Problems and Prospects for Suburban Renewal: An Australian Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

More than any other country, Australia is a nation of suburbs (Davison, 1995; Forster, 2004). The traditional expansion of the city through low density single house lot subdivision on the urban fringe, predominantly for home ownership, has been the standard model of suburban growth in Australian cities for much of the 20th century (Troy 2004). Apart from medium density infill around suburban town centres, the principal housing form of Australia’s suburbs has been the owner-occupied detached house (Davison et al 1995; Badcock & Beer 2000). At the 2006 census, 75% of the Australian population still resided in a detached house, the vast majority located in the suburbs of the largest cities.

This picture is changing and becoming much more complex. In particular, there is now an emerging band of aging ‘middle ring’ suburbs built in the forty years between 1930 and 1960. These relatively declining areas have been characterised as a “Third City” behind the First (inner) and Second (outer fringe) cities (Randolph, 2002). The result has been both a relative and absolute shift into these Third City middle suburbs of increasingly numbers of the most disadvantaged communities exhibiting a range of ‘stressed’ quality of life indicators previously typifying inner city areas or contemporary public housing estates (Gleeson, 2006; Randolph and Holloway, 2005).

In the US, the emergence of academic and policy interest in the phenomenon of the “First Suburbs” parallels the processes that have become increasingly apparent in the larger Australian cities. The American geography of this emerging interest has been variously defined as ‘crab-grass slum’ (Davis, 1990), ‘midopolis’ (Kotkin, 2001), ‘first tier’ suburbs (Hudnut, 2003), and ‘first suburbs’ (Puentes and Orfield, 2002). These areas are basically synonymous with suburbs developed between the 1940s and the 1960s that now represent a declining band on the edge of older central city jurisdictions. In many cases, disinvestment has led to a degraded physical, social and economic landscape, with these places becoming a ‘devalorized urban form’ (Short et al 2007). Such neighbourhoods sometimes fulfill roles as gateway suburbs for migrant communities and have increasingly become shaped by the same type of pressures which previously afflicted the inner core: a rising concentration of socially disadvantaged groups and a deterioration of the physical fabric and local environmental quality.

This paper engages with the First Suburb debate in an attempt to consider its relevance to the Australian context. At its heart, the First Suburb debate concerns the wave of disinvestment that has hit suburbs of comparable age to the Australian Third City Suburbs as places in decline and in need of renewal. This raises the issue of the comparability of the US and Australian experiences. While there are obvious similarities, it is also clear that the Australian and American contexts are different in detail. Short et al (2007, p. 653) have posed
the question, in relation to inner city renewal as ‘to what extent is marked inner-
suburban decline an example of US exceptionalism?’ The paper poses a comparable question in respect to the emerging patterns and processes of Australian post-war middle ring suburbia.

While we would expect parallels given a broadly shared economic, cultural and social development history as western capitalist societies, the actual patterns of spatial advantage and disadvantage, and of investment, disinvestment and reinvestment, are far more complex and context driven. In particular, the middle ring Australian suburb appears to have retained a more resilient economy and buoyant housing market than many comparable US suburbs. Issues of race, municipal resourcing and continued suburban sprawl have less purchase in the Australian situation. While aging middle ring Australian suburbs have gone through a cycle of relative decline, the extent of decline has been moderated by continuing demand for housing in part due to continued immigration pressure on Australian cities, strong metropolitan economies, and a more supportive public investment climate in which State level expenditures across the cities have tended to ameliorate impacts on local government rate revenues from falling population and income bases.

The paper reviews evidence of the increasing complexity and social polarization of the Australian suburb. Drawing on evidence from the 2001 Census, we present a profile of the emerging divisions in the Australian suburbs, using Western Sydney as a case study. A more in depth analysis of development approvals in one local government area in this region shows that despite indicators of disadvantage, urban renewal indicates a continuing attraction of these areas for investment by both households and developers. The policy implications are then reviewed with a final reflection on the contrasting trajectories of US and Australian cities in the light of the discussion. The paper first briefly reviews the basis of the debate over the US First Suburb movement before going on describe the emergence of Australian Third City Suburbs and the evidence from Sydney.
FIRST SUBURBS AND THE EMERGE OF POLARIZED SUBURBIA

The First Suburb phenomenon arises partly from the acknowledgment of increasing suburban heterogeneity in which a traditional and simplistic ‘city-suburb divide’ has declining analytical power and policy purchase (Hanlon et al 2006). Lucy and Phillips (2000) have commented on a slow, insidious and inevitable suburban decline that characterises the ring of communities just outside the boundaries of the older central cities, with ageing ‘non competitive’ housing, infrastructure, and, at times, struggling neighbourhoods and commercial areas. These local government areas are often small in size and governance and therefore highly fragmented, resulting in inadequate revenue bases as population declines with increasing fiscal stress caused by imbalances between revenue capacity and expenditure needs. In worst case scenarios, characteristics of falling population and ‘white flight’, rapid ethnic change, increasing poverty, poorer school performance, declining retail levels and the loss of local jobs through deindustrialization have left these places with a smaller economic base for opportunity and mobility (Short et al 2007). Once the urban frontier, these mature communities face the prospect of being new ‘metropolitan pivot points’ of decline (Hudnut 2003).

While many of these areas have benefited from significant assets in terms of urban accessibility and building design, existing and underused infrastructure, and ‘resiliency of spirit’ (Hudnut, 2003, p. xv), they have been caught in a ‘policy blindspot’, that is, neither desolate nor undeveloped enough to qualify for targeted state assistance (Leigh and Lee, 2005; Puentes and Orfield, 2002; Puentes and Warren, 2006). Puentes and Orfield have recognized that these communities are the places where ‘the nation’s most critical issues are played out on a daily basis’ (2002, p. 18) and call for more balanced policies with a ‘focus on strengthening existing communities’ (2002, p. 18). Such policies should include a regional emphasis on transport and land use planning, incentives for reinvestment, help to equalise fiscal health, and assistance to expand opportunities through the building of political coalitions (Puentes 2006).

The US literature therefore links both the empirical issue of suburban decline with the political underpinnings of the problem and its social consequences. However, the literature has also thrown up critiques. Lee and Leigh (2007) note the limitations of research to date. These include failures:

- to offer a clear, consistent definition of inner-ring suburbs;
- to provide a standard method with which to identify the geographic boundaries of inner-ring suburbs below the municipal level, with annexation muddying the distinction between central city and suburb; and
- to develop integrated indicators that represent the socioeconomic decline of the inner ring.

The US First Suburb literature has also been criticised as failing to account for the sheer diversity of post-war suburbs. They seem to fit some typologies (Short et al 2007) better than others (Lang et al 2006). While regional and
place-bound diversity is acknowledged, appreciation of this diversity is often hidden in an over-arching construct obviously gaining power by generalization. Indeed, from a policy perspective, first suburbs as a whole may be ‘hampered by their heterogeneity’ (Puentes and Warren 2006) and can display wide disparities in percentage of foreign born, owner-occupation, median household income, and percentage black (Short et al 2007). The net result is that the First Suburbs emerge as generalised constructs even in the US, let alone as a global model.

AUSTRALIAN SUBURBIA: DIVERSITY AND DIVISION

The evolving geography of Australian cities parallels broader western experience and models (Forster 2004). Indeed, developed over the last two centuries on what were declared tabula rasa sites, they are microcosm of the sweeping economic, technological and social forces influencing the development of capitalist cities in the modernist era. Waves of investment, disinvestment and reinvestment represent an on-going process of suburban development and renewal, continuing established patterns noted in earlier phases of urban development (Harvey 1974; Kendig 1979; Seek 1983).

The physical form and structure of Australian cities was shaped by successive phases from walking, public transport to automobile cities. By the 1970s social differentiation crystallised broadly into a geometry of socio-economic sectors, socio-demographic crescents, and ethnic clusters comparable to those evident abroad, but a more complexly patterned polyglot ‘residential mosaic’ has since emerged (Badcock, 1984; Gleeson 2006; Forster 2004; Randolph 2004a).

Cyclical historical waves of investment, disinvestment and reinvestment have been expressed through sequential processes of development, urban renewal and redevelopment. Until recently, the simplistic divide of dense, mixed inner city versus a hegemonic suburban residential zone of more affordable housing has predominated and pervaded cultural critiques, planning theories and urban policy. Post-Second World War development was seen as producing a suburban landscape ‘characterised by outward social homogeneity and a rough uniformity in the style of houses’ (Gleeson 2006, 17). But the reality has been not so uniform. This seeming homogeneity has been further dented by a pervasive suburbanisation of disadvantage, characterised by areas of lower socio-economic status, more public and private tenants than home-owners, more migrants, lower housing values, above average unemployment, and poorer standards of local services (Randolph and Holloway 2005; Murphy and Watson, 2000). Such a process was eloquently pinpointed early by Stretton (1970, p. 310) when he characterised cities acting as ‘both physical and psychological devices for quietly shifting resources from poorer to richer, and for excusing or concealing – with a baffled but complacent air – the increasing deprivation of the poor’.

By the latter two decades of the 20th century, the exclusion of the urban poor to the middle suburbs had become a predominant feature of Sydney. Coupled with new types of suburban development – sub-regional centres, new suburban employment zones, master planned communities, and ex-urban outliers – the overall suburban trajectory has been toward a suburban mosaic of enclaves.
However, in contrast to many US cities, and even those in the UK, Australian cities lack the extensive blighted zones manifested in abandoned housing and intense social dysfunction in inner cities. While there is some evidence of a ‘white flight’ phenomenon (Gwyther, 2004), there has not been the large scale abandonment of inner or even middle ring areas that have so damaged some US cities. As Horvath et al (1989, 88) noted, apart from isolated pockets of substandard housing, ‘perhaps the most striking feature about relatively poor Sydney … is the absence of extensive residential slums anywhere in the metropolis”. While these may well now be emerging in some areas, most particularly in the higher density clusters of rented flats in middle suburbia, the vitality and attraction of the older inner city centres and suburbs has been sustained and enhanced as desirable places of accessibility, employment, and cultural identity, especially for newly arriving immigrant groups.

Looking to the urban periphery, while suburbanisation was extensive and evident well before even the turn of the 20th century, rampant leapfrogging development has been largely held in check since the 1970s in Australia. There have not been the same powerful decentralizing forces of extensive freeway networks and tax-deductible mortgages as in the US. Driven by a mix of deliberative planning, developer behaviour and consumer preferences, growth at the fringe has been more than matched by intensification of development and diversification of housing stock within the historic urban footprint, supported by urban consolidation planning policies which have come to dominate strategic planning for all Australian cities since the 1980s (Forster 2004; Searle 2007).

An enduring outcome has thus been evidence of the inversion of the socio-economic gradation within the (admittedly also somewhat stereotyped) American city, with better proximity to the central core characterised by higher socio-economic status and amenity advantages while many outer suburban areas struggle with poorer accessibility and limited employment opportunities. This social geography was institutionalised by the large peripheral public housing estates developed in the 1960s and 1970s. With the exception of the early 1970s, when a rare burst of national urban policy belatedly, and albeit briefly, sought to formally address metropolitan territorial injustice, whole suburban regions were more or less stigmatised as spaces of stress – Melbourne’s and Sydney’s western suburbs, Adelaide’s northern suburbs and Brisbane’s southern suburbs for example.

Within this belt, an Australian version of the American First Suburb phenomenon is also evident to some degree. That is, there are middle ring suburbs characterized by mass produced low to moderate income suburbs rolled out in the post-second world war housing boom in the 1950s and 1960s to realize the housing dream of the ‘quarter acre block’ that through a confluence of the impacts of macro-economic restructuring, generational change, new migration policies, and other social changes have come to represent spaces of relative disadvantage.
AUSTRALIA’S AGING MIDDLE RING SUBURBS

Social heterogeneity is now a feature of Australian suburbs and an underlying context of this discussion is the increasingly polarized character of suburban development (Forster 2004; Randolph, 2004a). Sydney – as a beta global city (Searle 1996) - has become increasingly polarized as a result of the impacts of broader labour market restructuring, welfare reforms, demographic change and migration played out spatially within an essentially market driven housing system. In general social terms, the northern, eastern and inner suburbs, together with waterside locations, have pulled away from the middle ring western suburbs.

Figure 1:
Median household income by suburb, Sydney 2006
(heavier boundaries indicate local authority boundaries)

Within these general trends, the suburbs themselves have begun to diverge significantly. As Figure 1 illustrates, the middle suburban areas of western Sydney have markedly lower household incomes than the northern and eastern suburbs and also have lower incomes than many of the newer suburbs on the fringe. The recognition that the middle ring suburbs of Australian cities are beginning to show clear signs of social polarisation and relative decline has been emerging for some time. In the early 1980s, Maher (1982, 18) identified the middle ring suburbs as no longer representing the suburban growth frontier and as ‘showing signs of maturity’. Forster (2004) notes these locations as being a belt ‘strongly affected by ageing in place’ and suffering significant population loss in some locations. Darcy (2000) describes the middle ring suburbs as feeling the brunt of selective urban consolidation policies through new medium density housing which has become highly contested in some localities (Lewis, 2000).
More recently, Gleeson (2006, 46) noted a polarisation in stressed middle suburban areas: ‘the netherworlds of the private rental market, studded with decrepit housing stock and generally wearing the mantle of public neglect’. Stilwell (2005) also comments upon the middle ring suburbs as being ‘in limbo’ contributing to a longer list of other contemporary urban problems. He characterizes the issues as infrastructure stress on aging schools, hospitals, water and sewerage systems; a local tax base shrinking relative to more affluent localities; and a failure to attract gentrifiers and other affluent social strata. He notes that ‘they have not experienced the dramatic surges in property price inflation that have occurred in the gentrifying suburbs in the inner city areas’ and hence the ability of local governments in these areas ‘to effectively manage the maintenance of high residential amenity has become increasingly problematic’ (Stilwell 2005, p. 6).

In characterizing these locations as Australia’s ‘Third City Suburbs’, the argument is that they have fallen behind both the gentrified inner city and newer outer city fringe developments, with emerging problems of urban obsolescence of the housing stock. The ageing middle suburbs have become the dominant location of disadvantage (Randolph 2002, also Randolph and Holloway 2004). Older Anglo-Australian residents have been replaced by a mixed new population, some relatively poorer households, often young and new migrants, as well as second generation immigrants. However, as we argue below, this process of change can be seen to sparking a new wave of housing reinvestment, which runs counter to the notion of an inexorable decline in local amenity and social cohesion.

**Figure 2:**
Definition of Western Sydney local government areas
A DEFINITION OF MIDDLE RING SUBURGS IN SYDNEY

In order to show the emerging social divide of the Australian suburbs and the differential characteristics of the Third City Suburbs, we focus on suburbs located in Western Sydney. Figure 2 shows the Local Government Areas (LGAs) included in this analysis. The Australian Bureau of Statistics provides census data for sub-areas that constitute suburbs for postal purposes. For the purposes of this analysis, planning departments from the 11 local councils included in this analysis were asked to classify each suburb within their area in terms of the approximate date of development. This produced five broad sub-groupings of suburbs (Figure 3). The main point to make from this exercise is that while there is a degree of contiguousness in the distribution of suburbs by age, the particular geography of the city and the periodicity of development has resulted in a patchwork pattern of development, with ‘middle’ suburban suburbs located both in the central western Sydney area as well as in the two urban ‘arms’ to the west and south west. The particular spatial configuration of Sydney and its pattern of suburban expansion means that there is no clear concentric pattern to the location of these suburbs.

SUBURBAN POLIRIZATION: THE EMERGE OF THE THIRD CITY SUBURB

This section provides an analysis of the Greater Western Sydney region based on five broad sub-groupings of suburbs and using data from the 2001 Census:

- Suburbs developed after 1996 (Sub-Region 1)
- Suburbs developed between 1980 and 1996 (Sub-Region 2)
- Suburbs developed between 1970 and 1980 (Sub-Region 3)
• Suburbs developed between 1945 and 1970 (Sub-Region 4)

• Suburbs developed prior to 1945 (Sub-Region 5)

The suburbs provided to the Councils followed the suburb definitions that the Australian Bureau of Statistics classifies as being in ‘urban Sydney’. Areas outside ‘urban Sydney’, but still located in Greater Western Sydney were not classified for this exercise. Of particular interest are those suburbs developed broadly between the 1930s to 1970, that is after the suburban growth boom halted by the Great Depression and before the major development boom of the post 1970s era (Sub-Regions 4 and 5). The nature of these areas is benchmarked against the broader suburban context of western Sydney.

The results presented here represent a set of indicator statistics that aim to summarise the main characteristics of the areas based on Census data. The analysis illustrates two key messages: the level of intra-regional polarization that has emerged across the Western suburbs of the city, and the clear socio-demographic gradation that has developed between the older and newer suburbs. At the time of the 2001 Census, the region was home to a total of 551,000 households, of which 143,000 lived in suburbs developed before 1945 and a further 178,000 lived in post war suburbs built between 1945 and 1970. Together, these two sub-groups of suburbs accounted for 58% of the region’s households.

Sub-region 1: Post 1996 suburbs

These suburbs represent the very latest additions to the residential stock of Greater Western Sydney. This sub-region comprises 10 suburbs predominantly in the north west of the region, together with several suburbs in the south, and the middle suburban redevelopment area around Sydney Olympic Park. The profile of these newest suburbs is one of relative affluence compared to the rest of the region – higher income, home ownership, low unemployment, educated, car dependent and family orientated households in single family dwellings: the ‘aspirational’ cohort for whom up-scale fringe suburbia represents the expression of social achievement (Latham, 2003). These suburbs do not attract much variety in terms of household type – there are few single person and older households. They are places for couples (implying dual incomes), with or without (possibly pre- or post-) children, and there are virtually no public tenants. This is a distinguishing feature of the post-1996 suburbs – in many ways they fit the profile of ‘privatopias’, fully reliant on private housing solutions, with the ‘McMansion’ as a dominant housing form (Gleeson, 2006). However, the proportion born overseas is around the average for the more suburban areas of the region, and there are indications that certain overseas born groups from parts of Asia, northern Europe and southern Africa have been disproportionately attracted to these suburbs.
Sub-region 2: Suburbs developed between 1980 and 1996

The suburbs in this sub-region comprise many of the newer suburbs of outer Sydney. In many ways, these areas are still developing. Not surprisingly, they are broadly comparable with the newest fringe suburbs, but there are some notable differences. This sub-region has the highest proportion of children under 14 years and the highest proportion of couples with children, as well as an appreciable number of single parents families. In many ways, these suburbs are the most family orientated areas of the region. However, the proportion of higher income and managerial/professions households is lower. Once again, these suburbs are overwhelmingly places of single family homes and had virtually no flats. So while sub-region 2 shares many of the characteristics of sub-region 1, it comprises suburbs with a somewhat less privileged social profile. Nevertheless, they are overwhelmingly places for families, homebuyers and houses. Other varieties of households are significantly underrepresented.

Sub-region 3: Suburbs developed between 1970 and 1980

These suburbs were largely developed in the first decade after the Sydney Regional Outline Plan was introduced in 1968. They are now well established, but with a housing stock approaching forty years old and clearly maturing populations: the proportion of people aged over 55 is almost double that of sub-regions 1 and 2 and the proportion of couples with children significantly lower with much higher levels of single adult households. The population age profile is distinctly older than the previous two sub-regions, a reflection of the ‘ageing in place’ of residents who moved into the region twenty or more years ago. Almost a third of households originally came from overseas and there is a jump in the representation of people from Southern and Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Average incomes are lower, with one in eight earning less than $400 per week. What is different about these suburbs is the level of mobility, which, with only 35 per cent not resident in their current home five years ago, is the most stable of all the sub-regions, and the higher proportion of outright home ownership – older households who have paid off their mortgages. In many ways, therefore, this sub-region is a somewhat older and less affluent version of the population found in sub-region 2. The population who moved into these areas thirty years is clearly ageing, its children are growing up and their mortgages are being paid off. The cultural mix is different to the newer suburbs, but is still predominantly Australian in character.

Sub-region 4: Suburbs developed between 1945 and 1970

These are the classic post-war suburbs, built in the suburban expansion that overtook Sydney’s first metropolitan strategic plan, the County of Cumberland Plan, after 1945. In demographic terms, the original residents of these areas are ageing: one fifth of the population in these suburbs is aged 55 years or older. At the same time almost a fifth of households are lone parents. Incomes are significantly lower than in the newer suburbs, with only 8 per cent of households
earning over $2000 per week and almost one in five households earning less than $400 – three times the level in sub-region 1 suburbs. Almost one in ten of those in employment worked as a labourer or related occupation, and less than ten percent had university qualifications. These suburbs contain some of the larger public housing developments of the 1960s, which, together with a growing private rental market, mean that 30% of households are renters. In addition, around a fifth of dwellings are higher density forms – semi-detached houses or blocks of flats – clear evidence that these suburbs are undergoing a process of infill and renewal with higher density and attached housing replacing the older separate dwellings. These suburbs clearly show signs of change, with the first wave of residents being replaced by an increasingly diverse population. Renewal through higher density is occurring. The population is both less affluent than newer suburbs and less homogenous.

Sub-region 5: Suburbs developed before 1945

These are the oldest suburbs in the region. With their origins in the half century before the Second World War, they comprise most of the older town centres in the region and their surrounding areas and have clearly been subject to a process of renewal and redevelopment. In many ways, these areas are the most physically and socially diverse in the region. It's here that the ‘First Suburb’ characteristics of urban decline are most pronounced. The population is the least young of the five regions. Proportions of childless couples, lone parents and divorced or separated people are above the average for the region, and over a fifth of households are single adults, the highest proportion of all five urban sub-regions by some way. These suburbs contain the most ethnically diverse population in the region, with two in four residents being born overseas and as many as 11 per cent lacking fluency in English. All the immigrant groups are represented, with high proportions of Southern and Eastern Europeans, the Middle East and Asia. Household mobility rates are relatively high. In economic terms, these suburbs are among the poorest in the region, with 21 per cent of households earning under $400 per week but only 7 per cent earning over $2000 reflecting, in part, the high proportion of single adult and older households. Moreover, one in ten of the economically active population was unemployed, well above the regional average and there were higher proportions of lower skilled workers.

A significant proportion of households (16 per cent) does not have access to a motor vehicle and there are relatively few households with three or more vehicles. With 26% living in flats and another 11% in attached housing, the level of higher density housing is one of the key features that differentiate these suburbs from the rest of the region. Indeed, higher density housing accounts for a greater proportion of housing in this sub-region than in Sydney as a whole (37 per cent and 35 per cent respectively). Much of this stock is found around the local town centres and along the main transport routes, which partly accounts for the higher proportions of households without cars. Associated with the high proportion of flats is a very high proportion of private rental. This sub-region has by far the highest proportion of households renting from a private landlord (27 per cent), again, even higher than the Sydney average. Only one in five households (20 per cent) are homebuyers, while just over a third (36 per cent) own outright. The large presence of higher density private rental is a primary
factor behind these suburbs’ relatively high mobility and their heterogeneous population.

In many ways, therefore, this group of older suburbs is the multi-cultural core of Sydney. A highly diverse population, in contrast to the newer suburbs, is a reflection of a much more diverse housing market. The sizeable proportion of single person households reflects the greater variety of housing choice in the area that is simply not available in the new suburbs.

The analysis of these five sub-regional areas confirms a strong picture of the differentiation of suburbs across Greater Western Sydney related to the general chronology of development. The newer suburbs present a clear indication of a more wealthy and largely ‘mono-cultural’ population, linked by a uniform house purchasing, family and car dominated lifestyles, with low representation of other housing or households types. As the analysis shifted towards the older suburbs, a consistent trend to a more diverse and less privileged population profile emerged. In particular, the oldest, pre- and post-war suburbs are characterised by high levels of social diversity, with the highest proportions of the most disadvantaged in the region, as measured by household income and occupational characteristics. The defining characteristic is, in many ways, the income polarization between the older and newer suburbs. It is the absence of higher income households that largely defines these older suburbs, together with much more heterogeneous housing markets. The higher social diversity here is in great part linked to this much greater variety in housing market characteristics. It also reflects the fact that several waves of renewal, in-migration and change have moved through these older suburbs as the housing stock has been renewed and reused. The result is a mix of newer communities among what remains of the older community that moved in when these areas were originally developed and their offspring.

HOUSING MARKETS IN THIRD CITY SUBURBS: REINVESTMENT AND RETENTION?

The housing market in these areas has responded in a range of different ways in recent years, assisted by a series of State strategic planning polices aimed to stimulate higher density housing:

- Spot redevelopment in an ad hoc and unplanned way, often as two story and bigger houses replacing older fibro houses – the ‘Knock-down Rebuild’ market;
- Extensions and additions to existing property, extending the rear to accommodate larger living spaces;
- Redevelopment as multi-unit villa and town house ‘dual occupancies’ where residential zoning or spot rezoning permits;
- Redevelopment of older houses into higher density flats in areas near town centres or on larger plots which have been rezoned specifically to permit such development – the now notorious ‘gun-barrel’ blocks, so called as they stretch back from the street frontage.
• More comprehensive higher density and more recently mixed use renewal near town centres and train stations encouraged by recent urban consolidation planning policies.

This often results in a ‘salt-and-pepper’ renewal approach with poor admixture of older fibro houses and newer ‘gun barrel’ medium density redevelopment on house lots. Much of the medium density renewal is undertaken on a lot-by-lot basis and rarely are several plots assembled to allow more sensitive and comprehensive renewal. The resulting urban form is often a disorganized mix of redevelopment that is poorly integrated in terms of street design, with low quality visual amenity and open space provision. Usually there has been little consideration of the longer term needs of the local community.

Table 1: Socio-Economic Profile of Sub-Regions in Greater Western Sydney, 2001

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<td>Aged 0 to 14 years</td>
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<td>28.9%</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
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<td>21.4%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
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<td>Aged 15 to 34 years</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
<td>31.9%</td>
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<td>Aged 55 to 64 years</td>
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<td>9.2%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aged 65 years or more</td>
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<td>4.2%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Separate House</td>
<td>93.0%</td>
<td>90.9%</td>
<td>88.1%</td>
<td>80.3%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td>79.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi Detached Dwellings</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flats/Units</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Dwellings</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner Occupiers</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>41.9%</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchasers</td>
<td>51.9%</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwelling Rented from State Housing Authority</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwelling Rented from Other Sources</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple Family with Children</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
<td>55.4%</td>
<td>44.8%</td>
<td>40.6%</td>
<td>41.5%</td>
<td>44.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple Family without Children</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Parent Families</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lone Person Households</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous Persons</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons Born Overseas</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>33.4%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons Lacking Fluency in English</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons who are Separated or Divorced</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households with No Motor Vehicle</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households with 3 or more Motor Vehicles</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, at the same time, this activity suggests that rather than widespread disinvestment and social decline, parts of these middle suburbs have retained and attracted a level of reinvestment in the housing market, from a range of directions. In particular, the high proportion of first and, increasingly, second, generation immigrant households (See Table 1) also points to the role of these suburbs as areas of developing cultural significance, places where new communities can gain a foothold and flourish. Without doubt, many who prosper also join the move to the new fringe suburbs. But increasingly, these communities are staying in the areas they or their parents first moved to on arriving in Sydney. This implies that rather than falling apart, middle suburb Australian communities have held together through cultural, religious and ethnic networks, forming a range of cohesive communities, rather than a solely socially excluded and disadvantaged spaces. While there is some anecdotal evidence this is the case, a gap exists in our knowledge of the precise drivers of this process.
REINVESTMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF DEVELOPMENT APPROVALS IN BANKSTOWN

The process of contemporary reinvestment in this region is shown by an analysis of Development Applications (DAs) approved in Bankstown LGA, in many ways a representative Australian Third City suburb. While opened up originally for urban settlement in the earlier part of the 20th century with the rail line to central Sydney, the area was predominantly developed in the post war period (Neutze, 1974). Its core housing stock is low density single family houses on moderate to large plots, often built of asbestos fibro sheeting which was a popular and affordable building material (Fingland 2006). A subsequent wave of higher density renewal became a dominant trend from the 1960s onwards when newly introduced strata title legislation facilitated the development of blocks of flats for sale to investors (Spearritt, 2000). These were largely developed in and around town centres or near rail lines, aided by zoning ordinances. Dozens of these blocks, usually of between 6 to 12 flats each, were constructed in the 1960 and 1970s and they continue to be a focus of local planning in the region today driven by State government instigated urban consolidation policies (Bunker, et al, 2006).

Figure 4: Development Approvals, Bankstown, 2000-2005

Bankstown now exemplifies a core middle ring foundation of ageing, low density, low amenity detached homes and higher density concentrations of flats, the latter associated with some of the most disadvantaged households in the area. It has a significant immigrant community, with a high proportion of Middle Eastern and Arabic residents, as well as an ageing population, representing the remnants of the communities who moved in during the 1950s and 1960s. Its politics have been solidly left-of-centre Labor for most of the post-war period. Nevertheless, it was largely built out in a period when public infrastructure was
poorly provided or only on a limited basis. Consequently, the area has suffered from social and physical infrastructure deficits compared to inner city and northern suburb areas of Sydney.

Evidence as to the level of renewal activity in these communities is shown in Figure 4 which plots the location of the 414 development applications (DAs) approved by Bankstown City Council for the 2000-2005 period that resulted in new dwellings. Figure 4 shows these DAs disaggregated by dwelling type and number and the location of these DAs in relation to the City’s zoning scheme. The figure emphasizes the dispersion of activity across the council area. Single house and dual occupancy redevelopments (where an additional dwelling is constructed on a single house plot) are scattered across the residential area, as are, to a lesser extent, villa and town house developments. Flats and larger town house developments are confined to the localities zoned for higher density around Bankstown town centre.

Altogether, these DAs resulted in 174 knock-down and rebuild redevelopments, and 6 new houses on infill sites, with an additional 210 dual occupancy developments, 23 applications for townhouse developments and 15 for blocks of flats. This is significant amount of activity for a seemingly archetypal ‘First Suburb’. In addition, a further 157 DAs were submitted for major additions and improvements to existing houses (not plotted in Figure 4).

The suburban renewal market clearly reflects a wave of reinvestment in what have become relatively devalued housing markets, at least compared to values elsewhere in the city. The process looks to be driven by sub-regional factors, with upwardly mobile households choosing to buy or redevelop new houses within the suburbs where they have previously lived or stay in their properties and undertake major renovations or re-builds. Our hypothesis is that suburban renewal is largely a locally generated process with in situ social consolidation a more likely explanation, rather than invasion and succession from other parts of the city or social groups as in a classic gentrifying market.

If correct, then the suburban renewal market challenges traditional concepts of centrifugal migration to the fringe for upwardly mobile households. Research in Sydney’s western suburbs has shown that traditionally net household migration shows a predominantly outward pattern with higher income households leaving established areas. Gwyther’s (2003) study of aspirational suburbanites in new fringe suburbs suggested households were choosing new housing that offered a homogenous community underpinned by a feeling of ontological security, appreciating property values and an escape from the older suburban areas. The suburban renewal market, however, suggests that the older middle suburbs may now be retaining these households and in so doing, helping to stem the outflow of economically more able sectors of the population, thereby countering the tendency towards greater social polarisation. However, there is little clear evidence as to why these households choose to invest in existing suburban housing, the very places those moving to the urban fringe appear to be rejecting, although social and cultural factors may be important (Burnley 1999).

It is also worth noting with regard to the looming challenge of climate change adaptation that the suburban renewal market offers a significant opportunity by which these older areas may in some way meet this challenge. In NSW, the Building Sustainability Index (BASIX) code, introduced in 2005 requires
mandatory reductions in water and energy use in new and renovated dwellings against given benchmarks. All new and renovated homes must comply with this standard to obtain development approval. The suburban renewal market is therefore a mechanism by which environmental standards can be raised in existing low density suburb, albeit at a relatively slow pace.

This trend is in contrast to the picture painted by some US commentators. According to Short, et al (2007, p. 647), upgrading in older areas ‘only occurs in selected metropolitan regions where there are still large-scale downtown employment opportunities, an affluent middle class and an overheated housing market’. Elsewhere, the decline in housing quality due to neglect and failure to reinvest in repairs and maintenance has proceeded with little likelihood of rehabilitation. Thus, ‘the older postwar suburb has become the devalorized urban form …. characterised by widespread disinvestment’.

While there has no doubt been a process of relative devalorization in the Third City suburbs in Australian cities, suburban renewal may well be acting to achieve more cohesive social outcomes, sustain local economic performance through retaining the household income and tax base, as well as generating local employment and helping to address climate change adaptation. While certainly not a panacea for the social issues facing these areas, it is nevertheless an indication that the socio-economic processes at work in these areas compared to other area of the city are much more complex than a simple reading of the First Suburb thesis in the Australian context might imply.

THE POLICY RESPONSE

Policy responses to the decline of American ‘First Suburbs’ highlight their significance for metropolitan economic health. Emerging policy responses seek to recognise and capitalise upon some intrinsic advantages. Hudnut (2003) identifies ten principles for revitalising first suburbs, many of which focus upon competitiveness and opportunity resulting from high accessibility locations with a strong infrastructure base. There is also increased recognition of the mutually beneficial role new housing plays in enabling both individuals and communities to build and retain assets through affordable home ownership through redefining housing markets and reconnecting them to broader metropolitan dynamics (Lucy & Phillips 2000; Lee & Leigh 2007).

In the US, a number of policy prescriptions have been promoted to address the integrated problems the First Suburbs face. These include the ‘10 principles for revitalizing inner-ring suburbs’ developed by Urban Land Institute (Hudnut, 2003). These include:

1. Empower local leadership (through community dialogue, coalitions, vision)

2. Be competitive (build on location-location-location)

3. Find a Niche/Attraction/Market/Purpose (seek or use competitive advantage)
4. Create opportunity, stability and diversity (homeownership, infill, mixed housing)

5. Strengthen schools to achieve balance

6. Incentivize the private sector (financial packages, cut red tape)

7. Maintain and strengthen infrastructure

8. Embrace smart growth principles (Mixed use, mixed income communities that are less car dependent, higher density, attractive places)

9. Think and Act Regionally (tax base sharing, governance structures, regional visioning)

10. Be results-oriented (sustainable outcomes?)

In a less prescriptive vein, Puentes and Warren (2006) propose 5 broad policy areas in the context of federal, state, and local policies for strengthening and sustaining First Suburbs. Together these would:

1. Address the special challenges of an elderly population;

2. Pursue a coherent set of policies to meet the needs of the rising foreign-born population;

3. Create and sustain economically-integrated neighborhoods of choice;

4. Remake and renew the economic and physical landscape;

5. Promote regional cohesion and collaboration

In the Australian case, the evidence presented in this paper shows that the older suburban communities are also far from uniform and that there is clear evidence that housing markets are responding to the need for upgrading and renewal, albeit in a different form and scale to that which has occurred in inner city areas (we are not talking about gentrification in these locations). Australian Third City Suburbs nevertheless face a set of inter-related policy dilemmas. These include:

- Replacement or upgrading of the ageing housing stock without displacing those in most need;

- More effective urban design outcomes, improved local amenities and retrofitting of public open space, particularly civic meeting places;

- Integration of land use, social planning and social interventions;

- Halting and reversing population loss and the threat to local tax revenue;

- Development of planning strategies to link job market interventions with land use plans, improved public transport and access to job rich areas and investment in infrastructure;

- Retention of upwardly mobile families and particularly those with children;
• An increasing need to meet climate adaptation targets.

Set in the context of the current Sydney Metropolitan Strategy’s (NSW Department of Planning, 2005) recently re-confirmed targets of almost 100,000 new dwellings over the next 25 years to be expected across the central western Sydney region (broadly contiguous with our middle suburbs definition), there is no doubt that these areas will need to rapidly lift the level of housing redevelopment and reinvestment if these kinds of targets are to be met. However, the Metropolitan Strategy does not itself contain many tools by which government at either State or local level might stimulate such a task. It will be essentially a matter for the market to provide, aided by less onerous planning processes and more liberal zoning policies.

In specific relation to Sydney’s Third City Suburbs, Randolph (2002, p142) has noted the only effective policy in these areas is planning-led urban consolidation which to date has done little more than promote densification and greater diversity of stock. However, this focus on densification does not represent a comprehensive policy framework for addressing emerging housing market issues. There is a potential for renewal of low density suburban public housing estates through community renewal programs, but areas of private sector disadvantage have been left to the vagaries of the market to sort out. Randolph (2004b) has advocated UK-style neighbourhood renewal consortia or development corporations working with local and state governments.

Randolph (2004b) also highlights the potential role of market-supporting polices, such as housing improvement grants, as part of a policy toolbox available to housing and local authorities to encourage stock condition improvements that do not entail full redevelopment and points to the problem of assembling multiple blocks of land currently occupied by single houses for more integrated renewal – “perhaps the single most important issue underlying effective renewal of lower density suburbs”. The small scale regional builders active in these areas may not be best placed to achieve such amalgamations, hence the potential role for a government sponsored agencies to do so.

A range of innovative planning approaches to stimulate more integrated solutions for these older suburbs which would use both public and private sector drivers have been proposed (Randolph and Holloway 2004b). In particular:

• Local renewal strategies for target areas at risk of increased social disadvantage to integrate land use and social planning;

• Development of renewal master plans to assemble land and implement the local renewal strategy;

• Local renewal corporations or trusts based on public/private partnerships and local control to implement strategies over a 10-20 year period

• Local renewal funds such as a reinvigorated Urban Improvement Program to help leverage private investment;

• Affordable housing investment strategies through the community housing sector to replace poor quality private rental housing and owner occupied housing, address housing problems and rebuild community stability;
• Better planning for well-being and health outcomes;

• Integrated place focused policy framework - a whole of government framework of targeted social and employment initiatives directed at the local level by the renewal corporations.

Such policy innovations, while some way off, are increasingly being voiced by those tasked with implementing the latest Metropolitan Strategy objectives for renewal. Without some form of public policy intervention, and indeed, public funding or underwriting, it is very hard at this point in time to see how the ambitious housing renewal targets of the Sydney Metropolitan Strategy can be achieved in these otherwise low value areas which remain relatively unattractive to large scale residential developers.

A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON US AND AUSTRALIAN CITY

In the US literature, the First Suburbs are conceived as those areas of our cities falling between the inner and out cities - ‘neither fully urban nor completely suburban’ (Puentes and Warren 2006) – and more forcefully as ‘grotesque’, ‘desolate’ and ‘gothic’ (Short et al 2007). They are ‘gloomburbs’ that contrast to the outer ‘boomburbs’. This paper has set out to set out the case for the equivalent Australian phenomena, the ‘Third City Suburb’ in response the question of whether ‘suburban gothic is a uniquely US phenomenon’ (Short et al, 2007, p. 653-4). Some clear convergence in trends and processes have been observed. We see the same tendency toward ‘localisation of difference’ accentuated by neo-liberal policies and retreat of direct state engagement with cities (Gleeson 2006, 46). There is also some evidence of outmigration of Australian born from the middle ring suburbs linked to an Australian version of the American ‘white flight’ syndrome (Gwyther, 2003; Birrell and Seol 1998).

However, while social dysfunction exists in these areas, it is also prevalent in outer and inner suburbs. Inner city public housing estates in Redfern-Waterloo and the outer city public housing estate of Macquarie Fields have both experienced social disruption and street rioting in recent years. So too has the middle class beach-side suburb of Cronulla to the south of the city, where something approaching an ethnic based riot between White Australian and Middle Eastern youth took place two years ago. So far, such larger scale conflicts have not been witnessed in the middle ring Third City Suburbs of our cities.

Lee and Leigh (2007) have proposed a model of American urban experience which acknowledges the First Suburb as a significant feature of the US urban scene. This conceptual model of the decline of the inner-ring suburbs identifies three distinct trends:

• spillover effects of blighted areas from the inner cities to the inner-ring suburbs;

• strong decentralization from the central city and inner-ring suburbs to the outer-ring suburbs;
back-to-the-city trends toward the downtown and the inner city.

All these trends are discernable to some extent in the Australian city, but there are significant differences, not least being the lack of large scale urban blight. Continued population growth pressures and general levels of government expenditures across the city, especially in terms of social infrastructure, have reduced such polarization tendencies. An Australian version would recognize less blight, stronger centrality, growth containment, a more variegated mosaic and the continued role of sub-regional urban centres.

Distinctive Australian divergences from American norms have been commented on before (e.g. Badcock 1984; Forster 2004). Our discussion to some extent complements and extends Freestone and Murphy (1998) conclusions on edge cities. They argue that despite a long-term trend of employment decentralization, the intensity of the phenomenon of new suburban commercial centers in Australian cities has been dampened by several key factors including:

- less fractious central city-suburban relationships which have been so damaging to inner areas;
- less uneven impacts of municipal balkanization because state governments have historically been the universal provider of educational, health, police, and utility services ensuring a greater equality of basic service provision;
- More limited freeway infrastructure has not undermined the magnetism of the CBD;
- More robust metropolitan planning laws and guidelines in notable contrast to many American metropolitan regions where the planning systems are more fragmented and regional planning powers may be weak or nonexistent.

This less laissez faire context of urban development in other countries has been also noted by Short et al (2007) who make the comparison between the US and other countries like the UK. They argue that comparatively ‘there have been fewer restrictions on growth in most metropolitan areas in the US’ (2007 p. 648), compared to Western Europe and ‘a greater metropolitan mandate to conduct planning and that limits suburban sprawl’. In addition, they add that US suburban jurisdictions can act independently ‘without regard for a regional public good’ (2007, p. 649). In other words, a more robust framework of city governance, economic health and planning explains the more ‘middling’ manifestations of US urban problems in these other places. In Australia, in particular, the suburbs generally ‘have guaranteed a high minimum level of welfare for ordinary Australians’ (Gleeson, 2006, p. 25). Indeed, the suburbs became the locale in which the post-war political compromise between capital and labour was effectively played out.

It is possible to propose a rather different ‘model’ for the Australian city in the early part of the 21st Century which reflects a culturally-specific context of urban change and evolution. While very much an abstraction, and recognizing that most of the large Australian cities are either port or coastal cities, which
effectively means they have had constraints to centrifugal expansion, the basic components of the contemporary Australian city might be summarized as follows:

- High density CBD with expanding higher density populations
- Gentrified inner city and coastal/harbourside suburbs
- Upper income ‘global arc’ sectoral suburbs extending away from the CBD
- Middle ring 1930-70 ‘Third City’ suburbs: 15 – 30 km
- Maturing 1970-90s suburbs: 25 – 45 km
- New ‘aspirational’ post 1990 fringe suburbs: 35 – 60km
- Peri-urban fringe – rural residential development on large lots (2 Ha)
- Coastal strips of contrasting gentrifying and low income rental/ownership.

However, the question arises as to how far this model will endure. Further research into the changing trajectory of city areas in Australia will be needed before firmer conclusions can be drawn.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a case for the polarization of Australian suburbs based on their age of development and has highlighted the clear emergence of areas of relative disadvantage and low income in those suburbs build approximately between 1930 and 1970. The main feature differentiating these areas from other parts of the suburbs, and the rest of the city, is the lack of upper end incomes, rather than a concentration of the very poor per se. Moreover, the evidence is that these suburbs are far from homogenous and encompass a wide variety of communities, household mix, housing tenures and built form. It has also made the case that, despite their relative poor social outcomes, there is nevertheless evidence of continued reinvestment and renewal. The picture is therefore far from bleak and such investment implies continued attraction of these areas for groups of the population.

But there is no doubt that some Australian middle suburbs are struggling. With decades or more of policy neglect, a range of forces is building up to press for change. In part, this is driven by new urban consolidation policies, which, as noted above, have targeted these areas for higher density urban redevelopment. The problem arises as to whether the private market is capable of delivering such a scale of renewal in these areas, given current lack of obvious demand, without significant social disruption.

If there is a middle ring suburban ‘squeeze’ in the Australian city, it is not so much in limbo between inner city decline and outer growth, but rather a sandwich between rampant inner city gentrification and outer city growth of the so called ‘aspirational’ fringe. Its positive prospects lie with investors and residents looking for new investment opportunities outside an overheated inner
core and increasingly overvalued greenfields suburbs. Moreover, the role of the middle suburbs as location for the consolidation and retention of newer immigrant communities which act as a driver for reinvestment and community stability needs further consideration. These areas face an uncertain but by no means unfavourable future.
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