The great Australian sprawl

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Australian cities have reached an historic turning point. For the first time the federal and state governments are committed, with varying degrees of resolution, to policies of urban consolidation. Sometimes these policies are piece-meal and tokenistic - such as permissive regulations for dual occupancy - sometimes, as with some of the initiatives of the late (if not lamented) Better Cities program, the policies attempt to be more far-reaching and coercive. These policies continue to encounter some degree of resistance. While most governments - conservative as well as Labor - share the aspiration to economise on urban infrastructure, they are less united on the broader environmental objectives which inspire the more ardent advocates of the policy. There is some difference of opinion, even among those who broadly share the desire to create more environmentally-friendly cities, about the degree to which urban consolidation is the means to achieve this. There is also a difference of opinion among both advocates and opponents about the malleability, not only of the urban fabric which the consolidationists propose to remake, but about the underlying values which created it in the first place.

As urban conservationists, our primary interest in urban consolidation may seem to be the maintenance of the historic fabric of our cities: what does it mean, not only for the survival of individual places, but for the neighbourhoods and precincts of which they are a part? But urban consolidationists must also be interested in the history of our cities, for it is only by examining the forces that created those historic neighbourhoods that they can truly assess the forces of resistance. In this paper I offer a brief historical account of the 'Great Australian Sprawl' - the ideas and circumstances that created and sustained it. In conclusion I will suggest, even more briefly, some lessons on the implications of urban consolidation for historic conservation.

Colonial Australia was born urban and quickly became suburban. From the earliest days of the colony of New South Wales, our cities have been shaped by a dread of density and susceptibility to sprawl. Within months of his arrival at Sydney Cove in 1788, Arthur Phillip had drawn up a town plan that exhibited the preference for fresh air, space and detached housing that was to distinguish Australian urban living almost to our own day. He required that the streets of Sydney town should be laid out 'in such a manner as to afford the free circulation of air, and when the houses are built ... will be granted with a clause that will prevent more than one house being built on the allotments, which will be 60 feet in front and 150 feet in depth'. Phillip was a naval officer who had visited port towns in Portugal and South America as well as Britain, and his ideas of town planning probably owed something to the fears of contagion, which were a constant problem in the confined and overcrowded spaces of a ship at sea, as well as to contemporary planning ideas.

He may also have been mindful, as his successors certainly were, of the threat of 'moral' contagion. Sydney was a gaol and its first residents had formerly been habitués of the most crowded districts of London and other large British cities. Concentrating them together in neighbourhoods like the Rocks, the crowded
slum on the western side of the quay, was a recipe, so many colonial officials believed, for incubating an epidemic of vice and crime. When Commissioner Bigge visited the colony to inquire into Governor Macquarie's administration, several colonists testified to the harmful effects of allowing the convict population to be concentrated in Sydney. "Every man acquainted with human nature and the general contamination of vice, must admit that nothing can tend more to confirm old offenders in their habits of vice and wickedness, and to destroy all religious feeling in the minds of those convicts who are depraved than the congregating of them into large bodies", declared the Reverend Samuel Marsden. Colonial governors believed that the safest course was to disperse convicts into the countryside as quickly as possible. Even after the end of the convict era colonial immigration officials followed a similar policy urging, and sometimes compelling, newly arrived immigrants to head away from the sinful attractions of Sydney and Melbourne and into the countryside.

This was not necessarily very sensible advice; as most immigrants soon discovered the employment prospects up-country were strictly limited. Decentralisation, as many other enthusiasts were to realise, is a noble ideal, but hard to realise in a sparsely-settled pastoral country. Getting the right balance between concentration and dispersion was a problem that greatly concerned experts on colonisation - none more than that famous Edward Gibbon Wakefield. Wakefield was opposed to the reckless 'dispersion' of pastoralism, but the kind of 'concentration' he favoured was the English pattern of small farms and villages spread evenly across the land. South Australia was the colony that attempted most faithfully to put Wakefield's ideas into action. Its capital, Adelaide, was planned to achieve the kind of ideal balance between town and countryside that he had in mind. The town itself was small and compact, and designed, so far as we can tell from Colonel Light's famous design, along much the same lines as contemporary new towns such as those in Dublin or Edinburgh. Beyond the town he laid out a number of dispersed villages. And between the two, as if to create a kind of buffer between town and country, Light inserted Adelaide's famous green belt of parkland. What happened in Adelaide - and more or less everywhere else - was that this distinction between town and country was rapidly dissolved by the creation of what was to become the dominant form of Australian settlement - suburbia.

Within a decade of its foundation, the town had spilled over the surrounding belt of parkland and the dispersed villages - designed originally as the hubs of a farming community - had begun to merge in to a continuous sprawl of suburbs inhabited. for the most part, by townsmen commuting from Adelaide.

Under the Ripon regulations of 1831 colonial administrators had been instructed to divide land in the vicinity of towns into three broad categories - town, suburban and country allotments. They originally used the word 'suburb' in its 18th century sense to simply mean wasteland beyond the bounds of the town, to be used for grazing cattle or perhaps for market gardens. But by the 1830s Australian city-dwellers were coming to use the word 'suburb' in a new sense - that popularised by the landscape architect John Claudius Loudon in his
Suburban Garden and Villa Companion. Already in the late 1820s, inspired in part by these ideals, Governor Darling had laid out Sydney’s first suburb, Woolloomooloo, as a place of picturesque retreat for wealthy free settlers, the so-called ‘exclusives’. Introduced as a sanctuary for the rich, the suburban idea soon took off among all classes. By the late 1830s estate agents in Sydney, Hobart, Adelaide and Melbourne were appealing to shopkeepers and tradesmen, as well as gentlemen and merchants, to acquire their own suburban estates.

The idea of the villa suburb reflected the influence of four great contemporary ideas – evangelicalism, sanitarianism, romanticism and class segregation. Evangelicalism reinforced the idea of the family as the focus of religious and moral life, and of the suburban home as a sanctuary from the venality and vice of the city. Sanitarianism – the new science of public health – saw the suburb as a safe-haven from the dirt and disease of the city’s over-crowded courts and alleys. Romanticism emphasised the idea of the suburban home – and especially the suburban garden – as a place where people might seek refuge from the artificiality and noise of the city amidst the quiet and beauty of nature. And in a society where class distinctions were becoming more sharply defined, the suburb, as a zone of exclusive middle-class residence, offered new ways of symbolising and reinforcing them.1

Australia, which had been founded at the very moment when the modern suburb was being born, was a natural convert to the idea. As we have seen, early colonial governors actively promoted it. Many immigrants, as refugees from the overcrowded cities of Britain, saw Australia itself as a kind of distant suburb and quickly gravitated to the fringes of the newly-founded colonial cities, where they found a more spacious field in which to realise their dreams of independence and their taste for land speculation. Climate may also have played a role: longer, warmer summers gave a stronger incentive to engage in outdoor pastimes such as gardening, and reduced the incentive to conserve coal and firewood by adopting more compact forms of building. Australians enjoyed higher and more stable wages than their British or American counterparts and could afford to spend more on land and housing. And the colonial governments helped to finance the growth of the suburbs by providing transport and other urban services on a more generous scale than other countries. By 1890, when the American statistician Adna Weber reviewed the growth of cities in the 19th century, he found that Australia was not only the second most urbanised land on earth (next to Britain), but the most suburbanised of all. As Lionel Frost has shown, the newer Australian cities – Melbourne and Adelaide – sprawled more luxuriantly than the older ones – Sydney and Hobart.2 This was partly a matter of topography – the harbour and estuary limited suburban growth more than the wide plains on which Melbourne and Adelaide were situated. But the style of suburbanisation was also influenced by subtle differences in each city’s foundations, immigrant composition, transport systems and growth pattern.

Late-19th century visitors were usually more amazed than offended by the great Australian sprawl. Sometimes it was applauded, as a sign of an ambition to be
Meanwhile the town often bore a rather raw, unfinished look, "like a mere outline sketch with only the central portion shaded in", said Henry Cornish of 1870s Melbourne. Anthony Trollope was impressed by the "air of wholesomeness and space" but noted "the drawback" that "as the city grows the distances become immense". In 1889 Edward Morris, the newly arrived professor of English at Melbourne University, noticed the city's wide streets and spacious housing allotments: "The result of these large spaces is that the suburbs are far apart... The tax upon the ladies of visit-paying which modern society demands is much heavier because of the distances that have to be traversed between friend and friend." By the 1890s the tyranny of suburban distance had been lessened somewhat by the introduction of trains and trams, and the costs of commuting would continue to decline in relative terms into the new century.

One of the major, but little remarked, effects of the great Australian sprawl was that urban growth seldom required large scale demolition and redevelopment of central city areas. The city grew by tacking on new bits at the edge rather than rebuilding more intensively at the centre. While the inner regions of London, New York and Paris were constantly being torn down and built over, the inner regions of Melbourne and Sydney remain remarkably unchanged in basic building form, and even in fabric, from the mid-19th century to today. The impulse to conserve old buildings in Europe and America had sprung, very largely, from the desire to rescue valued places that lay in the path of the demolisher. But until the mid-20th century these pressures scarcely touched most parts of the Australian city.

The first city to feel them in any real way was the most congested, Sydney. Only accidental destruction, like the fire in Pitt Street in the early 1890s, which engulfed several picturesque buildings of the convict era, prompted local historians to consider the need for conservation. About the same time some Sydney artists, led by Julian Ashton, began to paint old convict buildings. Such studies, a contemporary critic noted, "would be valuable as a relic of the past, when such old houses... have been swept away to make way to make more room for modern buildings". Organisational moves to conserve historic buildings always lagged well behind the movement to conserve bushland and public parks. It was the encroachment of building on Sydney's Centennial Park or the parks laid out around Melbourne by Governor LaTrobe which stirred the strongest resistance from citizens - as perhaps it still does.

Not until the 20th century did Australians seek to curb the process of sprawl - and then only half-heartedly. The fear of urban density, which exerted such a strong hold on the imaginations of 19th century city-dwellers was reinforced by the medical and eugenic ideals of the early-20th century. The influenza pandemic of 1919 probably helped to strengthen popular belief in the health-giving properties of space and fresh air which was now manifested in building regulations designed to enforce minimum allotment sizes, and in a new architectural fashion - the sleep-out. Oswald Barnett, Melbourne's Methodist anti-slum crusader, proclaimed his faith in the benefits of fresh air, not only in
the back streets of Fitzroy, but in his own home in middle-class Balwyn. ‘Father
was mad about fresh air’, his daughter explained to Janet McCalm. He and
his wife had ‘both been brought up in small, poky little houses – so fresh air –
coming out to Balwyn – it was almost like a religion’. 1 Along with the
minimum allotment came the practice of residential zoning. Many middle-class
suburban subdivisions not only specified minimum allotment sizes, but building
materials (such as brick and timber areas), setbacks, the exclusion of flats and
duplexes. Where flats were permitted they were usually limited to two or three
storeys. The net effect was to reinforce sprawl.

High-density housing was associated in the popular mind with rootlessness,
cosmopolitanism and loose-living. ‘They were condemned as inventions of the
devil, sources of immorality, forces for reducing the birth-rate and an
encouragement to excessive familiarity’ notes Richard Cardew of Sydney’s
interwar flats. 2 Low-density living, on the other hand, was associated with
social stability, health and virtue. The motorcar promised to put suburban living
within reach of everyone; it widened the city-dweller’s horizons, as one
enthusiast remarked in the mid-1920s.

A few town planners, influenced by Ebenezer Howard’s ‘garden city’ with its
firm perimeter of green space, gave token support to the idea of urban
consolidation. Limiting metropolitan sprawl was an idea that bobbed up in
almost every Australian metropolitan plan from the 1920s to the 1960s. 3 The
1929 Melbourne Metropolitan Planning Commission had drawn attention to the
unsystematic process of subdivision. Sydney’s Cumberland Plan of 1945 had
sought to contain ‘the present kind of sprawling development’ by interposing a
‘green belt’ and promoting measures of ‘consolidation’ – perhaps the first time
the word was used in Australian planning circles. 4 When Sir Patrick
Abercrombie, the creator of the Greater London Plan, visited Melbourne in 1948
he warned against the city’s ‘straggling unplanned settlement’ and suggested a
scheme to curb the sprawl by the creation of new towns on the English pattern
within a firmly drawn urban boundary.5 But while decrying sprawl, the
planners were generally faint-hearted in their attempts to arrest it. In 1952
Robin Boyd had asked how much longer Australian city-dwellers could afford
‘the price of privacy’. ‘Will not our big cities choke themselves out like over-
stimulated weeds? How far can a man travel each day? How thinly will city
amenities spread? How dull can life become?’ 6 He dreamt of a Corbusian city
of high-rise apartments and large public parks, but like everyone else the critic
of the Australian ugliness gravitated to the suburbs – to a house in that
quintessential suburb, Camberwell, just a few blocks away from the house in
which Barry Humphries had grown up. Melbourne’s 1954 Metropolitan
Planning Scheme identified the city’s ‘sprawling, low density development
which had added substantially to the cost of providing the normal utility
services, to the cost of transportation, and to the time taken to travel from one
part of the city to another’ as first among the problems it was obliged to address,
but largely ducked the problem of how it should be reversed. 7 Like an obese
person contemplating a diet, they knew, or thought they knew, that abstinence
would be good for them; but they lacked the will or conviction to put their belief into practice. Most of the city plans gave only lip service to urban consolidation. Elsewhere they continued to laud the advantages of the quarter-acre block, the expressway and the public park.

It was probably not until the 1960s that ordinary Australians – as distinct from planning theorists – began to question the social assumptions behind the sprawl. Jewish refugees from eastern Europe accustomed to high-density apartments, were appalled by the seeming emptiness of Australian suburbia. In her autobiography Amirah Inglis recalls her father’s reaction to Sunday in Melbourne’s suburbs: ‘Here in a Protestant country Sunday looks like a Jewish Sabbath! Absolutely nothing to do! Nowhere to go. Nowhere to get a cup of coffee!’ Many Italian immigrants felt the same. Guiseppe, newly arrived from Italy, came home from work one day to find his wife in tears: ‘What’s wrong with you?’, he asks, ‘you’re not happy.’ ‘Yes, I am happy’, she replies, ‘I have my mother, you, my daughter. But where you brought me, I’m dying. Five o’clock, everything finished in this street, no noise nothing.’ These immigrants brought with them a radically different appreciation of the delights of density, of a city with limits. ‘I liked boundaries’, Amirah Inglis recalls. These newcomers naturally gravitated to the terrace houses of the inner suburbs and the flats of St Kilda, although in time they too often succumbed to the suburban ethos – Italians heading north and east to the cream brick villas of Bundoora and Bulleen, Jews to the southern suburbs of Caulfield and Elwood.14

Young Australians who had hitch-hiked through Europe, sampling the piazzas of Rome and the flats of Earl’s Court, also returned to Australia with a yen to recreate the same ambience in Paddington and Carlton. This was a revolution in cultural values among a few rather than a crisis of conscience among the many, brought about by heightened ecological awareness; though it was nice, when the oil price-hike came in the early 1970s, to find that terrace living could be considered virtuous as well as trendy. The young professionals who saved historic buildings and fought freeways often believed they were promoting lifestyles that were less wasteful of the earth’s resources than the working-class folk who drove their beat-up Holdens to brick veneers in far suburbs. And perhaps they were – though that was only half the story.

The cultural revaluation of urban space, symbolised by the middle-class rediscovery of the terrace house, laid the foundations for the current campaign for urban consolidation. Many of its architects are themselves long-time residents of the inner city and their belief in the delights of density has probably been reinforced, if it was not actually inspired, by that experience. We should not be too critical of them – everyone tends to think that what is good for them will be good for everyone else. If you’re an intellectual who likes reading books and drinking capuccinos and hates mowing lawns and repairing motor bikes, then an inner-city terrace house is just what you need. But if you’re not an intellectual, and your terrace house is in a so-called ‘urban village’ half-way to Ballarat or Bowral, then urban consolidation starts to look a lot less attractive.
The Better Cities program was not only the first program to be cut by the incoming Liberal government; it would also have been first victim of the razor gang of a returning Labor government. This is not necessarily because the issues it was trying to face were not real issues; it was more because those policies were proving politically unpalatable.

This does not mean that urban consolidation is a dead issue. On the contrary, urban consolidation is now government policy in most Australian states. Rather than trying to sell the idea to Australian city-dwellers as desirable, it will slowly be forced upon them by the sheer pressures of the market and the seemingly inexorable rolling back of public investment. As governments progressively withdraw or wind down urban services in fringe areas, poorer Australians will be left with the brutal, but not unprecedented, choice between a house with no services and no house at all.

Urban consolidation, if it is attempted seriously, may be the most significant threat yet to the historic character of our cities. The threat comes, not in the form of comprehensive plans for urban villages or dual occupancy, but in the pressures created throughout the urban land market by the constriction of development, and the poor supply of urban infrastructure on the fringe. The selling-off of state assets, such as state schools with their playing fields, assembly halls and other community facilities, and their replacement by medium-density housing, is another sign of the times. In the eyes of the consolidationists these changes not only represent a rational response of the market, and a more efficient use of urban land and services, but a welcome reversal of the boredom and emptiness they associate with suburban sprawl.

I am not so sure. Go to the new estates and you will find rows of pseudo-Victorian terraces rising on pocket handkerchief allotments, invoking the architectural language of the trendy inner suburbs as though by doing so you could transplant the cappuccino culture in Kingswood Country. It is not that I want to conserve the cream-brick suburbs as an open-air museum of 1950s nostalgia, or that I think they represent a glorious period of Australian architecture. But in spite of what trendy planners may think, they – or rather the underlying forms of low-density, family housing – do represent a remarkably adaptable, durable and popular form of city living: one which I have tried to show, is deeply implanted in Australian consciousness as well as firmly inscribed on our urban form. The 'Great Australian Sprawl' is not just an unfortunate planning aberration. It is us.


4 Under the Southern Cross, London 1873, p 93.


7 Journeyings, p 74.


