

The Post Suburban Metropolis: Western Sydney and the Importance of Public Space

Sophie Watson

Open University, UK

Sydney, like all cities, is imagined in particular ways which derive from a specific socio-cultural and historical context and which persist over time, even when social and economic changes render the dominant imaginary outmoded. How a city is imagined has distinct effects on how that city is planned and lived, and in this sense a mismatch between the dominant imaginary and the material reality of that place can have deleterious impacts. In this paper I want to make two interconnected arguments. First, I suggest that there are prevalent myths about Sydney that are no longer very helpful for understanding that city, and that these inhibit the potential and possibilities for creating liveable suburbs which have public spaces which meet a diversity of cultural needs at their core. These are the myths of the white picket fenced homogenous suburbs of the traditional Anglo-Australian nuclear family of a working man with his two kids and his wife predominantly engaged in domestic responsibilities. Second, I argue that public space can play a significant role in the contemporary multi-cultural city as a site where individuals can meet and encounter one another across their differences in productive ways.

In the first section of the paper I look at some of the origins of the dominant myths. I will then consider how contemporary Western Sydney has changed. In the final part of the paper I set out an argument for the important role of public spaces in creating a positive environment for people to encounter each other across their diversity in the contemporary multi ethnic city that Sydney has become.

A brief history

If we return to the period around the Second World War, we can begin to see how embedded a particular myth of the Australian suburb was. In his famous 'Forgotten People' speech in 1942, Menzies upheld the established norm of new migrants striving to establish themselves as home owners and set the tone for the ensuing post war debates on this supposedly great Australian dream:

I do not believe that the real life of this nation is to be found either in great luxury hotels and the petty gossip of so-called fashionable suburbs, or in the officialdom of the organised masses. It is to be found in the homes of people who are nameless and unadvertised, and who, whatever their individual religious conviction or dogma, see in their children their greatest contribution to the immortality of their race. The home is the foundation of sanity and sobriety; it is the indispensable condition of continuity; its health determines the health of society as a whole.

And:

The material home represents the concrete expression of the habits of frugality and saving "for a home of our own."

And:

National patriotism, in other words, inevitably springs from the instinct to defend and preserve our own homes.

From this moment until the late twentieth century, there has been a propulsion in Australia towards suburban home ownership for all strongly supported by federal, state and local governments, in order to meet what have been seen as the dominant desires and needs of the Australian people – both new and old migrants to the country.

The suburbs in Australia have always been heavily imbued with affect, meaning, and aspiration, held to offer all sorts of magic possibilities for salvation, happiness; a certain kind of life – a life that is moral and true. They have also been stereotyped and caricatured as the site of the hills hoist, the white picket fenced bungalow on the quarter acre block. While the densely inhabited inner city has stood for diversity, buzz, and culture. This dichotomy has been central to the social imagination for at least half a century, where suburbs are represented as homogenous, bland, politically conservative, safe and even deadening. These are the memories of three writers of the post war period:

The suburb, so littered with people and empty of life sometimes suggests that the people who live there have no real feeling either for their surroundings or for each other. It is true the lawns are shaved and clipped and the water is drenched religiously over everything. You see it every day; white spraying mists leaping and dancing, an endless ballet, the choreography extending across the gardens and the street lawns... For the lonely or heavy hearted the neat street with well kept lawns, brick and tile houses with closed doors, blank venetians and drawn curtains... seem to be unpeopled and without exuberance of any sort. In other words they seem to be the most sad and depressing places to live in especially on a Sunday (Jolley, 1992: 72-74).

I was ten in 1950 when the foreigners moved into our street. The man in suede shoes who hid his wine bottle in Mrs Olrick's daisy bush; the couple who set up house in Rusack's sleep out... Mrs Olrick, Rusacks, Mr Borchers... the Italian ice-cream boys at the Odeon didn't count, you knew them... but these other people were different: they were the ones the newspapers called the New Australians. They were the peeping Toms, the anonymous telephone callers, the child molesters... they carried brief-cases and wore black stockings and drank coffee (Hanrahan, 1989: 143).

While at the same time the centre of the city was exotic, connected to Europe, the home of writers and artists and bohemians:

In the late '50s there as an area of Sydney bounded by Elizabeth Street, Hunter Street, George and King Streets... (which) boasted a number of pubs and a wine bar, as well as the coffee shops or Rowe Street and some book shops... Close to this heartland of pubs and coffee shops were the Savoy Theatre where we first saw foreign films... and drank short blacks in the foyer; the Theosophical Society next door where we imagined Madame Blavatsky reciting Yeats; the Phillip Street Theatre which produced revues... Most often dinner was at the Greeks in Castlereagh Street where

for 1s 9d you could get spaghetti... and one glass of truly terrible red wine... Richard Meale's Marrickville was probably as far west we ever travelled in those days... (Cresswell, 1989: 165-7).

Over the second half of the last century the quarter acre block, with the brick veneer bungalow, hills hoist and barbecue, came increasingly to dominate the Australian lifestyle – represented graphically in the television serial, *Neighbours*. Implicit in this form of housing provision was the traditional nuclear family, often with the father travelling to the city centre for work, and the mother at home taking the major responsibility for domestic life, and private transport arranged to enable access local services, schools, shopping, cinema complexes and employment opportunities which were likely to be spread over a disparate and disconnected set of spaces. Though suburbs have more recently come in for criticism as boring and conformist, and the people within them dull, Ugg boot wearing and cultureless, nevertheless they have been the apparent choice of the majority of households. How much this represented a lack of affordable or available alternatives is ultimately difficult to assess. Nevertheless this dominant myth of the suburb was strong. Thus Australia, as Donald Horne observed, became the ‘first suburban nation’ and to urbanists like Hugh Stretton, this was an undoubted triumph.

Re-imagining the suburbs

To what extent a picture of homogeneous suburbs in contrast to the diverse inner city was ever an accurate representation of reality is unclear, though statistical, biographical and literary accounts confirm such a view for the 1950s at least. What is evident, however, is that such an account no longer holds water – the area has been transformed. With socio-demographic shifts due to changing social mores, including the greater ease of divorce, and a shift in gender relations, leading to the increase of single and single parent households, on the one hand, and high levels of immigration over several decades from a huge diversity of countries and cultures, on the other, the white Australian suburban family dream increasingly belongs only to the likes of Pauline Hanson, John Howard and others, who nostalgically mourn an Australia long since gone.

In Western Sydney the heterogeneity of the population is marked with a large proportion of residents born overseas across the different localities. In four of the nine suburbs, over 40% of people were born overseas reflecting a huge ethnic transformation of the region. Yet this process has been uneven: in another three localities in the region, the equivalent figure is under 20% (WSROC, 2002). What this represents, as we see in the other statistical profiles is diversity within the localities as well between the localities that constitute the Western Sydney region. It is also important to note, that though as a percentage of overall households the numbers are small, the presence of indigenous people is greater than anywhere in Australia outside of the Northern Territory. First, there is the declining significance of two parent family households, and a relatively large proportion of single parent households overall in the region (ibid.). There is also a considerable variation between localities, with only 5% of single parent households in Baulkham Hills compared to 13% in Liverpool (ibid.).

Home ownership is also not as widespread as commentators on the suburbs would have us think. In Parramatta only 45% of households are owners or purchasers, with less than two thirds of households in another four localities: Auburn, Blacktown, Fairfield and Liverpool (ibid.). Adele Horin suggests that single people and childless couples, and people under 35, are thus living more like Europeans, either because they cannot afford it, or simply because they don't want a house in a far flung suburb, caught up in the costs associated with a long and debilitating commute to work (Horin, 2005).

On socio-economic criteria there is also a wide variation between individuals and households across the Western Sydney region. Taking education as one indicator of future employability, for example, only 10% of people in Fairfield have tertiary qualifications compared to 29% in Baulkham Hills (WSROC, 2002). The proportion of employed persons in each locality is equally varied, from 68% in Baulkham Hills to 43% and 47% in Fairfield and Liverpool respectively. Not surprisingly therefore a similar variation in family incomes is revealed across the region where Baulkham Hills is the only area where a quarter, or more, of the households have a weekly income over \$2000 (ibid.). Thus what we see is wide variation on key social indicators across the region.

Core-periphery myths

There are not simply stereotypes about the kind of people who live in Western Sydney, their politics, and the houses they live in (in recent years the McMansion dwellers have become a dominant theme in representation of Western Sydney dwellers (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2003)), there are also stereotypical views of how the economy is spatially dichotomous. Here, the inner city is articulated as the economic core, where the major industrial, financial, economic interests of the city are seen to be located. This is the part of the city which is seen as highly linked into and networked with broader global processes. The periphery, or suburban fringe, in contrast is characterised as economically less important and more cut off from the global scene. In the same vein urban analysts of how the new global economy is reshaping cities rarely avert their gaze from the centre of cities, the metropolis, to the surrounding suburban regions.

These perceptions are echoed in the representations of other global cities. Yet in their study of the transformation of Orange County since World War 11, Kling, Olin and Poster (1991) highlight some important trends which are increasingly also in evidence in other large suburban regions like Western Sydney. Over the last two decades or so in urban research, there has been an increasing emphasis on a multi-centred approach as opposed to the core-periphery model, as analysts have begun to discover the economic, social and cultural dynamism of what once were seen as the sleepy suburbs. The normative description of the homogenous and lifeless suburbs has thus been more and more disrupted to reveal the complexities, jumbled nature, vibrancy, and incoherence of this supposedly samey place. What is revealed in these post suburban (as they describe them) regions is a huge variety of commercial, shopping, residential and cultural activities conducted in different, often disconnected, places linked primarily by private, not public, transport. According to Kling et al. (1991: ix), what defines a post suburban region is that many activities are conducted in centres that are functionally specialised and separated by travel times of 15-20 minutes. Instead of shops being mixed in with housing or industrial centres, in post-suburbia, there are 'distinct and separable centres:

residential neighbourhoods, shopping malls, and industrial parks' (ibid). As in Sydney, Orange County is characterised by its ethnic transformation, which they suggest has gradually provided the conditions for the old parochialism to be replaced by a more cosmopolitan ethic.

The spatial organisation of these post-suburban regions is not then a decentralised one. Rather, it is multi-centred or multi-nucleated as Gottdiener would have it. Thus it is organised around many distinct specialised centres, rather than a traditional city centre surrounded by industrial and residential areas (ibid: 6). These post suburban regions have broken away from their dependence on the urban core, evolving their own cultural and economic dynamism across a multiplicity of sites. But all important to this spatial formation is the private motor car; these spaces are not designed for pedestrian use. Moreover, they are regions which comprise large conglomerates of technologically advanced services, industry and information processing. They are also sharply differentiated by class, income and life styles. While there is considerable wealth in these post suburban regions, there is also striking poverty and many are socially excluded from the stories economic success, the rise of information capitalism and technological developments.

The spatial organisation of Western Sydney reflects many of these trends of other post suburban regions. Economically the picture is a complex one however. It is now one of Australia's principal manufacturing regions- representing 51% of manufacturing jobs in the Sydney region (Western Sydney Region Organisation of Councils, WSROC, 2002). Growth in the financial and business service jobs in Western Sydney has lagged considerably behind the rest of metropolitan Sydney since the early 1990s. Nevertheless there is a continued increase in the proportions of resident workers in these sectors across the region. What we see is a picture of the residents in some localities, such as Baulkham Hills, benefiting greatly from the growth in the service, financial and informational sector employment – here 21% of the labour force work in this sector representing 3% increase from 1996-2001, and 36% in professional occupations – representing 4% increase in the same period (ibid.). While other localities the proportions of the labour force in these sectors are smaller, for example, the equivalent figures for Fairfield are 14% and 15% (Ibid.). Unemployment is similarly uneven and a highly localised phenomenon clustered in suburbs such as Auburn, Cabramatta-Fairfield (13%) and the western suburbs of Blacktown, with an unemployment rate in Baulkham Hills of only 3% and 6% in the Blue Mountains (Ibid.).

More broadly indices of social polarisation are very complex, with lack of housing amenity, households without a car, high unemployment rates, people with poor English proficiency, greater in some areas than others. According to WSROC, there is a danger that Western Sydney will become a much more divided and even polarised society (2002: 16) with life chances and opportunities spread very unevenly across the region. Thus there is a growing disparity between social groups and segregation by income, and the region is developing a number of distinct socio-economic patterns. For example, the Hawkesbury and the Blue Mountains are increasingly identified as life style areas, while the new suburban subdivisions on the edge are characterised by younger home buying households with higher incomes. A growing divide is between the older localities of the regions which provided significant levels of affordable housing and the newer, more affluent housing estates (WSROC, 2002: 16-7).

One of the key social issues faced in the region is transport and accessibility. Reliance on the private car is very widespread due to limited choice for intra- regional travel and the lack of key public transport linkages to employment opportunities, facilities and services. This has the most profound impact on those households with no, or one car, and on older people, young people and single mothers in particular – who can spend the whole day ferrying people around between school, the local doctor, the shops, the place of employment and so on. Average travel times for commuting trips by both car and public transport for Greater Western Sydney residents are longer than for the rest of Sydney – up to 10 and more minutes longer (WSROC, 2002: 27).

In conclusion to this part of the paper, it should now be clear that the dominant myth of the homogenous Sydney suburbs occupied by the white working man and his family is far from accurate today. What I want to argue next is for the importance of finding ways for different people to live together in the multicultural city or region that Western Sydney now is. Here, I want to suggest that one important route to confronting some of the inequalities of the suburbs on the one hand, and enhancing the possibilities of people co-mingling in the city across their ethnic/racial, socio-demographic and other differences, is to ensure the creation of diverse public spaces where people can encounter one another and reduce the fear and hostility that can arise when the ‘other’ is unknown and stereotyped as different, strange and ultimately, a threat. In the next part, I thus outline the importance of public space as a site of such encounters.

Public space in the post–suburban metropolis

Various writers have pointed to the importance of public space in the city as a space of encounter with others who are different. Optimistically, the unoppressive city in Young’s words is ‘defined as unassimilated otherness’ (2002: 437), which offers the potential for knowing others as different and gaining understanding of groups and cultures that are not one’s own, where, ‘[i]n such public spaces the diversity of the city’s residents come together and dwell side by side, sometimes appreciating one another, entertaining one another, or just chatting, always to go off as strangers’ (Ibid.).

Yet fear of others who are different, unknown, and thus perceived as threatening, is a source of constraint to living with difference and underpins, I think, some of the reactions to migration from earlier migrants that Howard and Hanson and others can tap into. Richard Sennett has observed a worrying trend emerging in American cities over the last few decades, where neighbourhoods within cities are becoming increasingly homogeneous ethnically as people elect to live close to people like themselves in a drive towards a ‘community of similarity’ (1996: 42). As a result people lose the art of relating to, and interacting with people who do not share the same language or understandings, so that they regard meeting and negotiating with others who are different with misapprehension. This becomes a vicious circle which is hard to break.

Bauman (2003) attributes this drive towards similarity and sameness to the fact that people in cities are overwhelmed and discomfited by the strangeness and unknowability of others who are different from themselves – echoing Simmel’s notion of over-stimulation leading to psychic retreat. Recalling Mumford’s (1938) early analyses of smaller communities, he suggests that alien others in villages and rural areas are enfolded

into the community through being known and understood, through being domesticated and incorporated. In contrast, strangers in cities are too numerous to be familiarised – ‘they are the unknown variable’, whose intentions cannot be predicted and whose ‘presence inside the fields of action is discomfiting’ (Bauman, 2003: 27). Under these circumstances people have to make daily choices as to how to act, whether by design or default. Bauman suggests two opposing tendencies – ‘mixophobia’ and ‘mixophilia’ – both of which are present in the ‘liquid modern city. Mixophobia is a widespread response to the overwhelming variety of life styles and differences that people encounter each day in the city streets, and to those: ‘accumulated anxieties (which) tend to unload against the selected category of ‘aliens’, picked up to epitomise ‘strangeness as such’ (Bauman, 2003: 26). In chasing them away from one’s homes and shops, the frightening ghost of uncertainty is, for a time, ‘exorcised’ (2003: 26). Like Sennett, Bauman suggests that mixophobia drives individuals into self segregation in walled and fortified enclaves. Yet cities, in Bauman’s view, as I also argue here, offer the potential for meeting strangers more closely, for defusing the tension and apprehension that unknown others produce and for negotiating rules of life in common through cooperation and talk, or simply eye contact – this is the potential for mixophilia.

It is for these reasons that public space has an important role to play. In particular I want to suggest that public sites out of sight, not the city centres now being designed and planned to reintroduce diversity, the often marginal and less visible spaces of the city can be more successful in bringing strangers together than planned and carefully organised sites (Watson, 2006). For people to live together with their differences we need those spaces of delight which encapsulate serendipitous encounters and meanderings, sitting, watching, being, chatting in spaces that may be planned, designed and monumental, but more often may be barely visible to the unseeing eye, on the margins of planned space, or even imagined. These are not Richard Rogers’ grand piazzas or endlessly rehearsed shopping malls. Neither are they necessarily the large sports grounds or football fields that are scattered across Western Sydney – though the provision of these is important too. These sites of magical urban encounters are often hidden in the interstices of the planned and monumental, divided and segregated, or privatised and thematised, spaces that more usually capture public attention.

If cities, and Sydney in particular, are about enabling, creating, supporting and allowing public spaces to exist as spaces of enchantment and encounter across people’s differences three principles are important. The first is that there are different conceptions of the public for different subjects – the ‘public’ and public space is deployed and understood in multi-faceted and particular ways constructing subjects heterogeneously. This implies paying attention to cultural differences and needs. The second is that contra Habermas and others, the public is not just about ‘talk’, it concerns bodies and their micro-movements. To put this another way, bodies and public space are mutually constitutive. This means that how different bodies can live and move in particular sites matters. The third argument is that exploring marginal, un-portentous, hidden and symbolic spaces, and the different imaginaries of often forgotten subjects, gives us a way into thinking public space differently. Insights from those inhabiting these different spaces can provide avenues for their creation and sustenance. At the same time, these very same sites can quickly shift from liminal space to the centre stage as they rub up against institutional and regulatory arenas at particular historical moments. So even marginality is a temporary and shifting state- the invisible becomes visible and vice versa in

unpredictable ways so that planners and those involved with creating public spaces need to be attentive to change.

Conclusion

For me, thinking about public space in places like Western Sydney is an important political project. Global cities, like Sydney, and the public spaces which constitute them, in the twenty first century are the site of multiple connections and inter-connections of people who differ from one another in their cultural practices, in their imaginaries, in their embodiment, in their desires, in their capacities, in their social, economic and cultural capital, in their religious beliefs, and in countless other ways that cannot be enumerated here. If these differences cannot be negotiated with civility and urbanity and understanding, if we cling to the rightness of our own beliefs and practices, and do not tolerate those of another in the public spaces of the city, at best Mike Davis – with his vision of the fortress or militaristic city (2000) – would have been proved right, at worst there will be no such thing as city life, as we know it, to enjoy or celebrate. This is not to argue for a world where differences are ironed out, equalised, or placated, it is to confront the realities of differences in the city head on and to experience the pleasures as well as the pains they inevitably produce. It is to think about ways of not entrenching difference in the politics of fundamentalism (religious and secular) which is threatening the possibility of everyday democratic multi-cultural space. So, finally, it is to think about enchantment in the public spaces of the city, about places and sites where people do rub along, not just in the exoticised, celebrated and commodified spaces representing a visible multicultural settlement, so loved by city planners and investors, but in the ordinary spaces of everyday life. For Western Sydney over the next twenty years and more this, in my view, will be a challenge and a necessity if all the different cultures can continue to live together in relative harmony and acceptance.

References

Bauman, Z. (2003a) *City of Fears, City of Hopes*. Goldsmiths College, London: Centre for Urban and Community Research.

Creswell, R. (1989) 'The sea The sea', in D. Modjeska (ed.), *Inner cities: Australian women's memory of place*. Victoria: Penguin Books. Pp.155-170.

Davis, M. (1992) *The City of Quartz*. New York: Vintage.

Gottdiener, M. (2001) *The Theming of America: American Dreams, Media Fantasies, and Themed Environment*. 2nd Ed. Boulder: Westview Press.

Gottdeiner, M. & Kephart, G. (1991) 'The multinucleated metropolitan region: a comparative analysis', in R. Kling, O. Spencer and M. Poster (eds), *Postsuburban California: The Transformation of Orange County since World War II*. California: UCLA Press.

Hanrahan, B. (1989) 'Earth worm Small', in D. Modjeska (ed.), *Inner cities: Australian women's memory of place*. Victoria: Penguin Books. Pp.143-155.

Jolley, E. (1992) *Central Mischief: Elizabeth Jolley on Writing, Her Past and Herself*. Melbourne: Viking.

Horin, A. (2005) 'The end of the mythical quarter-acre block', *Sydney Morning Herald*. April 9th

Kling, R., Spencer, O. & Poster, M. (eds) (1991) *Postsuburban California: The Transformation of Orange County since World War II*. California: UCLA Press.

Menzies, R. (1942) 'The Forgotten People', Radio Broadcast 22 May, <http://www.menziesvirtualmuseum.org.au/transcripts/ForgottenPeople/ForgottenCont.html>

Modjeska, D. (ed.) (1989) *Inner Cities: Australian women's memory of place*. Victoria: Penguin Books.

Mumford, L. (1938) *The Culture of Cities*. London: Secker & Warburg

Sennett, R. (1996) *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* London: Faber and Faber.

Sydney Morning Herald, Good Weekend (2003) 'Crowded land of Giants', August 26th

Stix, N. (2005) 'McMansions, Real Estate Wars, and Media Tricks', <http://mensnewsdaily.com/blog/stix/2005/08>

Watson, S. (2006) *City Publics: The (Dis) Enchantments of Urban Encounters*. London: Routledge.

WSROC (2002) 'FutureWest Sydney'. Blacktown, NSW: Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils.

Young, I. (1990) *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.