piped water. By their actions, the new suburbanites demonstrated that they put a higher value on the security of home-ownership and the opportunity to have their own bit of ground than they did upon health or natural surroundings.

Footscray, Melbourne's newest industrial suburb in the 1880s, was as famous for the size of its standard building allotments and its high level of owner-occupied houses as it was notorious for the stink of its noxious industries and its muddy, unmade streets. More than 60 percent of householders owned or were buying their own homes, the highest level in the metropolis. A contemporary wondered whether 'there is another place in creation where the people as a whole are so comfortable, and so many of them freeholders'.20 His conception of 'comfort' was obviously


different from our standard definitions of 'liveability', for Footscray was also possibly the worst polluted suburb in the metropolis:

Home-buyers [writes John Lack in his admirable recent local history] got nothing more than a house and the land it stood upon. Virtually none of the streets, footpaths or rights of way were formed, these tasks being left to municipal councils. By the late 1880s in Footscray only three of some 200 streets had been metalled to their full width, one third of the rights of way were unmade, and two-thirds of the street channels were earthen. Most of the house yards and sideways were neither paved nor properly levelled. Footscray's residential areas simply stank.21

Although the local council tried to clean up the mess and make the roads, the ratepayers were reluctant to pay for improvements. A local pressure group formed to bring the polluting industrialists under control, was denounced by working men as a threat to their livelihoods 'If the swells found the stink too much for them let them go to St Kilda', they declared.22

Footscray's experience was not unusual. From the first gold-rush suburbs, in Redfern and Collingwood, to the so-called 'heart-break' suburbs of northern Melbourne and western Sydney in the 1940s and 50s, working class Australians were prepared to give up much of the natural beauty and health that had inspired the creators of the romantic suburbs of the Victorian era. They were probably not careless of such matters, but their significance paled by comparison with the more fundamental desire for space and owner occupation. Working class suburbanites in North America often made similar choices.23 They had good reasons for doing so, for the owner-occupied house standing in its

21 Ibid, p.104.
22 Ibid., p.100-102.
own ground was not only a way of acquiring a small property holding, and hence providing for one's old age, but it was also the source of a economic, social and psychic benefits not found in a rented terrace in the inner city.

In the midst of our current debates about consolidation, urban infrastructure and the 'liveability' of our cities, it may be worth reminding ourselves of how many Australians have traditionally weighed the advantages of health and aesthetics, on the one hand, and and space and ownership on the other. It goes hard against the professional judgement of the architects, planners and engineers to contemplate any relaxation of building and planning standards, but I suspect that, if push came to shove, many Australians would prefer their cities to be a bit uglier, and even perhaps a little more dangerous, than to give up the prospect of owning their home, however humble, poorly serviced and unplanned it may be.

The suburbs - living or only partly living?

Since the end of the nineteenth century, intellectuals have been eager to tell Australians what was missing in their suburban civilisation. Medical experts, aesthetes, social planners and political economists have all contributed something to our changing understanding of 'liveability' in the suburbs. Their writings, it must be admitted, often tell us more about the preoccupations of the intellectuals than the day-to-day experience of the suburbanites. In fact, one often comes away from reading them with an unpleasant sensation of having been patronised by experts who thought that they knew what was good for the average suburbanite better than she did herself.

Some critics reproached the Australian suburb with failing to live up to the ideal. It was not spacious, private, natural or healthy enough. In the early twentieth century, sanitarians and planners, influenced by the Garden City ideals of Howard and Unwin, constructed a working definition of urban amenity around the provision of adequate living space. While they were principally concerned with the physical health of the city-dweller, they shared the conviction of nineteenth century slum reformers that it was possible to live a virtuous and happy life only with plenty of room,
outside and inside the home. The Royal Commission on the Housing of the People of the Metropolis which sat in Melbourne during the Great War focused its attention mainly on the problem of 'overcrowding'. In discussing a proposal to legislate a minimum size for suburban allotments, the commissioners articulated the tangled skein of reasoning—moral and social as well as scientific—behind contemporary planning theory.

In a general view, it is regarded as insanitary, and otherwise undesirable practice, for two or more families to occupy at the same time a dwelling house of ordinary design and size, when evils due to overcrowding are to be looked for. So it is agreed amongst sanitarians that similar evils, on a larger scale, are to be expected where dwellings are built on allotments having dimensions so limited as to leave insufficient space for entrance of sunlight and fresh air around and into the house, or for privacy, or for adequate yard space, clothes drying ground, play area for young children, or for fire breaks for the spread of fire from house to house, to say nothing of possible advantage presented by such open spaces in reducing risk from supposed aerial convection of infection.24

In the mind of the physical determinist, such as the authors of this report, medical and moral influences were closely intertwined. It was this type of thinking, more than any other, that influenced the first generation of uniform building regulations, fire safety standards and local planning ordinances, and their influence is still with us today.

In the mid-twentieth century, these regulations became a favourite target of a second generation of planners and architects whose notions of suburban liveability were more aesthetic than sanitary. In 1953 a young Melbourne architect, Robin Boyd, visited the new Brisbane suburb of Serviceton, then growing up on the site of a former American army

camp. What he found filled him with dread. The old army camp had consisted of nothing but Nissan huts, but they had been erected on sweeping roads that followed the contours of the land and took advantage of the natural shade of the big gum trees that dotted the site. But now the Queensland Housing Commission had arrived. The huts had been demolished, the trees cut down, and the curving army roads had been replaced by straight parallel streets. 'Serviceton', Boyd wrote, 'now presents the bald, raw, sun-beaten drabness, which has become the salient feature of post-war Australian housing'.

The Australian suburb [he continued] was originally a wonderful idea: the private castle for every man in place of the crowded gardenless urban terraces of Europe. We did not, of course, invent the idea, but we carried it further than most nations. The ironic thing is that its foundation was the late 19th century conception of a 'garden city' - a reaction to the overcrowded industrial town - a quiet, spacious residential parkland. Without the trees we are returning to something as depressing and forbidding as the brick jungle of the nineteenth century industrial city, which first drove men out to seek the gardens of the suburbs. When we destroy greenery we destroy the justification for the suburb.25

Here, in embryo, was Boyd's famous attack on 'the Australian Ugliness'. He invokes the values of the Garden City to condemn its unprepossessing Australian child. In spite of his patrician origins, and his insistence upon the high calling of the architect, Boyd's vision of the liveable Australian suburb in the 1940s and early 1950s was populist, if not exactly democratic. He was interested in the use of natural materials, like pisé, as a means of lowering construction costs and in cooperative housing schemes. Above all, however, Boyd was a firm believer in the contribution of good design to happy living. His choice of adjectives for

the unreconstructed postwar suburb —bald, raw, drab, depressing, forbidding— underlines the close link which he saw between aesthetics and liveability. Like other critics of his generation, Boyd too readily assumed that an environment that looked uniform and boring from the outside must seem so to its inhabitants; that because (in the words of the famous Pete Seeger song) 'they all lived in little boxes', they must all live, feel and think the same. Whether the new residents of Serviceton found their environment as forbidding and depressing as Mr Boyd and Mr Seeger is, of course, another matter.

Sanitarians and aesthetes invoked the suburban ideal to condemn its products. A more forceful critique of suburbia, however, came from those who contested the ideal itself. The suburb, I have suggested, was based on the logic of avoidance, and its virtues, therefore, were essentially negative virtues. In excluding everything that was dangerous and offensive, its critics alleged, its creators had also banished everything that was stimulating and exciting. In guaranteeing privacy, they had also guaranteed boredom and loneliness. Suburbia, they implied, was too private, too exclusive, too leafy, too healthy, even perhaps too virtuous.26 'The only place outside a man's house where he could get to spend an evening was either a public house or a prayer meeting' complained the newly arrived resident of one Melbourne suburb in the 1880s.27 In 1909 the socialist playwright Louis Esson raged:

The suburban home must be destroyed. It stands for all that is dull and cowardly and depressing in modern life. It endeavours to eliminate the element of danger in human affairs. But without danger there can be no joy, no ecstasy, no spiritual adventures...28


In the early 1960s, Jeanne MacKenzie, a visiting English Fabian, asked a young Czech migrant how she liked Australia: 'It is very nice', she replied, 'but there is something missing'.

Every intellectual has a theory to explain what is missing. Socialists used to put suburban dullness down to the practice of home-ownership, which shackled every householder to a mortgage and thus tamed the instinct to rebel. Social democrats like Hugh Stretton associate monotony with social uniformity; if only our suburbs were socially more mixed, he suggests, they would be more lively as well. Feminists see the root of the problem in the bourgeois ideology of 'separate spheres' for men and women from which the Romantic idea of the suburb as a feminised zone of safety and retreat was first derived. In the early 1990s these several strands of criticism have been invoked by the advocates of urban consolidation — more, one suspects, as convenient props for policies that are driven rather by economics than by social preference. They offer us the attractive prospect of denser cities that will also be livelier, more equal, and friendlier, both socially and environmentally.

Meanwhile the suburbanites themselves display a disconcertingly high level of satisfaction with their way of life. In doing so, they often register their desire for values and conveniences that may not rate highly in the intellectual's scale of proper urban virtues, but which have more utility, even in an environment of recession, than its alternatives. In spite of changing gender roles and work habits, rising mortgage payments and declining rates of capital accumulation, lengthening journeys to work and shrinking suburban allotments, the suburban home remains a goal to which most young Australians continue to aspire. It is a dream which the future may deny them, but which they seem unlikely to renounce of their own free will.

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