

The Australian Suburb: It's a Class Act

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The Australian suburb forms a central conceit in the national public imagination, playing the schizophrenic role of the quintessential Australian 'fair go'. On one side it represents the equal playing field, a place where the ordinary Australian can aspire to greatness. But it also sits awkwardly alongside its more vernacular expression as the antithesis of style and measure of cultural vacuity. Like suburban enclaves around the world, it is a troubled place of contradiction where nothing is ever what it seems, and where the surface tension is echoed in built form through the features of architectural façades.

Unsurprisingly, the 'Australian' suburban character plays host to many of the maladies of Australian parochialism and its excesses of xenophobia, violence and dispossession. As the site of community and the home, the collective metaphor of the suburb today represents a shifting Australian identity at the peak of neoliberalism, an expression of four decades of "rational" economic reform begun under Bob Hawke's Labor Party when Paul Keating was treasurer.

Encapsulating all this is the brick veneer home, a precise metaphor, whose skin deep façadism echoes the White Australia Policy, a lingering manifestation consistently reappearing in various guises: Hanson, Children Overboard or the Cronulla riots. If façadism is only skin-deep then we are left to imagine something deeper and more profound malingering underneath. A cover up seems only appropriate for a colonial outpost not yet practiced in its dreaming, in an occupied territory where the indigenous peoples have still never ceded sovereignty. Australians forget there has been no Treaty between blackfulla and white settlers; and there remains to this day no proper talk about self-determination for Aboriginals in the Australian constitution.

Today's reigning figure of suburban Australia is the aspirational middle class, parodied in popular culture as 'the Bogan', a figure superseding 'the Westie' of earlier years, and best exemplified in satirical form in the ABC TV comedy Kath and Kim. From the tedious comfort of suburban Fountaindale, Kath and Kim assaulted our more cultured (and perhaps deluded) sense of the 'true Australian'. Ironically, perhaps it is the self-deprecating humour of the Australian culture that permits these contradictions to flourish.

In the middle class view of the world from the living rooms of their flat screen televisions, the privatised perspective of the family home is held aloft as a potentially lucrative market. In the past 15 years housing in Australia has emerged as a market for "mum and dad investors", and is trumpeted in the media as a vessel for capturing wealth and expressing the personal success of its vendors by "capitalising on its assets". This new 'Australian dream' is made possible through a tax system that benefits the homeowner and punishes the renter, with homeowners in receipt of \$36 billion a year in subsidies.¹ Although actual returns for mum and dad investors are rarely realised, home renovation reality television programs grow in popularity and lifestyle magazines laud the home as a material palace, and marker of economic success. Meanwhile the

housing market for young first time homebuyers is artificially inflated and home ownership shifts further out of reach; since 1996 the median house price has jumped from three to four times the average salary to seven to eight times the average salary.²

The drive upwards of land value and speculation is not a new story. However, the way in which the Australian Dream has mortgaged its future is interesting for the way in which nationhood and the creation of Australia-ness has wedded itself to the neoliberal advances of spatialised economics—principally through the markers of place and the intangible economies of the surrounding cosmopolitan values of proximity to culture and hubs of activity. In the suburbs more generally, the ascent towards comfort and the middle class leers further towards homogeneity whilst shouting from a platform of uniqueness. This takes the form of a kind of internalised cosmopolitanism where the markers of exotica, melded with architectural design lifted from the pages of a lifestyle magazines, attempt to recreate a privatised version of a diverse civic life. This is a narrative that encourages the consumer to be like everyone else whilst remaining completely remarkable. It parallels other contradictory narratives, which aim to foster global cities while militantly policing our “sovereign borders”. These contradictions are bound up in the Australian vernacular of the fair go, increasingly becoming anachronistic in the triumph of neoliberalism.

However empty the rhetoric of egalitarianism may echo in official government policy, it is important to remember that the Aussie expression ‘fair suck of the sav’ has emerged from decades of material struggle by workers, farmers, women, indigenous, teachers, young people and old people. It is also significant that the little Aussie Battler on Struggle Street is mired in a convict past that celebrates a clean slate, a chance to diminish the disparity in class relations, and an escape from ‘old Blighty’ - Mother England.

The myth of the classless Australian society has been a resilient one. But indicators for the distribution of wealth in Australian have challenged this mythology. While Australian wealth per capita has risen in global terms, it has also come at the cost of its growing underclass. Saddled alongside this has been a marked increase in insecurity and a growing meanness of public spirit, (or stinginess as ‘true blue’ Aussies would say). This is no more apparent than in the current media barbarity against asylum seekers. In many ways we have gone backwards; we have retreated from workers rights and unionised workplaces, retreated from the gains made by feminists for equality in the workplace and the home, and we have certainly retreated from any act or vision for indigenous self-determination, crudely symbolised by the intervention and most recently by the Abbott government’s wholesale removal of Section 18C of the racial discrimination act.

In the 1980s as elsewhere in the world, Australia underwent a series of aggressive ‘reforms’. This is where we began to alter the egalitarian myth. As Mark Davis writes in the *Land of Plenty*:

“Ours is an era that is economically rich yet socially poor, where the gap between the two is the gap between record corporate profits and record flows of capital, and declining public amenity and shriveled public discourse (...) So fragile is the veneer of prosperity that for many people it only takes one thing to go wrong—a lost job, illness, a relationship breakdown, a slight change in interest rates or fuel prices—to take them to the brink of financial disaster” (10)

This scenario forms the backdrop to the fiction novel *Three Dollars* by Elliot Perlman, later made into a film directed by Robert Connolly. Set in 1998, the story portrays a middle class family struggling with debt amid the political and cultural milieu of an Australia marked by increasing uncertainty. The character Tanya solemnises:

"People's fear of change and their despair at the lack of certainty in any area of their lives, particularly where the social and the personal meet, that is with respect to their jobs and income, if it lasts long enough, will lead them to abandon reason, to be suspicious of it and to look for scapegoats and simplistic solutions. The wisdom or correctness of a government's decision will scarcely be discussed but instead attention will be focused on the strength with which the decision was made, the apparent certainty, the conviction with which it was implemented." (139)

Three Dollars charts the tragic downfall of a middle class family through the prism of a society ruled less and less by government and increasingly more by corporations. Now, fifteen years later we could imagine the central characters to be the “same middle-class, socially concerned, politically inactive, foreign-film-going, wine and cheese tasters” perhaps only with the exception of a substituting organic wine and cheese on the menu. (39) A recurring depression for the character Tanya is given the name “the all ordinaries” economic speak for when the index takes a slump. And as wealth inequality grows so does the increase in mental health days, and concern for its link to productivity and an estimated \$190 billion cost to the economy.³

Whilst this year Australia came in at number two for highest recorded median for an average wage (the midpoint between the richest and the poorest), 22 per cent of all growth in Australia's household income has gone to the richest 1 per cent—and it has not come about without the cost to the middle three income bands.⁴ While Australia's overall wealth is increasing, the average is declining by about 4%.⁵ (Mitchell) The Australian Bureau of Statistics' recently released report on Household Wealth and Wealth Distribution confirms that we are indeed following a path of increased inequality. According to the latest OECD figures: “The richest 10 per cent of Australians have gained almost 50 per cent of the growth in income over the past three decades”.

The shift of wealth from the poorest and most vulnerable to the richest and most privilege is at odds with our national imagery of the aspirant middle class, if not the popular image of the ‘equal playing field’. But fuelling this perception is a media saturation beating up on those who don't deserve, those who are

perceived as “bludgers”, or welfare cheats and those troubled by drug addictions and on the fringes of society. The demonising of refugees is also targeted as part of a broader demonisation of cheats and queue jumpers, weirdly skewed as privilege.

In 2008 Julia Gillard said: “Hardworking Australians wanted to know refugees settled here weren’t getting special treatment. People like my own [migrant] parents who have worked hard all their lives can’t abide the idea that others might get an inside track to special privileges.”⁶ But our perceptions of privilege are highly skewed.

Privilege is tied to another Australian cultural mores; that of the tall poppy. But it is troubled by another prevalent cultural trope—the underdog. (The ‘battler’, again.) Here is the pioneer mythology celebrating the ordinary, working class, or non-property owning class; a rejection of the British feudal culture. The reversal of this can be seen in the celebration of property owners as an aspirational marker for those in the lower middle-income brackets.

Writing for the Sydney Morning Herald, Peter Hartcher’s definition of Tall Poppy states: “(Australian) Citizens know that some among them will have more power and money than others... But according to the unspoken national ethos, no Australian is permitted to assume that he or she is better than any other Australian. How is this enforced? By the prompt corrective of levelling derision. It has a name—The “Tall Poppy Syndrome”. The tallest flowers in the field will be cut down to the same size as all the others. This is sometimes misunderstood...It isn’t success that offends Australians. It’s the affront committed by anyone who starts to put on superior airs.”⁷

The paradoxical subjectivity of “the Australian” maintains this useful tension, and it serves to detract from the actual growing inequality, while feeding a growing and increasing delusional aspiration that the little Aussie battler on struggle street is just around the corner from becoming a self made millionaire. Echoing the American Dream of pulling yourself up by the bootstraps, it crows that through hard work and determination, you too could become successful and retire early. But the statistics indicate that Australians in full-time work are working for longer and with longer hours. While Australia scored number one on the Better Living index as the best address on the earth in terms of income wealth, if the work life balance is weighted, Australia is listed as one of the worst places to live in the developed nations.⁸ Meanwhile as National Australia Bank chief executive Cameron Clyne takes a 1 million dollar pay cut to \$7.8 million, its clear not everyone is doing it tough.⁹

¹ The report, *Renovating Housing Policy*, found homeowners received \$36 billion a year in government subsidies, landlords about \$7 billion and renters less than \$3 billion; cited in Peter, Martin. “More Home Subsidies Go to Rich Than Renters.” The Sydney Morning Herald. N. p., n.d. Web. 26 Oct. 2013. <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/more-home-subsidies-go-to-rich-than-renters-20131020-2vuz7.html#ixzz2iouemE4a>

² http://housingstressed.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Australias_Broken_Housing_System.pdf

³ Wade, Matt. "Income up, but Mental Illness Costing \$190b a Year." The Sydney Morning Herald. N. p., 13 June 2013. Web. 19 Nov. 2013.

⁴ Tim Colebatch "Country's Rich Have Lion's Share of Income Growth." The Sydney Morning Herald. N. p., n.d. Web. 26 Oct. 2013.

⁵ Mitchell, Bill. "Wealth Inequality Rising Slowly in Australia." Bill Mitchel Blog. Web. 22 Oct. 2013.

⁶ <https://newmatilda.com/2013/10/24/asylum-policy-vortex-political-posturing>

⁷ Hartcher, Peter. "Voters Now at Ease with Rich Pickings." The Sydney Morning Herald. N. p., 30 July. 2013. Web. 26 Oct. 2013.

⁸ Martin, Peter. "Still the Lucky Country, but Some Work Too Many Hours." Sydney Morning Herald. N. p., n.d. Web. 26 Oct. 2013.

⁹ <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/financial-services/clyne-suffers-1m-pay-cut-but-big-four-ceos-still-take-home-36m-plus/story-fn91wd6x-1226762493851#sthash.uQtZCmTV.dpuf>

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