

## **Public Housing and Urban Renewal: a rock and hard spot**

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Public Housing, in its simplest definition, is the provision of government funded housing to support those who are unable to enter the private housing market due to income barriers, illness or other special needs. However, any definition or conception of public housing in Australia, as elsewhere in the world, is the result of a dynamic and complex political map of historical forces. Mapping this evolution reveals Australia's shifting attitudes to housing—from housing as a human and social right, towards housing as investment commodity and mark of social status.

Likewise the designation of 'Housing' as a government department along with planning and infrastructure, or as a portfolio within human services, also reflects the shifting priorities and definitions of housing according to larger economic and social policies determined by neoliberalism. Housing and land use has increasingly shifted towards being considered a financial instrument in government planning, and away from the thinking that shaped health and welfare departments.

Urban renewal, a strategy with precedents in earlier slum abolition acts, is largely driven by housing, and bound up in realising new forms of spatialised capital in relation to urban centres. When entire public housing estates become targets of urban renewal, the collision of interests and the needs of civil society become rich sites for investigation. The following series of essays will explore the intersections of these interests and needs across public housing, urban renewal and the spatialised politics of place making.

### **Public Housing in NSW**

The formal emergence of public housing occurred with the creation of the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement in 1945, and the recognition that good quality low cost housing was urgently needed for an estimated 80,000 people, mostly in New South Wales. In 1942 the Housing Commission NSW was established and began investigating housing affordability strategies and standards, and developing planned neighbourhood estates. Firstly in Canley Vale, and then later in Ryde, Villawood, Maroubra, Seven Hills, Ermington, Rydalmere, Dundas Valley, Windale (Newcastle), Unanderra and Berkeley (Wollongong).<sup>1</sup> In the 1960s the first high-rise apartments were built in Sydney's inner city areas, as larger sized estates expanded south and west into Green Valley and Mount Druitt.

Most of Australia's current public housing stock was constructed on large tracts of land in fringe suburbs, with a traditional three-bedroom town house. These houses were uniform in design and many of them made based on the Radburn design, an American urban planning model, which developed in the 1930s. You can see the influence of the Radburn model in most of Canberra's design of suburbs.

## **Radburn Design**

The characteristic feature of the Radburn design is that it flips houses around, with the backyards facing the street and the fronts facing each other over common yards. It was led by a desire to foster pedestrian activity, separating the car domain from common thoroughfare.

The Radburn design takes its name from the establishment of a planned community in New Jersey called Radburn in 1929. It drew inspiration from the 1920s English Garden City movement, which was started by urban planners Ebenezer Howard, Sir Patrick Geddes, and landscape architect Clarence Perry.<sup>2</sup>

The earliest influence of the Garden City in Australia can be traced back to Daceyville, a suburb in the south of Sydney, which became home to Australia's very first public housing scheme. In 1912 a new housing act was passed which recognised the appalling living conditions and severe shortage of affordable housing in Sydney. In introducing the act John Rowland Dacey stated:

The day is past, when free Australians were content to be herded together in terraces of mere dog-boxes. In some suburbs they are compelled to herd together like flies . . . the time has come when we should create a Garden City and provide houses of an up-to-date character at the lowest possible rental.<sup>3</sup>

However the intentions of the garden city have not always translated well across differing geopolitical localities and shifts in political regimes. Its original intentions of providing affordable, self sufficient and pedestrian dominated neighbourhoods were gradually compromised by shifts from its roots as a radical social movement to it becoming a pragmatic planning force.<sup>4</sup>

In New South Wales, the Radburn design was introduced in the early 70s by the then NSW Government Architect Philip Cox. The intentions of the early garden city movement have clearly shifted in the Radburn Design when you consider the current status of public housing estates in South West Sydney. Philip Cox who had this to say about an estate in Villawood:

Everything that could go wrong in a society went wrong....It became the centre of drugs, it became the centre of violence and, eventually, the police refused to go into it. It was hell. <sup>5</sup>

## **Cluster of Disadvantage**

By the late 80s, a toxic combination of unemployment, drugs, and violence on housing estates became known as hot beds of crime, were under constant surveillance, and subject to frequent negative media portrayals. But this situation was not solely the result of bad urban planning, although the pedestrian laneways did provide favourable getaway routes for criminals. This 'cluster of disadvantage' emerged as a result of shifts in housing policy, which was increasingly modeled on home ownership in the private sector. This mainly benefited the middle class, and left the housing commission estates catering less

and less for working class families and increasingly providing for those most in need. According to Arthurson 'Whereas in 1966 over 80% of tenants in public housing nationally were employed, by the mid-1980s a similar proportion, 84% of tenants, were in receipt of welfare benefits increasing to 89% by 2000.'<sup>6</sup>

These were areas poorly serviced by public transport or other amenities, where job opportunities were few, and with increasing number of high needs residents with a history of intergenerational poverty and unemployment. These were communities were experiencing high levels of stress and dysfunction. In the late 90s a number of disturbances and revolts occurred across Sydney, referred to as riots by police and government ministers: Villawood in 1997, Mount Druitt in 1998, Redfern in 2004, and Macquarie Fields in 2005.<sup>7</sup>

Increasing media attention on some of the worst excesses of the estates prompted government action, which in some cases was influenced by a quick fix solution, namely that demolition and relocation was the only remedy. In social and human services discourse this is referred to as 'increasing social mix tenure', and is informed by a number of theories and policies aimed at making more inclusive, resilient, and functional neighbourhoods. However estate demolition has typically resulted in the overall loss of public housing, and has not addressed the underlying structural causes to social dysfunction. Villawood estate was demolished in 1998, with 253 dwellings removed. Kathy Arthurson reported that this 'loss of housing resulted in an "overall increase in wait time of approximately 2 years" for public housing in the high-demand East Fairfield region'<sup>8</sup>

The debate on demolishing public housing is contentious; a mixture of public perceptions which acknowledge that the clustering of disadvantage in any area is ultimately unhealthy, together with the marked signs of crime, fuelled by a media analysis of previous riots in Macquarie Fields and Redfern that did more to stigmatise the area than provide any kind of constructive awareness of the structural roots to the situation.

Arguments around social mix have been the subject of much debate, particularly in regards to assumptions made about the modelling of middle class behaviours among public housing tenants. Questions have been raised as to whether the actual mixing of neighbours in common areas occurs after relocation, and the impact of stigma on public tenants among private homeowners.<sup>9</sup>

### **Urban Renewal**

Public housing represents a very small percentage of total housing stock in Australia, indicating a large number of people are experiencing housing stress as Australia's grossly overvalued housing market puts us at number three for least affordable housing in the world according to the Demographia Housing Affordability Survey in 2012.<sup>10</sup> In 2012, there were only 330,906 public housing dwellings nationally, out of a total housing stock of 7.1 million in Australia nationally. There has been a 3.1% decrease in supply in the public housing subsector between 2006 and 2012.<sup>11</sup>

Demolition of estates under the rubric of urban renewal has proved popular as policy, but is not without its detractors. Kate Shaw comments on a recent publication by Kate Arthurson, summarising the policy of estate demolition as Urban Renewal:

The discussion of contemporary social mix policies in Australia is firmly located in the context of decreasing Commonwealth funding for public housing since the mid-1980s, and the associated tightening of waiting lists to those with high and complex needs. The increasing residualization of the sector is exacerbating problems on public housing estates, and Arthurson's core argument is that contemporary social mix policies are not only focusing on symptoms rather than causes, but are no longer based in a social democratic discourse that emphasizes redistributive governance and equitable access to a range of quality services.<sup>12</sup>

### **Urban Renewal of Airds**

Fast forward to Airds in 2013 and the Department of Housing is embarking on another large-scale demolition of Radburn designed estates across NSW in an urgent effort 'de-radburn'. The Department of Housing has learnt from previous experiences at Villawood, and more recently at Minto in South West Sydney, and has implemented a Living Communities Program which 'values and builds on existing community strength' and puts the individuals affected by the project at the centre of the activities'.<sup>13</sup> Acknowledgement about the necessary community consultation time and care required in relocating whole communities is reflected in their appointment of Sarah Antpohler, as the dedicated Relocation Coordinator for Airds. Sarah has a full time job on her hands, working with a large number of clients from initial approach until they are settled in their new home, which can take many years.<sup>14</sup>

The Airds public housing estate was established in 1976 and is representative of the shift in demographics that have accompanied the shift in policy, with many aged residents alongside newer single parent families and a more diverse ethnic mix. Work on the Airds Bradbury renewal project began in 2008 and will continue until the final stages are completed in 2026. There are four stages identified in the plan: Community Engagement, (2008 – 2011); Support (2009-19); Integration (2016-26); and Sustainability (2020-2026). In total 800 houses will be relocated and when the renewal of Airds is complete there will be 600 remaining. This renewal project replaces 1400 social housing homes with about 2000 mixed public and private homes.

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<sup>1</sup> History of Public Housing

<http://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/About+Us/History+of+Public+Housing+in+NSW/The+1940s.htm> accessed 27<sup>th</sup> July, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Ward, 'The principles of Garden City planning' in Assessment of Garden City Planning Principles in the ACT

[http://www.environment.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/232816/gardencityreportch2.pdf](http://www.environment.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/232816/gardencityreportch2.pdf)

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- <sup>3</sup> Samantha Sinnayah, 'Daceyville', Dictionary of Sydney, 2011, <http://www.dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/entry/daceyville>, viewed 26 July 2013
- <sup>4</sup> Freestone, R., Model Communities The Garden City Movement in Australia Nelson, 1989: 79
- <sup>5</sup> Dylan Welch, 'Demolition ordered for Rosemeadow Estate' Sydney Morning herald January 8, 2009 <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/demolition-orders/2009/01/07/1231004105780.html> accessed 27th July, 2013
- <sup>6</sup> Kathy Arthurson, 'From stigma to demolition: Australian debates about housing and social exclusion', *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, 19, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004: 256
- <sup>7</sup> Don Weatherburn, 'Riots, Policing and Social Disadvantage: Learning from the Riots in Macquarie Fields and Redfern' in *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* Vol 18, no.1, 2005: 20-31
- <sup>8</sup> Arthurson, 2004: 266.
- <sup>9</sup> See Arthurson, Creating Inclusive Communities through Balancing Social Mix: A Critical Relationship or Tenuous Link?, *Urban Policy and Research*, 20:3, 245-26
- <sup>10</sup> Accessed 21 July, 2013 <http://www.demographia.com/dhi.pdf>
- <sup>11</sup> Shelter NSW Housing Australia factsheet: pp.12, accessed July 21, 2013 <http://www.sheltersa.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/130314-fly-factsheet-australia.pdf>
- <sup>12</sup> Kate Shaw, 'Social mix and the City: Challenging the Mixed Communities Consensus in Housing and Urban Planning Policies' in *Housing, Theory and Society*, 30:2, 210-212
- <sup>13</sup> Airds Bradbury Renewal Project Plan, Department of Finance and Services, Land and Housing Corporation, Renewal Division July 2012
- <sup>14</sup> Group meeting with Sarah at Airds Community Centre, November 14 2012.