

“A Lot of Hardship, There’s Nothing There at All”

Experiencing premature housing development in post-war Sydney

Nicola Pullan

PhD candidate, University of New South Wales

n.pullan@unsw.edu.au

During the fifteen years following World War Two, thousands of aspiring home-owners on Sydney’s suburban fringe lived in residential subdivisions without basic household amenities and public infrastructure. This situation was the result of weak planning regulations governing the subdivision and sale of property at the same time as a national housing shortage created unprecedented demand for residential land. Aspiring homeowners took advantage of the sale of subdivided agricultural land to purchase an affordable allotment and, in many cases, built a temporary dwelling while they saved to pay for a permanent cottage on site. Living without services was challenging. Households relied on makeshift methods of cooking, lighting and heating, and compromised on comfort and privacy. Once a permanent home was achieved, usually after a number of years, residents still had to contend with a lack of public infrastructure such as sewerage and storm-water pipes, sealed roads, all-weather footpaths, and street signage. Premature subdivision of land may have been officially frowned upon by state and local planning authorities but, in this adaptive incremental way, many Sydney residents acquired basic shelter and moved into home-ownership. This paper describes residents’ experiences of living in “prematurely developed” areas of the Shire of Hornsby on the northern fringe of Sydney. Against the historical backdrop of this under-researched mode of early post-war housing, the paper seeks to recover, understand and convey through their own words the resilience and sacrifices of a generation of suburban temporary dwelling residents in the 1940s and 1950s.

Keywords: premature development; Sydney; temporary dwellings; post-war

Introduction

In 1948, the Report on the Planning Scheme for the County of Cumberland, a New South Wales region which contains most of the Sydney metropolitan area, defined premature development of

land as “the subdivision of land for residential purposes without relation to actual housing needs” (Cumberland County Council (CCC), 1948, 72). The Report then criticised the system of land development prevailing in New South Wales since the nineteenth century which allowed rural land to be subdivided into suburban allotments for its investment potential rather than to satisfy an increased demand for residential space (CCC, 187). The consequent over-supply of allotments was complicated by inadequate subdivision regulations, which specified that any internal roads must be constructed but did not require the developer to install, or contribute to the cost of installing, household utilities, or further infrastructure (CCC, 187). This situation was recognised by urban planners of the time as leading both to scattered, and therefore wasteful, occupation of already-serviced land, and to the subdivision and sale of quite remote blocks which had little prospect of service provision within a reasonable period of time, if at all (CCC, 72). These more remote subdivisions were still without basic amenities when the demand for building land caught up with the over-supply and the allotments were finally occupied during the unprecedented housing shortage following the close of World War Two.

This paper seeks to recover, understand, and convey in their own words, the resilience and sacrifices of those aspiring home-owners in the 1940s and 1950s who purchased allotments in prematurely-developed subdivisions in the Shire of Hornsby, a locality on the north-western fringe of suburban Sydney. It commences with a discussion of the historical context of this un-serviced residential land, followed by accounts of the solutions contrived by residents to achieve a tolerable standard of living without water, electricity, sewers or public infrastructure, and concludes with a discussion of the difficulties of utility provision during a time of exceptional urban development. The paper draws on oral history interviews with residents who volunteered their stories, complemented by primary and secondary sources such as contemporary photographs and maps, state and local government records and histories of utility provision in the County. It has developed from ongoing doctoral research into the role of temporary dwellings in facilitating access to home-ownership, supplemented by previous research for a master’s dissertation which documents the emergence of a small housing estate in Hornsby.

Premature development and provision of utilities

Premature development of land due to unregulated subdivision within the County was of great concern to post-war urban planners. The authors of the Planning Scheme for the County of Cumberland estimated that by 1948 there were close to a quarter of a million residential lots which were still vacant, having been subdivided and sold during the preceding seventy years of haphazard suburban expansion. Of these, just over half were situated in or close to areas which were already developed and were regarded as viable building sites. The remainder, comprising almost 120,000 lots, were so remote and widely spread that it was considered impossible to provide utilities within a realistic period. The Report concluded that approximately one quarter of the total urban development of the Sydney metropolitan area could not expect installation of services and amenities in the foreseeable future, with Hornsby listed amongst the localities most affected (CCC, 72). Between 1947 and 1961, the population of Hornsby Shire increased by 60%, with new arrivals settling predominantly in prematurely-developed subdivisions (Australian Government, 1948; 1955; 1962). In order to provide services for this population increase, in 1960 the Shire Council was spending over 60% of its revenue on capital works (Jeans and Logan, 39).

The Kurrajong Estate in Hornsby is one example of premature and un-serviced subdivision. The estate dates from 1917 when approximately 12 acres were divided into 54 lots and sold as multiple holdings to four purchasers. By 1940, the majority was still scrubland with only two houses built close to an existing road. Phyllis Pool, one of the residents, recalls:

it was just a dirt road ...but we had the gas, the electricity and the water...up the road we had a telephone box...we didn't have one[at home] at that stage.

In 1947, a small number of lots within reach of these utilities were sold and some construction started but the majority were still without services or a graded road in September 1949, when they were sold individually (HSC, Valuation list 1947-1951).

The majority of vacant blocks in the County were held by investors aiming to benefit from proximity to existing facilities or the promise of future infrastructure undertakings, but a small number were purchased by genuine homebuilders (CCC, 72). Basic services such as water, electricity, garbage and sanitary services were usually supplied by the respective entities once a subdivision had reached approximately 25% occupation, although provision to this small number of consumers was uneconomic. Installation and maintenance costs were included in the consumer's periodic consumption charges, with public infrastructure such as local roads and street-lighting funded through a separate "contribution to works" rate levied by the local authority on improved land only. Under this arrangement, the owners of vacant land were only liable for the general rate and a nominal water rate based on the unimproved value of their property, they were not required to contribute to the installation and maintenance of the utilities and infrastructure which ultimately increased the value of their landholding (CCC, 187).

Where households were widely scattered within a largely-vacant subdivision, the bulk of the initial and ongoing costs of services were borne by the supplier, whether a private company, a government entity or the local council itself, often with agreement from the local council to guarantee any deficit in income (HSC, no. 6/54, file no. 2976). In this situation, installation of amenities was largely dependent on local council access to the grants and loans necessary to fund or underwrite the work, which would either be realised in staged increments or deferred until finance was available (HSC, no. 1/54 file no. 2056).

With provision of amenities already a problem at the close of the Second World War, the rapid occupation of prematurely subdivided vacant land during the fifteen years after the war increased the demand for utility installation in the outer suburban areas to such proportions that the suppliers were overwhelmed and the waiting time for some utilities increased to years rather than months (Jeans and Logan, 41). This situation was the result of a unique combination of economic, legislative and social circumstances which transpired over twenty years, commencing with a world-wide housing shortage and culminating with a large proportion of the population in the fringe areas of Sydney living in temporary dwellings without services or infrastructure.

The housing shortage and the aspiring homeowner

The housing shortage in Australia dated from the depression years of the early 1930s, during which investment in residential building was severely reduced. The building industry had still not recovered

sufficiently to make up the resulting shortfall before World War Two commenced and restrictions on residential building were introduced (Hill, 22; Australian Government, 1944, 22). The combined effect of these two circumstances left the nation with a shortfall of between 300,000 and 365,000 homes by the end of 1944 (Dingle, 22). In 1945, the inclusion of housing due for replacement, the housing needs of Commonwealth territories, and estimates of accommodation required for migrants brought this figure closer to 400,000 units (Boyd, 102; Australian Government, 1944, 22). By 1946, the New South Wales (NSW) government estimated Sydney metropolitan area alone was in need of approximately 90,000 extra homes (Australian Labor Party, 100).

This long-standing shortage of accommodation was intensified by two legislative actions: firstly, periodic renewal of Federal Government control of housing rents, extended in NSW until 1956; and secondly, National Security Regulations which set the selling price of vacant land at no more than 10% above the valuation figure determined in February 1942 by each State Valuer-General (SMH, 13 May 1944, p.4). The first measure reduced investment in residential rental properties, while the second removed any motive to on-sell holdings of previously-subdivided vacant land (New South Wales Government, 1946b, 734-736).

Although a limited number of vacant allotments were offered for sale in the regulated market during the 1940s, it was not until September 1949, when the NSW State Government allowed land sale price control legislation to lapse, that much of the vacant land was made available for purchase as individual building allotments (SMH, 30 December 1950, p.9). This land included a considerable number of prematurely-developed blocks in outer suburban areas, which were cheaper than serviced land and therefore more attractive to the aspiring but marginal home-owner. Many of these purchasers could not qualify for a bank mortgage but relied on savings, wartime reserved pay and gratuities, or private loans to fund their purchase (Logan, 418; Kociuba, Recording 1; Patryn, Recording 16).

Brian Wagstaff, a process-worker, and his wife and baby were living in one room of his parents-in-law's house at Glebe when he bought their un-serviced land:

I came up on the train and thought "Ohh, look at the bush, smell the bush, ohh... there was a small crowd standing up on the top of the hill waiting for the fellow... when he came he said "£89 the block", I had £30 to put a deposit on it...as soon as the banks opened [on Monday] I paid it out... I said to Jess "please say if you don't want it or you don't like it...it's going to be pretty tough you know, there's nothing there". We came up on the Sunday, wheeling Gary in the pram, she stood at the top of the hill and I said "It's there." And she said "What, all of that?" and I said "No, one block of it...and you think about it carefully, there's a lot of hardship, there's nothing there at all, just vacant land" (Wagstaff, Interview 1).

Once in possession of the title deeds, owners could apply to the local council for approval to build a house. In many local government areas, building approval also entitled them to apply for permission to occupy a temporary dwelling before any services were made available (HSC, no.3/51, file no. 1335). As with other outer Shires, Hornsby allowed owner-occupation of temporary dwellings, initially for six months with extensions granted, supposedly for up to two years but in many cases for considerably longer, provided progress continued on the permanent dwelling on the site (HSC, no.3/51, file no. 1335).

The property owner might have received approval but building progress was dictated by available finance and by the nation-wide shortage of building materials (Australian Government, 1946a, 159). Many of the cheaper prematurely-developed allotments were bought by buyers who could not qualify for a housing loan so used all their available funds to purchase land and erect a temporary dwelling (Wagstaff B., Interview 1; Patryn, K. Recording 16; Kociuba, T&A., Recording 1). Many of these purchasers were low-income workers, so progress on the house usually meant working overtime or finding a second job (Wagstaff, Interview 2). Additionally, most building materials were rationed in NSW until October 1952 (SMH, 14 October 1952, p. 1). Acute deficiencies existed for timber, steel products of all types, bricks and roofing tiles, asbestos cement sheeting (fibro), water and gas pipes, earthenware pipes, and baths, basins and stoves, meaning that, even with permission to build, it could take months to receive an order (Australian Government, 1950, 410; Smith, 15). Building material for a temporary dwelling could only be bought as a garage kit, sourced second-hand, or on the “black market” (Patryn, Recording 16; Wagstaff, Interview 3; Kirby, Recording 1). The lack of money among marginal owners, combined with the shortage of materials, meant that for many of the residents of temporary dwellings their anticipated six to twelve months living in their shed, shack or garage extended to become many years. These are the residents whose resilience and sacrifices are documented here.

Experiencing premature subdivision

The Commonwealth Housing Commission Final Report 1944 noted that “1. A home of modern standard and equipment is both a need and a right of every Australian”, soon afterwards the NSW County Planning Report noted that basic utilities such as reticulated water, electricity and garbage and sewerage services were recognised by 1930 as essential for the health of urban residents (Australian Government, 1944, 22; CCC, 187). The Plan concluded that “utilities which should be available in all urban areas are – Sewerage and Drainage, Water Supply, Electricity Supply, Gas Supply, Garbage Disposal, Street Access including paving, footpaths, street lighting and kerbing and guttering” (CCC, 185). In the newly settled fringe areas during the late 1940s and 1950s, it was impossible to achieve these standards.

Access to water was the first priority as permission to occupy any dwelling would not be granted unless clean water was available (Wagstaff, Interview 3). Many households, like the Kirby’s in Mt Colah and the Patryn’s in Hornsby carried all their water from a neighbour until the permanent house was built five years later, while a resident in the nearby suburb of Turramurra brought water by garden hose from the nearest neighbour each day and stored it in his copper until money and pipes were available for his own connection (Oral history, Interview 1). If neighbours did not have reticulated water, the household had to manage as best they could. The Wagstaffs bought a garage kit for their vacant block and Brian’s first concern was water, firstly to mix concrete for the slab floor then for household use:

There was no water here but that creek was there, it wasn’t a bad trickle so I put a dam across temporarily so that it would back up and that’s the water I used to mix the cement for the garage foundations...Mrs Lachman said I could use her well for drinking water while I worked... the garage kit came with guttering so I thought I’d better get a tank...my brother at Como’s neighbour had the water put on and he was wondering

what to do with his tank...my brother brought it up. I didn't know if it was any good, it could have been full of holes, so I climbed inside...looked for light everywhere, anything that was a bit suspect, I patched up...with bitumen and gal. sheet...I set it up at a reasonable height and put [the pipe] into the house with a tap and a sink and bucket underneath...Many years later, I put a lean-to out the back and put a pipe extension so it was a laundry and we eventually put a bit of a shower in there, pretty cold in the winter I can tell you!...but it got us out of a lot of trouble (Wagstaff, Interview 4).

Washing clothes and keeping clean was always a problem. Many people put a shelter over a brick surround for a wood-fired copper boiler, if not they built an open fire in the yard to boil clothes and for hot water for baths. Others visited family who had a bathroom or they bathed at hospitals and factories once they had finished work. Brian Wagstaff tells of his solution and remembers a neighbour's washing day:

Twice a week we needed to have a hot tub, I set up many kerosene tins...cleaned them out and use it with a handle...[to]carry hot water from the fire out in the yard, for a bath or whatever, for Jess to do washing...I built it up on stone there...that's what we did and if it was raining – tough!

We were very envious of Shirley [a neighbour], she had a water-driven washing machine ...the pressure of the water turned it...he had the water connected on where she had the tubs and washing machine, it was water-driven...no electricity (Wagstaff, interview 4).

Whereas access to clean water was mandatory, access to gas or electricity was only recommended. Without mains power or gas lines, most residents of temporary dwellings relied on kerosene for cooking, lighting and heating. The most common appliances were a "tilly" lamp (pressure lamp) and a single-burner Primus "ring" used for cooking and small volumes of boiling water. When Taras Kociuba, a railway stoker, moved his family into three tents in Hornsby, he knew they would have to rely on kerosene:

I bought two kerosene heaters- the ones you can cook on top and you open like this for heater- and one Primus, and we make the kitchen in one tent...no fridge, there was no electricity...Kowalenko had a block of land with a spring...we used the spring as a fridge...we had two tilly lamps for light (Kociuba, Recording 1).

The Wagstaffs started with a single-burner Primus but his wife later discovered a small stove unit in the local produce store:

Jess in Somerville's found a two-burner primus stove with an oven on top, she came home and said "We're going to have a lean week this week, look what I've bought". But it was good, she baked cakes and we could have a baked dinner. We had a [kerosene] fridge one side, a stove the other, it was good (Wagstaff, Interview 4).

The Patryns, a barber and a domestic worker at the local hospital, also had a Primus “ring” and Katiusha would ask the chef at the hospital to cook her meat for her. When she needed to cook in a big pan, she too used a fire in the yard and if it rained, her husband held an umbrella over them both (Patryn, pers.comm. April 2011). Despite living directly opposite the main electricity sub-station, she could not afford to have electricity connected:

We already living right on this [place]...I had my Primus...every year you finish work, holiday, I got money...and I put in electricity, we put electricity, we didn't have electricity and at that time I think “Ready to put in electricity”...and I went into Sydney, I bought jug to make cup of tea (Patryn, Recording 16).

Although the Kociubas ensured they had two heaters for the tents, heating was a luxury for many residents. The Wagstaff family did not heat their unlined and un-ceiled garage, instead they would stand outside near the fire:

Of course it was as cold as hell, 'cause we didn't have a fire-side heater...we put on more clothes...and I had bricks set up here where we boiled kerosene tins of water and I could keep that going and the kids could stand in front of it...I can remember Shirley and Bill [neighbours] coming across with their little girl one time when we had the fire going, they were living in a garage over there as well, and “oohh, oohh” [hands were held out], 'cause it was cold, frosty, ice everywhere (Wagstaff, Interview 3).

Without an all-weather surface on the roads, deliveries of mail, milk and building materials and the removal of waste could also be a problem, including the essential Council-organised weekly sanitary service for the sanitary pan which replaced the unobtainable septic tanks. One Hornsby resident recalls:

[The milkman] wouldn't come down the hill. No, a lot of people wouldn't come down...every time we had heavy rain we had great gullies in the road...it was so bad and so rugged, and we would have to bring rocks and rubble and logs and things and fill it up just to get the “sanny-man” to come down...We had the tree on the corner, we used to have a nail we drove into the tree and of a night-time we'd go and hang the [milk] billys with the money in the billy...You'd see them [the wives] in the early hours of the morning, in their dressing-gown and racing up to get the milk. [The postman] would have come down [walking?] yes, absolutely...no bike (Wagstaff, Interview 2).

And another remembers the difficulty going out with two small children:

Oh, oh, the stumps, big stumps, the rocks too, small rocks doesn't matter, but with the pram it was shocking, you can't push up top...a truck delivering sand for cement broke an axle out there (Kociuba, A., Interview 13).

Progressing with utility provision

The difficulties faced by residents living in prematurely-developed areas were acknowledged by the various authorities responsible for service provision but extension of services was constrained by the shortages of materials and labour after the war, the limited capacity of the aging infrastructure, and

the difficult terrain to be traversed. Coal was Australia's main form of energy and the national shortage of coal impacted all aspects of utility provision, from power for pumps and machinery, through the heat for firing and furnaces, to the transport of materials to the districts (Broomham, 1987). Additionally, the providers were dependent on infrastructure installed decades previously and, although continually upgraded, it was not designed for the population growth from 1945 (Broomham, 162; Aird, 169; O'Neil, 1981, Interview, 6). The terrain of Hornsby Shire posed a further complication as the expanding township was located along a rocky ridge which drained steeply both easterly, towards established localities with most services already available, and to the west, where the majority of sparsely-populated, prematurely-developed areas were located.

Although provision of reticulated water was of the highest priority for both the local Council and the NSW Metropolitan Water, Sewerage and Drainage Board (MWS&DB), expansion of the reticulation system demanded greater pumping capacity, additional kilometres of mains, and increased manpower, all of which were in short supply (Aird, 75-77). The existing Hornsby reservoir was adequate but, in 1954, Hornsby Shire Council (HSC) requested amplification of mains and an extra temporary pumping unit capable of 4,500,000 litres per day. Whenever possible, the water mains were extended to serve existing cottages, cottages in the course of erection and still-vacant lots (HSC, no. 1/54, file no. 2056). Although HSC had the power to insist that developers install water to new subdivisions, this did not apply to the previously-subdivided land so households in temporary dwellings continued to depend on tanks or informal supply from neighbours (Dale, 1981, Interview, 3).

By 1960, 30% of Sydney homes were still not connected to a sewer, with the majority of these in the newly-settled outer suburbs (Jeans and Logan, 38). Hornsby's sewerage treatment works dated from 1911, drained only the eastern slope, also served three expanding neighbouring localities and was close to capacity by 1948 (Aird, 1961, 169). The MWS&DB was short of funds, materials and labour and had no plans to provide treatment works to sewer the western side of the ridge (Jeans and Logan, 38). Households in un-serviced subdivisions on the western slopes were consequently forced to rely on the Council-organised sanitary service until the permanent house was connected to an individual home-built septic system (Kirby, Interview 1).

Electricity was bought in bulk from the Sydney County Council-generated supply and distributed through the Hornsby Shire Council-owned grid (Wilkenfeld and Spearritt, 27). HSC was therefore responsible for extension of mains to un-serviced areas (HSC, no. 6/54, file no. 2976). Electricity generation and installation was greatly affected by industrial action, high consumer demand and lack of materials, and many improvements were deferred (Department of the Valuer-General, 1953, Valuation List - Hornsby). As with other utilities, provision to a street was nominally approved but work was forced to wait until "loan money and materials are available" and requests were refused if the street had too few customers for revenue to cover expenditure (HSC, no. 46/53, file no. 2044). The cost of connection meant a sizeable outlay for a household and electricity was not considered a priority for many residents of temporary dwellings who still had considerable progress to make on a permanent home.

The provision of gas to outer areas challenged the resources of Australian Gas Light, the privately-owned provider. Beset by industrial stoppages, shortages of coal and iron, collapsing infrastructure, and Government control of prices which discouraged investment in new extensions, the limited

increases in gas-line coverage were primarily for new Housing Commission developments (Broomham, 162-172). Gas was available in Hornsby township from 1890 but was not extended even to the closer newly-settled developments until 1955 (Broomham, 176).

Road maintenance, kerbing and guttering were primarily the responsibility of the local Council supplemented by grants from the Lands Department and Department of Main Roads (HSC, no. 22/53, file no. 2005). Once subdivided and sold, the developer-graded internal roads became the Council's responsibility and requests for "made" roads in the form of strips of bitumen down the centre would be regularly entered onto the HSC Works List to complete when loan money, materials and labour were available (HSC, no. 23/53, file number. 2015.) If requested, HSC would provide a load of stone for the resident to construct kerbing and guttering across their frontage but otherwise maintaining access and controlling storm water on roads located for the convenience of the developer rather than according to terrain was the responsibility of the residents (HSC, no. 22/50, file no. 1263).

Conclusion

The challenging experiences of residents of temporary dwellings living in residential subdivisions without basic household amenities and public infrastructure were the culmination of a series of events which unfolded over many decades. These events commenced in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries with the unregulated subdivision of remote agricultural land and its purchase by investors hoping to capitalise on the anticipated provision of utilities and infrastructure which never materialised. With the supply of building land greatly outstripping demand, the majority of remote allotments remained unoccupied until the need for residential space increased during the severe shortage of housing following World War Two. As the un-serviced land was relatively cheap and therefore affordable to marginal purchasers, the allotments were finally bought by aspiring home-owners once profit-limiting legislation lapsed and it came on the market.

Desperate for any form of accommodation and with building materials and labour in short supply, many thousands of these property owners, dependent on savings rather than unobtainable loans, chose to build and occupy temporary dwellings on prematurely-developed land while they saved for the permanent house. With utility and infrastructure providers equally constrained by shortages of materials, labour and funds, these more-remote properties remained without amenities for many years, forcing the residents to devise a variety of solutions to the everyday household problems of cooking, lighting, heating, cleanliness and transport.

Premature subdivision of land may have been officially frowned upon by state and local planning authorities but, in this adaptive incremental way, many Sydney residents acquired basic shelter and moved into home-ownership.

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