

9. *Building Communities*

*There are thousands of children in the area, no playing fields,
no meeting places, nothing for teenagers to do*

Today the word ‘community’ has numerous meanings, and many of them are quite vague. Middle-class professionals buy terraces in inner-city suburbs looking for ‘a sense of community’, captured for them in coffee shops and other European-style pavement activity. Interest groups readily adopt the word (the ‘business community’), while politicians discuss foreign policy in terms of that ultimate oxymoron—the ‘international community’. If we go back to the period before World War II, however, we find that the phrase ‘working-class community’ had a precise and tangible meaning: a network of social relationships based on geographical proximity. The neighbourhoods which made up ‘urban villages’, coal mining towns, ship building towns, or other factory towns, were populated by working-class people with close kinship ties and with access to local employment. As we have seen, these characteristics were very much the hallmark of Lithgow, and it retained its character as a classic working-class community much longer than did many of the inner-city localities of Sydney.

In the years following World War II the term ‘working class’—referring to industrial manual workers—was largely self-explanatory and well understood by working-class people themselves. Surveys conducted in Australia in the early 1950s showed that class was still the basis for group identity: ‘most cases appeared to consider their class membership as their major grouping or position in the community’. However, by the late 1960s, survey research showed a significant shift: ‘these data confirm that class is of little importance to most Australians: one’s town, one’s state and even one’s status as a British subject appear to loom larger’. By the 1980s this shift appeared complete, with the Australian researchers

on the *Comparative Class Project* declaring confidently: ‘class has no great cultural significance as a basis for social division’.¹

Explanations for the decline of class consciousness often focused on cultural, economic or political developments during the last half of the 20th century. In Britain, for example, Richard Hoggart, blamed the spread of ‘mass culture’ while other sociologists emphasised rising affluence. In Australia, some political scientists pointed to the ‘middle-classing’ of the Australian Labor Party as a core element. These insights go part of the way in explaining this decline, but if we also want to explain the decline of working-class communities, then we need to turn to geography, particularly the reconfiguring of urban space by the state in the post-war decades. In this chapter I look more closely at working-class housing in Western Sydney during the 1960s and 1970s. As in Britain, this period of history in Australia saw massive changes in the ecology of working-class life, as inner city families moved into large new housing estates on the perimeter of the city. Despite the grand schemes of the planners for rebuilding communities in the suburbs, the reality of inadequate services, long hours of commuting, and social isolation meant that the new communities differed greatly from the old. Mt Druitt, in Sydney’s West, provides a classic example of the failure of state planning, and of the class-based stigma around ‘welfare housing’ which first surfaced in the late 1960s and which has persisted to this day.²

Suburbia and the Post-war Working Class

The emergence of more privatised social relations was one feature of this transformation. In the mid 1950s two British sociologists, Michael Young and Peter Willmott, carried out a detailed study

1. 1950s quote from Oscar Adolf Oeser and Samuel Battle Hammond 1954, *Social Structure and Personality in a City*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 265–66. Late 1960s quote from Don Aitkin 1977, *Stability and Change in Australian Politics*, Canberra: ANU Press, p. 130. 1980s quote from Baxter et al. 1991, p. 274.

2. For British sociologists see Richard Hoggart 1971, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of working-class life with special reference to publications and entertainments*, London: Chatto and Windus [1957], and John Goldthorpe et al. 1969, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. For the Australian Labor Party see Andrew Scott 1991, *Fading Loyalties: The Australian Labor Party and the Working Class*, Leichhardt: Pluto Press.

on family and kinship relations in East London, charting the effects of post-war suburbanisation on working-class communities. Bethnal Green, in London's docklands area, typified the traditional working-class urban village, where generations of families lived in the same 'turnings' (streets) and often entered the same occupations. An extensive kinship system, based on mother-daughter relationships, formed a 'bridge between the individual and the community', and local institutions, like the pub and the corner shop, kept neighbourhood friendships alive. The new housing estate of Greenleigh, to where many Bethnal Green families had migrated in the early 1950s, lacked these kinship networks, this local labour market, and this pattern of neighbourhood friendships. While the fresh air and the open fields appealed to these families ('better for the kiddies'), the changes in community life proved costly. There were no pubs or shops nearby, and this made regular neighbourhood contact difficult to sustain, while the greater distances among members of the extended family made casual 'dropping in for a cup of tea' a thing of the past. As a result, a more privatised, nuclear-family-centred lifestyle emerged:

The growth of television compensates for the absence of amenities outside the home, and serves to support the family in its isolation. Instead of going out to the cinema or the pub, the family sits night by night around the magic screen in its place of honour in the parlour. In one household the parents and five children of all ages were paraded around it in a half circle at 9 p.m. when one of us called; the two-month-old baby was stationed in its pram in front of the set. The scene had the air of a strange ritual. The father said proudly: "The tellie keeps the family together. None of us ever have to go out now".³

In the late 1960s this theme of the privatised working-class family resurfaced in a landmark study on the post-war working class: *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*. This study set out to test the 'embourgeoisement thesis', the view that post-war affluence had induced a 'middle-class psychology' amongst the

3. Michael Young and Peter Wilmot 1957, *Family and Kinship in East London*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 117.

working class. The authors' findings led them to reject this thesis in its pure form, but they did concede that a normative 'convergence' had taken place. White-collar workers had moved away from their 'traditional individualism' and adopted more collective approaches to pursuing their economic goals, while at the same time, manual workers had shifted away from 'a community-oriented form of social life towards recognition of the conjugal family and its fortunes as concerns of overriding importance'. While this study highlighted the impact of high wages on working-class family life, other writers stressed the connection with suburbanisation:

The closed, homogeneous, one-industry, one-class, one-occupation community, familiar from earlier industrialism, is no longer typical. Suburbs and new towns are taking the place of the old mining villages, textile districts and dockside areas. And, through these and other changes, the street, the pub, the working-men's club are losing their importance as centres of local social contact, in a world where working class families lead increasingly 'home-centred' lives.⁴

This lament for the fading world of the pre-war urban village was not confined to British writers. The notable American study by Sennett and Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, took as its starting point the decline of ethnic, urban villages in the older industrialised cities of the east coast United States. In a similar fashion to their British counterparts, Sennett and Cobb were concerned to explore the embourgeoisement thesis. They concluded that the destructive effects of class relations were still present beneath the trappings of material affluence. As their interview material showed, such affluence had failed to compensate working-class men for the psychological insecurity and self-doubt which they experienced in their daily lives. These injuries of class grew directly out of the decline of the neighbourhood networks and kinship patterns which had been an essential part of the urban villages. As Sennett and Cobb suggested:

4. Goldthorpe et al. 1969, p. 163. 'Suburbs' quote from J.H. Westergaard 1965, 'The Withering Away of Class: A Contemporary Myth', in: *Towards Socialism*, ed. by Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn, London: Fontana, pp. 106-7.

urban labourers ... are aware of the of the momentous changes in their lives [that] the decline of the old neighbourhoods has caused; these working class people of Boston are trying to find out what position they occupy in America as a whole ... For the people we interviewed, integration into American life meant integration into a world with different symbols of human respect and courtesy, a world in which human capabilities are measured in terms profoundly alien to those that prevailed in the ethnic enclaves of their childhood.⁵

These British and American studies set the context for understanding what took place in Australia during the second half of the twentieth century. In Australia, a similar decline in working-class urban villages was evident and the same debates around community life and privatised family living also arose. In Sydney, the driving force for much of the post-war suburbanisation was the New South Wales Housing Commission, which established vast new housing estates on the western fringes of the city. As a result, the transformation of working-class communities during the 1960s and 1970s was profoundly shaped by the reconfiguration of urban space, a process in which agencies of the state played a central role.

The 'Slums'

During the 1930s housing reform had become a major political issue. The Great Depression had caused an explosion in homelessness, as housing construction fell away and unemployed families were evicted into the streets. By the end of the decade the sub-standard living conditions of the inner city working-class suburbs had been highlighted in a series of newspaper articles. A powerful housing reform movement based within the churches and the labour movement forced governments in several states to set up official inquiries into slums, and from their reports emerged strategies for low income public housing and for the creation of public housing authorities. In New South Wales a Housing Commission was established in 1942, in the midst of World War II. While its immediate

5. Sennett and Cobb 1972, p. 18.

task was to meet the housing needs of munitions workers, the long term goals of the Housing Commission were to remove the inner city slums and to provide affordable low-income housing.⁶

World War II worsened the housing situation, with nearly half the construction workforce enlisting in the armed forces and many of the remainder diverted into war-related activities. By the end of 1943 a Wartime Housing Survey estimated that there was a national shortage of between 250,000 and 300,000 dwellings. In New South Wales alone it was estimated that over 110,000 new dwellings would be needed to adequately house the population. In the immediate post-war years little could be done because of shortages of materials and labour. At the same time, the demand for housing increased sharply as ex-servicemen and their new brides sought accommodation. As the Housing Commission commented in 1948:

hundreds of such couples had been forced to accept overcrowded conditions, living with relatives, renting single rooms in sub-standard tenements, living in 'built-in' verandahs and in some instances actually forced to live apart.⁷

It was the slums which had generated most anguish amongst housing reformers in the pre-war years and 'slum clearance' had a high priority on the post-war agenda of the New South Wales Housing Commission. Some 30,000 houses in Sydney were regarded as candidates for demolition, mainly in the suburbs of Redfern, Surry Hills, Glebe and Waterloo. These were damp houses which lacked light and ventilation, and often had no bathroom or laundry. By the late 1940s, these slum conditions had worsened because of overcrowding, with many of these houses sublet as 'flats' to whole families:

6. M.A. Jones 1972, *Housing and Poverty in Australia*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press; Peter Spearritt 1978, *Sydney Since the Twenties*, Sydney: Hale and Iremonger.

7. Statistics from New South Wales Housing Commission 1948, *Annual Report*, Sydney, pp. 11, 20–21, and New South Wales Housing Commission 1944, *Annual Report*, Sydney, p. 4. 'Overcrowding' quote from New South Wales Housing Commission 1948, *Annual Report*, Sydney, p. 29.

Hundreds of married couples at present occupy such accommodation, many with young children, living, sleeping and eating all in one single room, and sharing toilet and washing facilities with three or four other families.⁸

By 1958, the Commission had only demolished 720 slum houses and replaced them with 1,411 flats. Even by 1970 the figures were still tiny: some 1,430 houses demolished and 3,472 new flats built. The fact that the dwellings demolished fell so far short of the original prediction was largely the result of owners and occupiers 'rehabilitating' what had previously been deemed sub-standard dwellings. As Peter Spearritt argued, much of the early outrage against the slums reflected middle-class prejudices around cleanliness and tidiness, rather than accurate assessments of the quality of the housing stock. In social terms, slum clearance proved costly. The kind of accommodation which replaced most of the inner city slums were large tower blocks, some of the them sixteen storeys high, containing as many as 430 flats, and with little provision for children. By the mid 1960s, the Housing Commission had conceded that high rise flats posed a problem and Commission staff no longer made an effort 'to prevail upon people to accept them if disinclined'.⁹

It was to the outer suburbs that the majority of the inner city working class migrated. In the eyes of social historians like Spearritt, it was a backward step:

Those people who moved, under the ideological supervision of the slum reformers, from the 'congested' inner city to the outer working class suburbs often found themselves living in more crowded houses though admittedly more rural surroundings. They were also much further from the pubs, jobs, cinemas and churches which made up the inner city community.¹⁰

8. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

9. Statistics from Jones 1972, p. 72. Spearritt 1978, p. 76. 1960s quote from New South Wales Housing Commission 1967, *Annual Report*, Sydney, p. 15.

10. Spearritt 1978, p. 67.

Why did working-class families move out of the inner city, when it so often entailed major social upheaval? Often they had little choice when confronted by overcrowding or exorbitant rents. Ultimately, working-class families were forced out of the inner city by the rising cost of housing. Rental stock began to decline as large amounts of housing were bought for owner-occupation, initially by Southern European immigrants and later by middle-class professionals. Particularly in the late 1960s and early 1970s, these professionals began to gentrify the older working-class suburbs, and as a result house prices soared and the prospects of home purchase by working-class families plummeted. One cartoonist of the time captured this dilemma well: a local ‘urchin’ was watching an academic, who had just bought a terrace house, walk down the street, and the local exclaimed, in words heavy with their double meaning: “There goes the neighbourhood”.¹¹

The New Estates

In the 1950s new housing estates had been built in parts of south west Sydney, such as Villawood. By the 1960s the Housing Commission had turned its attention to building even larger housing estates in the outer west: first at Green Valley and then at Mt Druitt. In the middle of World War II a university researcher, Mona Ravenscroft, had been commissioned to research the housing problem with a view to post-war reconstruction. Writing in 1943, she envisaged the emergence of vast new housing estates on the outskirts of the city and warned: ‘Sprawling suburbs, isolated from the city proper and industrial areas, must be avoided for major social reasons’. Amongst these were the problem for women of ‘loneliness and boredom’, something already evident in the war-time Sydney suburbs (‘women have left this boredom for the munition factory while their husbands are away’). As well as the need to avoid ‘suburban isolationism’, Ravenscroft stressed the importance of taking account of social networks in any post-war housing schemes:

11. Rental stock from Max Neutze 1972, *People and Property in Redfern: post war changes in the population and the properties of an inner suburb of Sydney*, Canberra: Urban Research Unit, Research School of Social Science, Australian National University, pp. 110, 116. ‘Urchin’ quote from Spearritt 1978.

for the sake of a good home working-class families would be prepared to leave the crowded locality; but, none the less, they are extremely afraid of being wrenched away from the relatives and friends within their neighbourhood. There is a vast system of clanship ties operating in these localities, and this background, deeply rooted in tradition, is greatly valued by people in depressed areas. It has been their source of emotional security for so long, when everything else failed them, that it is doubtful whether they would be happy and settled without it.¹²

The importance of community was recognised during the 1940s by a number of social planners who were enthusiastic that new housing settlements should be provided with 'community centres' in which 'people can find recreations, add to their experience and education, mould character and develop community spirit'. Such centres were intended to provide swimming pools, gymnasiums, adult educational facilities, meeting halls, libraries, health clinics and nurseries. As Carolyn Allport noted, these community centres were intended to 'involve everyone and to channel leisure time activities into constructive self-improvement action'. In this way, it was felt, 'the problems of loneliness, boredom, repetitive jobs, and delinquency could ... be solved in an atmosphere of communal assistance and communal traditions'.¹³

However, these aims were never to be realised. The high cost of community centres was beyond the financial reach of most outer suburban local councils, where low land values translated into low council income from rates. The state Labor government was pre-occupied with funding the physical infrastructure, and the Menzies Liberal Government in Canberra was reluctant to contribute. So, instead of community centres, the new suburbs were provided with decentralised recreational facilities, and even these came too little and too late. It turned out to be centralised suburban shopping

12. M. Ravenscroft 1943, 'The Housing Problem', in: *Social Horizons* (July), pp. 48–53.

13. Carolyn Allport 1980, 'The unrealised promise: plans for Sydney housing in the forties', in: *Twentieth Century Sydney: Studies in Urban and Social History*, ed. by Jill Roe, Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, p. 54.

complexes which ultimately developed as communal meeting places. However, these complexes were a considerable travelling distance from the outlying suburbs in the new estates, and their construction had been at the cost of preventing corner-shop development. As in Britain, corner-shops in Sydney's inner suburbs had been important for women in working-class communities, because they provided a 'local network for friendship, support and short-term financing for household expenditure'. Their absence in the new estates thus weakened attempts at re-establishing social communities in the outer suburbs. As Young and Willmott had warned in the 1950s, in their study of Bethnal Green:

even when the town planners have set themselves to create communities anew as well as houses, they have still put their faith in buildings, sometimes speaking as though all that was necessary for neighbourliness was a neighbourhood unity, for community spirit a community centre. If this were so, then there would be no harm in shifting people around the country, for what is lost could soon be regained by skilful architecture and design. But there is surely more to a community than that. The sense of loyalty to each other amongst the inhabitants of a place like Bethnal Green is not due to buildings. It is due far more to ties of kinship and friendship which connect the people of one household to the people of another. In such a district community spirit does not have to be fostered, it is already there.¹⁴

The late 1940s also saw the development of the visionary County of Cumberland Plan. As well as its goal of encircling Sydney with a 'green belt'—a corridor of native vegetation—the Plan also aimed to decentralise industry, commerce and cultural facilities away from the centre and into the suburbs. This was intended to both ease

14. Shopping complexes from Stuart Rosewarne 1983, 'The Political Economy of Retailing in the Eighties', in: *Journal of Australian Political Economy* Vol. 15. 'Network' quote from Carolyn Allport 1986, 'Women and suburban housing: post-war planning in Sydney, 1943–61', in: *Urban Planning in Australia: Critical Readings*, ed. by J. B. McLoughlin and M. Huxley, Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, pp. 244, 247. 'Town planners' quote from Young and Wilmot 1957, p. 166.

transport congestion and minimise long travelling times for workers. By the end of the 1950s, however, most of the rail proposals had been withdrawn from the plan, and the green belt itself had been reduced from an original size of 128 square miles to only 44 square miles. The Housing Commission's own goal to rapidly increase Sydney's housing stock was itself in conflict with the Cumberland County Council's 'lofty plans'. As Diane Powell argued:

The two government bodies were often at cross-purposes, the one aiming to provide a coordinated and aesthetically pleasing greater urban system with a harmonious balance of nature and culture, the other briefed to provide a huge number of houses as cheaply and quickly as possible within the metropolitan boundaries. One saw the empty spaces as permanent green areas in an urban patchwork, the other in terms of how many building blocks could be etched out of them.¹⁵

In the late 1960s Green Valley came to symbolise all that was wrong with the Housing Commission's large estates. While the Commission developed progressive policies for planning *physical* space, such as planting native trees and constructing child-safe pedestrian walkways, its efforts at planning *social* space were disastrous. In the 1940s the Housing Commission had intended to create communities rather than simply housing estates, but 'in an economic climate beset by shortages of materials, labour, and finance it was these community facilities which were to bear the brunt of restrictions'. By the 1960s, these shortages had been overcome but the community facilities, invariably the responsibility of other government agencies, lagged badly behind the provision of housing. In Green Valley thousands of people had been settled before any substantial social infrastructure was in place. In 1966, with nearly 5,000 dwellings already completed and no social facilities in place, the Housing Commission tried to justify this neglect as an inevitable 'stage' in any suburban development: 'while still experiencing the problems inevitably associated with a new major residential

15. Diane Powell 1993, *Out West: Perceptions of Sydney's Western Suburbs*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, p. 54.

area these will gradually disappear as normal community services and amenities are established'.¹⁶

Green Valley's dilemma exemplified the basic problem with the Housing Commission's strategy for developing new communities on the outer fringes of Sydney. The Commission planners were swayed by the availability of land, rather than employment, and took little account of how local labour markets functioned. In Green Valley, the new settlers competed in the Liverpool labour market with local workers, as well as other job seekers from the growing areas of Campbelltown and Camden. The result invariably was lower wages or longer hours of commuting. A study of Green Valley carried out in the early 1970s showed that 83 per cent of husbands on the estate spent more than ten hours per day away from home, and nearly a third were away for more than twelve hours.¹⁷

Mt Druitt: the Failure of State Planning

It was in Mt Druitt that the failure of different agencies of the state to co-ordinate the creation of new suburbs was even more pronounced. The State Planning Authority, local government, the Housing Commission, and various State departments such as health, education and social services, were all responsible for different aspects of the Mt Druitt development, and all failed badly to recreate in western Sydney the kinds of communities which the new settlers had left behind in the inner city.

Working class communities had always been built around more than just shelter. The close proximity between home and work, typical of the pre-war working class urban villages, could not easily be recreated in the empty suburban spaces where the bulk of the new population commuted long distances to work. There had been some industrial development in western Sydney in the 1940s, such as the St Marys' defence industries, and in the post-war years this continued to expand, providing one of the main sources of factory

16. 'Economic climate' quote from Allport 1980, p. 57. 1966 quote from New South Wales Housing Commission 1966, *Annual Report*, Sydney, p. 16.

17. Thomas Brennan 1973, *New Community: Problems and Policies*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, pp. 6-7.

work for women in the new Mt Druitt suburbs. Western Sydney continued to expand steadily from the 1950s through to the 1980s, as industries which had been traditionally based in the inner city or inner west moved to the Blacktown area to establish 'greenfield sites'. They seized the opportunity of large vacant sites to consolidate factories and warehouses which had often been spread across many suburbs. Some of these developments were massive, such as the Dunlop Centre at Rooty Hill which covered 52 acres of a new industrial estate of 235 acres. Not only was Dunlop attracted by the opportunity to consolidate its diverse activities on a single site, but it was highly conscious of the large labour supply at the Mt Druitt housing estate, less than two miles away. However, despite this pattern of industrial development, the growth of local employment in the Blacktown–Mt Druitt area fell far behind the massive increase in population in the area. Thousands of workers still commuted by train into the city, and road access to the Housing Commission estate remained a single lane highway until the early 1970s.¹⁸

In the late 1960s the Sydney Region Outline Plan had called for the development of large new commercial centres in Sydney's west, as a way of broadening the employment opportunities in the new suburban areas, but these had failed to eventuate. In their submission to the government in 1977, the Mt Druitt inter-agency workers declared:

The Mt Druitt community has been sold short. The early promise of job opportunity, commercial and industrial expansion with 'a balance between resident population and employment so that most people will not have to travel outside the area to work' has not been met.¹⁹

As well as the linkages between home and workplace, working-class communities in the inner city had also been characterised by strong neighbourhood networks. While these networks could

18. *Blacktown Advocate*, 29/11/1967, p. 1.

19. 'Balance' quote from the Sydney Region Outline Plan and included in the inter-agency submission. See Sue Richards et al. 1977, *Mt Druitt—Workers? Yes! Jobs? No!*, State Library of NSW, Submission to Government from Mt Druitt Interagency, p. 3.

be oppressive, claustrophobic and status-ridden, they nevertheless provided a supportive milieu for raising young families. By contrast, in western Sydney the new residents had to rebuild their neighbourhoods from scratch. The 'new settler experience', and their similar age range, gave the new residents much in common, but the social resources with which to build new communities were missing. Moreover, the vastness of the new spatial setting—thousands of quarter acre blocks—demanded a different response to that which had been sufficient in the streetscape of the old inner city. A motor vehicle in every household was almost mandatory, and where this was taken by the husband to drive to work, the isolation of women at home became acute. In the words of one historian: 'the Australian suburban dream created at one fell swoop the Australian housewife's nightmare'. For those with young children the situation was even more bleak. By 1970 Mt Druitt had 16,000 children under school age and, as the local Anglican minister pointed out, the area 'did not have one kindergarten, a baby health centre or even a pre-school minding centre where mothers could leave their children when they wanted to go shopping'.²⁰

Public transport remained inadequate for many years and in some cases, even deteriorated. Despite the steady increase in population in western Sydney, train services to the area were actually reduced during the late 1960s. Local businesses were more responsive to the needs of the new residents than were government agencies. Alert to the profits to be made in a vast new market emerging on their doorstep, one large Penrith store established a free daily bus service to Penrith for the Housing Commission residents. Blacktown Chamber of Commerce responded with a free bus service of their own. Meanwhile, the Mt Druitt retailers screamed 'unfair competition' because plans to expand their own shopping area were stalled while the State Planning Authority set out to develop a town centre for the area, a process that took another four years.

20. 'Nightmare' quote from Beverley Kingston, cited in Lyn Richards 1994, 'Suburbia: Domestic Dreaming', in: *Suburban Dreaming: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Australian Cities*, ed. by Louise Johnson, Geelong: Deakin University Press, p. 114. Anglican minister quote from *Blacktown Advocate*, 1/7/1970, p. 5.

Other social resources, such as meeting places, recreational and sporting facilities, health and educational amenities, were all deficient for many years. The residents, and especially local politicians, were acutely aware of the Green Valley experience and drew on this comparison to voice their anger. As the local State member explained,

Population was running way ahead of planning in the area and the mistakes that the State Government had made ... at Green Valley were being perpetrated on a even larger scale at Mt Druitt ... There are thousands of children in the area, no playing fields, no meeting places, nothing for teenagers to do, and inadequate transport facilities to take them anywhere.²¹

As late as 1973, with a population of 70,000, the area still lacked a public hospital. The vast majority of the people settling in the new estates of Western Sydney were young families, and yet specialist medical services, like gynaecologists, obstetricians and paediatricians remained clustered in the city centre. A *Sydney Morning Herald* feature article in 1973 summed up the dilemma bluntly: 'Out west—wasteland, wantland' and 'New town, blue town'. At the end of the 1970s, a *Herald* editorial characterised the plight of Western Sydney as a 'dumping ground' for Sydney's expanding population, and its writer condemned past governments for the neglect which had 'left communities to fend for themselves without adequate amenities, industry or services'.²²

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s the residents of Mt Druitt fought to have their community needs met, regularly lobbying Blacktown Council for community centres, libraries and sports fields. The planning debacle of the Housing Commission estate became the basis for solid Labor election victories in the area, and the social wilderness of suburbs like Mt Druitt spurred the

21. *Blacktown Advocate*, 27/8/1969, p. 1.

22. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8/2/1973, various pages. 'Dumping ground' quote from *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5/1/1979, p. 6.

development of the Whitlam agenda for the reform of urban and regional planning. As Mt Druitt's Federal Labor member explained:

councils ... in rapidly developing perimeter areas which were the scene of massive housing development were being given an 'impossible task' ... special funds should be allocated by the Commonwealth Government to the States, especially earmarked for the provision of vital facilities in these massive perimeter housing developments.²³

Mt Druitt: Resisting the Stigma

Suburbia has long held an ambivalent place in Australian literature and social commentary. As early as 1912, the socialist writer Lois Esson exclaimed: 'The suburban home must be destroyed. It stands for all that is dull and cowardly and depressing in modern life'. Fifty four years later, broadcaster Allan Ashbolt mocked suburbia in a similar vein:

Behold the man—the Australian man of today—on Sunday morning in the suburbs, when the high-decibel drone of the motor-mower is calling the faithful to worship. A block of land, a brick veneer, and the motor-mower beside him in the wilderness—what more does he want to sustain him, except a Holden to polish, a beer with the boys, marital sex on Saturday nights, a few furtive adulteries, an occasional gamble on the horses or the lottery, the tribal rituals of football, the flickering shadows in his lounge-room.²⁴

Architect Robin Boyd viewed the post-war Housing Commission estates as 'a desert of terra-cotta roofs relieved only by electric

23. *Blacktown Advocate*, 23/2/1972, p. 1.

24. Esson quote in Tim Rowse 1978, 'Heaven and a Hills Hoist: Australian Critics on Suburbia', in: *Meanjin* Vol. 37. No. 1, p. 5. 'Sunday morning' quote from Alan Ashbolt 1966, 'Godzone: 3 Myth and Reality', in: *Meanjin* Vol. 25. No. 4, p. 373.

wires and wooden poles', while actor and writer Barry Humphries mercilessly satirised suburbia in his stage characters, Edna Everage and Sandy Stone.²⁵

Others writers, such as Hugh Stretton, came to the defence of suburbia. Stretton pointed to the scope which the suburban quarter act block provided for creativity and self-expression, and for the freedom to alter one's house without changing one's address. And he argued forcefully against the 'suburb haters':

What these clichés about suburbs call for is really a rejoinder about life. Plenty of dreary lives are indeed lived in suburbs. But most of them might well be worse in other surroundings: duller in country towns, more desperate in high-rise apartments. Intelligent critics don't blame the suburbs for the empty aspirations: the aspirations are what corrupt the suburbs.²⁶

In a similar vein, Donald Horne defended 'the vitality of the suburban lifestyle': 'The profusion of life doesn't wither because people live in small brick houses with red tile roofs'. Craig McGregor echoed these sentiments when he praised the

zestfulness about much of suburban life which is apparent in a thousand particulars from the sense of bustle and good humour in the thriving suburban shopping centres to the discotheques, sports cars, surfboards and juke boxes which help enliven the life of the young suburbanites.²⁷

In the early 1970s, a new dimension to this ambivalence around suburbia emerged, one which turned upon the composition of the population settling in the new housing estates in the western and south western suburbs. As Peter Spearritt observed in 1973, now that the inner city was being gentrified, the 'slum stigma'

25. Robin Boyd 1963, *The Australian Ugliness*, Ringwood: Penguin, p. 98.

26. Hugh Stretton 1971, *Ideas for Australian Cities*, Melbourne: Georgian House, p. 10.

27. Horne and McGregor quotes in Rowse 1978, pp. 8–9.

had changed focus and descended on working-class suburbia. In the case of Mt Druitt, fears arose that the Housing Commission means testing was bringing in too many 'underprivileged' people, comprised of 'low-income groups, invalid pensioners, deserted wives'. It was this kind of stigma which the local Baptist minister had in mind when he criticised the 'adverse publicity given to this area, which is unfair and often untrue': 'The new residents of Mt Druitt are no different to any other people living in any other community'. The local Labor politicians were also concerned to stress that low incomes did not equate with social problems. When they lobbied for social amenities, and against things like rail fare increases, they spoke of their constituents in the affirming language of the 'battlers', rather than the disabling language of the 'underprivileged'. The Housing Commission was also adamant that it had not created 'welfare ghettos' in western Sydney:

The picture of a socially disadvantaged, economically unstable population deprived of opportunity to live happy and wholesome lives is utterly false and gives rise to great resentment amongst the many worthy people who are hurt by the thoughtless and grossly inaccurate misrepresentation perpetrated by insensitive people who should know better.²⁸

The Commission stressed that '95% ... are ordinary wage earners with little hope of obtaining a home on a purchase or rental basis elsewhere' and pointed out that only five per cent of its tenants were widows or deserted wives, 'many of whom were living under appalling conditions privately until housed by the Commission'.²⁹

The Housing Commission was struggling with a legacy inherited from the late 1940s and 1950s. Emergency housing settlements, like those at Herne Bay and Hargrave Park, had developed bad

28. 'Slum stigma' from Peter Spearritt 1973, 'The Australian Slum Stigma', in: *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* Vol. 9. No. 2, p. 44. Other quotes from locals in *Blacktown Advocate*, 3/6/1970, p. 1; 21/4/1971, p. 3; 25/9/1968, p. 1. 'Social disadvantage' quote from New South Wales Housing Commission 1970, *Annual Report*, Sydney, p. 7.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

reputations for 'problem tenants', families who exhibited 'anti-social behaviour' (such as failing to pay rent and engaging in disruptive or illegal behaviour). So poor was Herne Bay's reputation that after its demolition and replacement with cottage housing, the Housing Commission renamed the suburb 'Riverwood' in an attempt to bury the stigma along with the name. The large new housing estates of the 1960s, at Green Valley and at Mt Druitt, broke from the pattern of these emergency housing settlements and developed into 'mixed' housing areas. In 1970, for example, half of the residents in Mt Druitt were purchasing their own homes. As for the tenants, the Housing Commission proved very effective at excluding potential 'problem tenants' (mainly those defined as the 'undeserving poor'). As a result of this, the Housing Commission estates in Western Sydney never developed into 'welfare ghettos' comparable to those in countries like the United States. As early as the mid 1960s, the Commission was alert to this danger and it argued against forcing 'better-off families' out of Commission dwellings for fear the estates might become

the habitat of the poorest, oldest and least able sections of the community. The social character of our estates ... should not be diminished by making them increasingly and progressively poorer single class settlements.³⁰

However, by the early 1980s a 'welfare working class', composed of high concentrations of female sole parents and unemployed workers, had begun to emerge in Western Sydney. The Mt Druitt suburbs had rates of unemployment and proportions of single female-headed households that were far higher than the State average. At a time when only five per cent of all households in the State were headed by female sole parents, one of the Mt Druitt suburbs had four times that figure, and half a dozen of the other suburbs had three times that figure. In 1981 the State unemployment rate stood at five per cent for males, and six per cent for females. But in most of the Mt Druitt suburbs the figures hovered between twelve and fifteen per cent.³¹

30. New South Wales Housing Commission 1964, *Annual Report*, Sydney, p. 10.

31. Unpublished 1981 Census data.

At the same time, however, these suburbs had not become low income ghettos. The proportion of households on low incomes was actually below the State average in all but one Mt Druitt suburb. Neither, though, were there many high income households. In other words, despite significant pockets of poverty, the 'mixed' character of the Mt Druitt suburbs ensured that its overall income profile was comparable to that of other working-class suburbs.

Housing Reform and the Welfare State

The post-war housing reformers had hoped their efforts to transform the environments of the inner cities might result in more than just decent and affordable accommodation. As the Superintendent of the Paddington Christian Community Centre wrote in July 1947:

disease, crime, anti-social behaviour of various kinds, cramped and distorted attitudes and the like can be traced to the deplorable and depressing environment in which thousands now live. This is not to say, of course, that a new and better environment is the only solution. But in most cases the first step to taking the slum out of the man is to take the man out of the slum.³²

Other commentators were more perceptive. Mona Ravenscroft, for example, insisted in her 1943 blueprint that the provision to workers of a 'reasonable living wage' was the key to solving the post-war housing problem. Nineteenth century debates about poverty, particularly in Britain, had rarely confronted the issue of working-class incomes. Those debates swung between accounts which saw poverty as a personal failing—indeed a crime—and accounts which focused on the 'degeneration' of the urban environment. With few exceptions, the link between poverty and the operations of the casual labour market was rarely exposed, allowing middle-class moralising about the London poor to concentrate exclusively on the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor.³³

32. Quoted in Spearritt 1978, p. 88.

33. Ravenscroft 1943, p. 49. For the link between poverty and casualised labour see Stedman Jones 1971.

In Australia, this distinction remained at the heart of the post-war welfare state, but in an incomplete and contradictory fashion. Welfare benefits based on age and war-service flowed automatically to their recipients, while housing and unemployment entitlements entailed scrutiny of the applicants for evidence of their eligibility. During the nineteenth century the deserving / undeserving distinction was always explicit, though its vocabulary varied over time. In post-war Australia this distinction had become implicit, and its presence was now signalled in the language of 'responsibility'. The deserving poor were characterised above all else by 'responsibility', the acceptance of a personal stake in one's fate and the cultivation of the habits of thrift and diligence as the appropriate response to hardship. By contrast, the undeserving poor refused this model for self-improvement and their personal habits often offended the sensibilities of the middle-class dispensers of welfare.

The labour movement had always maintained an ambiguous relationship to this distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor. On the one hand, many of its leaders were drawn from the labour aristocracy, and therefore endorsed the ethos of 'responsibility' because it closely matched their own philosophy of self-improvement. On the other hand, labour leaders were also acutely aware that the distinction was at the heart of the charity industry, with its disabling paternalism. As John Dacey, the NSW Labor Treasurer, declared in 1912 when introducing legislation to establish the model suburb of Dacey Gardens:

I want this thing to be self-supporting. I want no element of charity or condescension about it. The tenant who gets one of our houses and pays what is a fair amount on the capital expenditure is under no compliment to the State and I do not think that the State should be under any compliment to him either. It is a purely business transaction.³⁴

The close links between paternalism and the deserving / undeserving distinction were well documented in Susan Marsden's classic study of the South Australian Housing Trust. This state

34. Quoted in Jones 1972, p. 151.

housing authority went further than any other similar housing body in fostering home ownership amongst the working class, in establishing large new estates where significant numbers of professional workers lived, and in developing large amounts of public rental accommodation. In all these respects the Housing Trust pioneered the development of non-stigmatised public housing, but it did so on the basis of paternalism and a rigorous enforcement of the deserving / undeserving distinction. Its first chairperson delighted in playing the role of elderly benefactor, regularly visiting his tenants, and taking 'great satisfaction from lovingly-created gardens and the spotless kitchens of grateful tenants'. In turn, the staff of the Trust imbibed this paternalism:

The attitude of Board members, which in turn influenced the practices of Housing Trust staff, was that there were 'deserving poor' whose efforts should be recognized with decent housing and sympathetic landlordism. Regular payment of rent, neatness and neighbourliness were not only appreciated by the Trust but had been methodically selected. It followed that irregular, unkempt or unruly applicants were rejected and such tenants were dealt with sternly.³⁵

The situation was similar in New South Wales. As the provider of public rental accommodation to low income sections of the working class, the Housing Commission assumed the role of paternalistic landlord. No matter how benevolently the Housing Commission acted in comparison with private landlords, it could not avoid undermining the autonomy of its working-class clients, particularly those on very low incomes or in desperate housing need. As one historian of the welfare state commented bluntly: 'The lower the income, the less the choice'.³⁶

As in South Australia, the New South Wales Housing Commission largely managed to exclude the 'undeserving poor', leaving them adrift in the private rental market, in extended family networks, or in various forms of homelessness. The tenancy application

35. Susan Marsden 1986, *Business, Charity and Sentiment: The South Australian Housing Trust 1936-1986*, Netley South: Wakefield Press, p. 65.

36. Jones 1972, p. 216.

forms, with questions like 'Are premises clean and well kept?' and 'Does civic pride exist? (gardens, etc.)' provided the initial screening device to ensure that this deserving / undeserving distinction was in force. The subsequent interactions between applicants and the Housing Commission officers continued in this vein.

For those working-class families who met with approval, the material rewards in escaping from the private rental market were considerable. Not only in the late 1940s, but also well into the 1960s, sub-standard housing was being let at excessive rents. While the overcrowding of the 1940s diminished, decent affordable housing remained scarce. Stories of leaking rooms and rotting floorboards were still common in the 1960s; one family wrote to the Commission enclosing a photograph of their house under a foot of water and explaining that the owner refused to carry out any repairs because he was waiting for the house to fall down so that he could sell the property to developers.

The economic circumstances of low income working-class families trapped in the private rental market, emerged regularly in Housing Commission tenancy files, usually in the details provided on the application forms. Invariably these families owned few assets—their furniture was often on hire purchase—and as much as forty per cent of their income was spent on housing. Often the bond was being paid off in instalments.

By way of contrast, Housing Commission homes for sale at this time in the new Mt Druitt suburbs were far more affordable. The deposit for the home was not much more than the bond money for renting in the private market, and the weekly repayments were usually less than half what a family would be paying in rent. For those working-class families deemed deserving, the Housing Commission's new estates in Western Sydney played a fundamental role in rescuing them from exploitation in the private rental market. The Housing Commission tenancy files show that home-owners were the fortunate ones. Those who remained as tenants placed themselves under the continuing scrutiny of the Housing Commission, a process subject to middle-class moralistic paternalism. And those rejected by the Commission, and thus completely excluded from any form of public housing, simply disappeared from the records.

This positioning of working class families as clients of the welfare state was, of course, a much larger process than just their housing experiences. While conventional wisdom has placed the birth of the modern Australian welfare state in the 1940s, with the introduction of Child Endowment (1941), Widows Pension (1942) and Unemployment Benefits (1945), some commentators argued that the 'real welfare state' only began in the 1970s. As Michael Jones argued, between the end of the 1960s and the mid 1970s, 'means tests were liberalised, real benefit rates increased, and new programs such as the supporting parent's benefit were established'. These reforms, which brought the Australian welfare state into closer alignment with the European social democracies, had barely settled into place when dramatic economic and social changes transformed the terrain of welfare provision. From 1975, unemployment increased dramatically and reforms to Family Law resulted in a doubling of the divorce rate within five years. Between 1971 and 1981, welfare dependency doubled in Australia. In terms of the numbers on social welfare, there was a 38 fold increase in unemployment beneficiaries between 1970 and 1988; those on sickness benefits increased nearly nine fold; and the number of supporting parents increased nearly seven fold.³⁷

Changes like these dramatically transformed the social landscape of Mt Druitt during the late 1970s. By the end of the 1980s, Mt Druitt had emerged from the stigma of a 'new estate', and it had finally achieved some of its basic social infrastructure, but the residents now found themselves engulfed by another pernicious stigma: as one of the sites of the so-called 'underclass'. Newspaper articles which focused on welfare recipients and the long-term unemployed regularly listed Mt Druitt amongst the leading welfare suburbs ('Where they live on welfare') and in their lurid case-studies they invariably picked on families living in Mt Druitt or its adjacent suburbs.³⁸

In the mid 1970s, dwelling construction in Australia per head of population had reached an all-time high. In the late 1940s, in the midst of the post-war housing crisis, new dwelling construction per thousand persons stood at 5.7. By 1976 the comparable figure

37. M.A. Jones 1990, *The Australian Welfare State: Origins, Control and Choices*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, pp. 45-47.

38. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17/7/1993-21/7/1993, various pages.

was 10.6. The public housing authorities in the various states had contributed significantly towards this expansion, either through sponsoring home ownership or through direct provision of public housing. By the late 1970s, however, the contribution from the public sector began to fall away sharply as State and Commonwealth governments cut back on funding public housing. Whereas in the mid 1960s the ratio of public to private housing construction was about one to five, by the early 1980s it had dropped to one to ten.³⁹

This fall in spending on public housing coincided with a dramatic rise in unemployment which the end of the long boom heralded. At the same time, the 'fiscal crisis of the state' arrived in Australia. This phrase had been applied to a common predicament faced by western industrial nations during the 1970s. Low rates of economic growth saw governments caught between falling state revenues and the rising social costs of recession, and they began to dismantle the 'post-war settlement', that political consensus in which steady growth, full employment and protected manufacturing industries had allowed the state to expand its spending on education, health and welfare. As manufacturing began to restructure in Australia during the late 1970s, and unemployment rose steeply, governments responded not by expanding the social wage, but by shifting resources into funding the economic infrastructure, like ports and power stations, which investors in the short-lived 'resources boom' demanded. By the mid 1980s, capital markets had been de-regulated and the real cost to state governments of building urban infrastructure from loan funds had doubled.⁴⁰

As a result of these various changes, a major housing crisis comparable to the post-war years emerged during the 1980s, only this time it was restricted almost exclusively to low-income families. Public housing waiting lists began to lengthen dramatically and residential vacancy rates in the private rental market dropped and rents rose steeply. Whereas in the 1950s, it took 12 years for rents to double, by the late 1970s, they were doubling every 7 years.⁴¹

39. Vamplew 1987, Table HS 163-171, p. 355.

40. James O'Connor 1973, *The Fiscal Crisis of the State*, New York: St Martin's Press. Urban infrastructure costs from Ray Bunker 1989, 'A reappraisal of Australian suburbia', in: *Journal of Australian Studies* Vol. 25, pp. 73-84, p. 83.

41. Vamplew 1987, Table HS 160-162, p. 355

At the same time, gentrification had spread to many of the remaining working-class suburbs which were still close to the city. In the words of Ray Bunker, the blue-collar working class was 'being attacked from above and below: by deindustrialisation and gentrification'. The first brought unemployment, the second unaffordable housing. According to Bunker, changes like these 'began to turn public housing into welfare housing'.⁴²

It could be argued, however, that the seeds for this transition had been dormant within public housing in Australia for several decades. A key moment was that period in the 1960s when housing authorities like the New South Wales Housing Commission redefined their role as meeting the housing needs of 'disadvantaged' individuals, rather than overcoming the deficiencies of the private housing market. This had been the driving force for public housing in the post-war years, a period when these paternalistic overtones were largely absent.

Once new ideologies of 'targeting welfare' began to emerge during the 1980s, it was a small step to add to the old distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor a third category: 'middle-class welfare'. In so doing, the universal character of welfare provision—a hallmark of the Whitlam years—was rejected in favour of a focus on the 'genuinely needy'. This revitalised ideology of charity brought Labor and conservative politicians into philosophical alignment; the only disputes now concerned where the boundaries were to be drawn and how much was to be spent. By the 1980s, that earlier Labor tradition which had stressed independence from paternalism—as in Dacey's concern for self-supporting housing—had all but collapsed.⁴³

42. Bunker 1989, pp. 78, 81.

43. The early Commonwealth–States Housing Agreement (CSHA), signed at the end of World War II, had concentrated on boosting the stock of rental accommodation. However, over time CSHA funds were increasingly used to promote home ownership. Greg Whitwell 1989, *Making the Market: The Rise of Consumer Society*, Melbourne: McPhee Gribble Publishers, p. 41.