

SUBURBAN CHARACTER

■ Graeme Davison

The residents of Melbourne have long shown their attachment to the house and garden ideal of suburban living. They continue to show this attachment, despite the advocacy of those promoting an alternative high-density urban lifestyle. The reasons why are explored in this article.

As we near the end of the millennium Australian cities have reached a historic turning point. For over two centuries, our dreams of the good life have been shaped by the suburban ideal. The owner-occupied, single-storey house standing in its own quarter-acre block on the fringes of the city was the standard of domestic comfort to which most Australians aspired.

The suburb has become so closely identified with popular ideas of the good life that any move away from it, for example towards urban consolidation, looks like an attack upon people's living standards. 'Saving our suburbs' means defending the quarter acre block against the threats of dual occupancy and unsympathetic design codes. It is an issue that excites strong emotions and taps folk memories and fears deep within the national psyche. Why do so many Australians feel this way? Are their feelings justified or irrational? Is the attack on the quarter acre block also an attack on the Australian way of life?

Australia was remarkable among new nations in being born urban and quickly becoming suburban. In the early 1790s when Governor Arthur Phillip drew up the first town plan for Sydney, he commanded that the streets be laid out:

in such a manner as to afford free circulation of air, and when the houses are built ... the land will be granted with a clause that will prevent more than one house

being built on the allotment, which will be sixty feet in front and one hundred and fifty feet in depth.

Such an arrangement, he declared, would 'preserve uniformity in its buildings [and] prevent the many inconveniences which the increase of the inhabitants would otherwise occasion thereafter'. Phillip's standard block was very close to the modern suburban allotment. From the outset, it seems, Australia's founders planned a sprawl of homes and gardens rather than a clumping of terraces and alleys. Phillip's successors reinforced this pattern. Even a hundred years ago Melbourne was more suburbanised — it had more people living in detached houses in their own gardens — than any city of its size in the world.

Australia was settled by Europeans at the very moment when the suburb was emerging as a solution to the urban problems of the Old World. Like a colony, the suburb was a place of escape or refuge, and it was shaped, therefore, largely by the logic of avoidance. In essence, the suburb is a mirror image of the slum. While the slum was dense, dirty, unnatural, disorderly and disease-ridden, the suburb was open, clean, natural, orderly and healthy. Four great ideas strengthened the influence of the suburban ideal upon the minds of colonial Australians — religion, aesthetics, medicine and social snobbery.

The heart of the suburbs, here as

elsewhere, was the so-called Bible Belt of respectable Protestant suburbs. It was the Evangelicals who popularised the idea of 'separate spheres' for men and women, and of the suburban home as a kind of temple in which the wife ruled as the 'Angel of the Home'. The prototype of the modern bourgeois suburb was Clapham on the south-western fringes of London where wealthy Evangelicals like the famous anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce settled in the early nineteenth century. In Australia, too, the low-density suburb had a special attraction for Evangelical Protestants. The first Australian suburbs were founded by Governor Darling in the early 1830s when he granted picturesque allotments near Woolloomooloo to wealthy merchants and public servants, many of them Evangelicals. In Melbourne too, well-to-do Protestants led the march into the eastern suburbs creating a Bible-Belt whose moral atmosphere has survived even the decline of the churches that created it. Camberwell and Nunawading's notorious 'dry area' — a zone bereft of hotels — and Canterbury's spirited resistance to the introduction of the 'Canterbury Tales' brothel suggest the tenacity of this tradition.

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

nature and attain the enjoyments and pleasures of pristine innocence'. The garden, therefore, was as important a feature of the suburb as the cottage or villa and the ideal suburb attempted, in its planning and architecture, to evoke something of the peace and solitude of the countryside. Gardening remains Australia's most popular suburban pastime.

Part of the trouble with dual occupancy is that it detracts from the sense of natural seclusion that went with the leafy garden allotment. Just recently, before we moved house, a builder constructed two two-storey Neo-Georgian 'townhouses' on the allotment behind our house in Mont Albert (Melbourne). As they went up, I analysed my sense of unease. Was it the design that worried me? Not really — the 1940s brick veneer they replaced was no better. Was it the possibility that my own back garden would be overlooked or overshadowed? Well yes, just a bit, although the house was to the south of us, and only one small window peeked into our garden. But the real disappointment was that instead of a mass of trees and shrubs we would be looking across the fence at a blank brick wall. We were a step further from nature, a step closer to the concrete jungle.

The suburb was a remedy, thirdly, for the stench and disease of the industrial city. According to the medical science of the day, there was a precise mathematical relationship between death rates and the density of the urban environment. Low-density suburbs everywhere, but especially in the new industrial cities, were largely promoted for their healthiness. In Melbourne, Box Hill and Camberwell boasted that their children were stronger and taller than those of Collingwood and Fitzroy — and in the 1920s they were. Health is probably not as important a consideration today as it was even fifty

years ago, when the 'sleepout' was still a feature of many houses, but sunlight and fresh air still probably figure in most people's idea of a good place to live.

In Britain the suburb was also promoted for its snob value. From the early nineteenth century the middle classes sought to insulate themselves, and especially their wives and children, from the uncouth and possibly dangerous life of the streets. 'Choose a neighbourhood where houses and inhabitants are all, or chiefly, of the same description and class as the house we intend to inhabit, and as ourselves', Loudon advised the prospective suburbanite. Melbourne's eastern suburbs did think of themselves as a cut above the inner suburbs, but snobbishness was never as strong an element in Australian suburban life as it was in English or even American. After all, there was little to feel snobbish about when almost everyone could afford a front and back yard of their own.

So these four ideas — Evangelicalism, Sanitarianism, Romanticism and Class Distinction — were important in reinforcing the idea of the low density suburb. All of these ideas were more powerful a century ago than they are today, although in secularised and subliminal ways they may continue to influence us. Many fewer women now stay at home as full-time housewives. There is no longer any scientific basis for believing that living in an apartment is more unhealthy than living in a villa. We can feel romantic about the vibrancy of the inner city as much as the solitude of the bush and garden. And a warehouse apartment in South Melbourne carries as much social kudos as a ranch-style house in Park Orchards. If the suburbs still have a claim on our affections it is not because current ideologies endorse them.

Yet the detached house and garden

does embody some real and very practical advantages. One of its advantages is its adaptability — it can be modified and extended to cater for a variety of living patterns over several generations. Current Australian taxation regimes tend to inhibit frequent movement, but even if they could change houses more easily many families would prefer not to do so. They value the home as a place that embodies past memories as well as providing current living space, and a detached house is usually better able to house a family over a lifetime.

Many more householders like having a garden than enjoy cultivating it. By providing a buffer zone between houses the suburban block also offers a natural form of noise insulation and visual protection. This space is as important for what it keeps out as for what it contains. It embodies the principle that a family is entitled to endure no more mess, noise and domestic misery than it makes itself.

A few years ago I spent four months living in an Edinburgh tenement. It was a spacious three bedroom apartment overlooking the Meadow and only ten minutes walk from the Castle. It had a small walled garden shared by the tenants and maintained by a paid gardener. This, I decided, was just the way of life I had been seeking for years. No gardening, shops and pubs close by, plenty of life on the streets. Then, one day, I thoughtlessly left the bath running and went out to the shops. When I returned the water had not only penetrated the floor coverings, but had seeped through more than a foot of packed earth in the cavity between our apartment and the one beneath, and a brownish liquid was now trickling from our downstairs' neighbour's light fitting. Suddenly I was up to my neck in legal and practical difficulties. How was the cavity to be dried out? Whose responsi-

bility was it — mine or my landlord's? How much easier it would have been in my own house in Australia where, if I left bath running, I had only my wife to answer to!

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

American and British suburbanites, on the other hand, seem to have placed a higher value on social exclusiveness than Australians. They sometimes introduced covenants and leases designed to ensure that the neighbours were suitable. The Grace Park Estate in Hawthorn was one such attempt. It was also one of the first Australian suburbs to adopt the naturalistic curvilinear street plans favoured by contemporary American landscape designers like Frederick Olmsted. The Windsor Park Estate in Melbourne's Surrey Hills was another early example. But while they became beautiful places they were never socially exclusive. English visitors were as struck by the 'diversity' of the Australian suburban landscape as Australians are still by the uniformity of the English suburb. 'A poor house stands side by side with a good house, a cottage, one might almost say a hovel, in close proximity to a palace', one

observer noted.

In the early twentieth century some new middle class suburbs sought to maintain their status through the imposition of 'brick areas' and housing covenants, some of which are still in force. While the low-density house and garden suburb remained the norm, such exclusive arrangements were more the exception than the rule. But in the 1990s, faced with the threat of dual occupancy and other unwelcome planning changes, an increasing number of new estates are incorporating covenants controlling density, setbacks and other aspects of amenity, and guarding themselves with walls and gates. Privacy and social diversity may well be partners rather than enemies. Strong fences, as they used, to say, make good neighbours. If we increase housing densities too much we may make for less tolerance and more class segregation rather than the reverse.

For more than a century, critics have been eager to tell suburbanites what was wrong with their way of life. They have been accused of conformity, philistinism, apathy, wowserism — and most recently of something mysterious and dreadful that the former Victorian Minister for Planning, dubbed the 'wheelie-bin mentality'. These criticisms often tell us more about the critics than the day-to-day experience of the suburbanites.

One recurrent criticism, which echoes the strictures of British Garden City planners, was an abhorrence for suburban sprawl. Robin Boyd was one of the many Australian patricians who have seen sprawl as an Australian vice. There was something untidy, ungainly, prodigal, about cities that extended indefinitely into the hinterland without a definite edge. They offended the aesthetic and political sensibilities of planners who liked things neatly bundled, and subject

to expert control. I have to admit that there is part of me that feels that way too. When I am in England I am half in envy of cities that bear the impress of so many centuries of intensive care and attention. But only half in envy, for I also feel the sense of foreclosure, of limitation, that comes from an over-cultivated landscape. Sprawl is the physical expression of an Australian preference for unbounded space. Immigrants, at first surprised and uncomfortable with it, often end up praising it, as symbolising a characteristic openness, a kind of relaxed freedom missing in their homelands.

Earlier this year I took the overnight train from Granada to Madrid, and as we neared the Spanish capital I was struck once again by the contrast with a similar journey in Australia. One moment we were in open fields with cattle and olive trees, the next we were passing six storey apartment blocks, petrol storage depots, abandoned factories. Arriving in Melbourne or Sydney one crosses a more ragged frontier, one in which countryside gives way more gradually to town through a sequence of hobby farms, fringe villages, suburban villas and outlying industrial estates. Australian sprawl is messy but it is all of a piece with the relaxed Australian character. 'An image of my country. And would that it were more so', says Les Murray in his delightful poem 'The Quality of Sprawl':

Sprawl leans on things. It is loose-
limbed in its mind.

Reprimanded and dismissed

It listens with a grin and one boot up on
the rail of possibility.

One of the great virtues of the suburban quarter-acre block is its adaptability. It allows families to cater for the changing needs of its members for shelter, recreational space, and aesthetic self-

expression, over the life-cycle. It lends itself to the practice of the Australian talent for improvisation. Les Murray recognises that the days of sprawl may be numbered — 'It may have to leave the earth' — but he sees no reason to hasten its passing. Neither, perhaps, in a more urban setting should we.

Some critics reproached the Australian suburb with failing to live up to the ideal. It was not spacious, private, natural or healthy enough. The Royal Commission on the Housing of the People of the Metropolis which sat in Melbourne during the Great War focussed its attention mainly on the problem of 'overcrowding' and proposed a minimum size for suburban allotments:

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

It was this type of thinking, more than any other, that influenced the first generation of uniform building regulations, fire safety standards and local planning ordinances, and their influence, much diluted, is still with us today.

A more forceful critique of suburbia came from those who contested the ideal itself. In excluding everything that was

dangerous and offensive, they argued, the creators of suburbia had also banished much that was stimulating and exciting. In guaranteeing privacy, they had also guaranteed boredom and loneliness. Suburbia was *too* private, *too* exclusive, *too* leafy, *too* healthy, *too* virtuous: 'The only place outside a man's house where he could get to spend an evening was either a public house or a prayer meeting' complained the newly arrived resident of one Melbourne suburb in the 1880s. In the early 1960s, Jeanne MacKenzie, a visiting English Fabian, asked a young Czech migrant how she liked Australia: 'It is very nice', she replied, 'but there is something missing'.

Everyone has their own idea of what is missing. Socialists used to put suburban dullness down to the practice of home-ownership, which shackled every householder to a mortgage. Feminists see the root of the problem in the idea of 'separate spheres' that put men in city offices and women in little suburban boxes. In the early 1990s these several strands of criticism have been invoked by the advocates of urban consolidation and medium density housing — more, one suspects, as convenient props for policies driven by economics and political expediency than to meet people's real preferences. They offer us the attractive prospect of denser cities that will also be livelier, more equal, and friendlier, both socially and environmentally. Some Australians, influenced by European ideals, are actually swapping triple-fronted brick veneers in Kingswood

Country for warehouse apartments in Cappuccino Country. But as yet they are small minority. And just as the house and garden suburbs do not, of themselves, make people dull and conformist, neither, I submit, do Neo-Georgian town houses make them witty and urbane.

Meanwhile most suburbanites display a remarkably high level of satisfaction with their way of life. In spite of changing gender roles and work habits, lengthening journeys to work and shrinking suburban allotments, the detached house remains the goal of most young Australians. Out on the suburban frontier, houses far larger than our forefathers and mothers could ever have afforded — palaces with family rooms, pool rooms and multiple bathrooms — are squashed onto allotments far smaller than the traditional quarter acre. The suburban dream is being quietly cut down to size. Some of the substance, and perhaps some of the symbolism, has already been lost. Yet its attractions remain strong. The quarter-acre block is a dream which the future may deny many younger Australians, but which they seem unlikely to renounce of their own free will.

References

The historical analysis presented here draws on Graeme Davison, 'Australia — the first suburban nation?', *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 22, no. 1, November 1995, pp. 40-74; 'The past and future of the Australian suburb' in Louise C. Johnson (Ed.), *Suburban Dreaming*, Deakin University Press, Geelong 1994, pp. 99-113; Graeme Davison, Tony Dingle and Seamus O'Hanlon (Ed.), *The Cream Brick Frontier Histories of Australian Suburbia*, Monash Publications in History, Clayton 1995.

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