The Garden Suburb in Sydney

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Former Home of Town Clerk of Sydney, Stanton Street, Haberfield, 1980.
The first two decades of this century witnessed an awakening public interest in the art and practice of Town Planning in Australia.

The experimental garden suburbs, the continuing controversy surrounding the planning of the Federal capital and the proclamation of the Local Government Act in 1919 were topics of public attention in New South Wales.

Sixty years later, two of the first garden suburb developments in Sydney: Haberfield and Dacey Gardens, are once again the subject of media attention with the recent public exhibition of conservation and redevelopment proposals. This article examines the origins of these two early planning experiments and the current pressures and proposals for their conservation.

Haberfield

In 1901, Richard Stanton initiated the purchase of Ramsay's Bush, a virtually undeveloped estate in the Municipality of Ashfield, just four miles west of the Sydney G.P.O.

A large tract of undeveloped land in a location so convenient to the city was unusual and Stanton seized the opportunity to realize his personal vision of a Model Suburb which he modestly described as the greatest suburb building venture in the Commonwealth.¹

At the low price of 110 pounds per acre he purchased a second estate in 1903 and progressively secured 200 adjacent acres, from the Ramsay family, by 1910.

In the absence of statutory town planning regulations Stanton developed the estate on his own principles of garden suburb design and management. He laid out large building blocks whose average dimensions included frontages of fifty feet and depths of one hundred and fifty feet, which was a substantial variation from the narrow width of terrace allotments.

Streets were sixty-six feet in width and usually incorporated shade trees on either side of the carriage-way. A sewerage system was laid for the entire estate, thus eliminating the need for night soil lanes so often decréd as receptacles for dirt and rubbish in the older suburbs.

The prospectus for Stanton's syndicate, the Haberfield Proprietary Company, emphasised the objective of founding a purely residential suburb. Industrial and business premises were excluded entirely from the first subdivision, so was any provision for public parks, playgrounds or open space; although prominently advertising the availability of these amenities elsewhere in the Municipality.² Stanton framed specific building
regulations by which he hoped to secure the uniformity of the class of buildings constructed on the estate. He personally entered covenants with land purchasers as to the height, style, minimum cost, building materials and setbacks which were permissible for each new house built on the estate. This use of covenants was not uncommon before the Local Government Act of 1919. They were designed to ensure compatible housing and the maintenance of amenity in the garden suburb and forbid speculative terrace development. In order to further secure Stanton's vision of Haberfield as a place of beautiful homes, the Company's project architect, J. Spencer-Stansfield, and Clerk of Works were located in an office and showroom on site; being always ready to show prospective purchasers the estate and its houses, and to explain the financial and legal arrangements which would secure Haberfield home ownership.

With an assembled team of one hundred skilled tradesmen, the houses of the Haberfield Estate were completed at a peak rate of six per month. The shift of the population back to the cities, after the failure of many small country selection settlements, meant skilled tradesmen were once more readily available and, with wages at a low 6d. an hour, a high level of artistry and craftsmanship could be achieved.
Materials of good and uniform quality were increasingly available. Dark Sydney bricks were used to construct cavity walls which, with the use of damp-proof courses, built solid and lasting cottages. Roofs were initially of Welsh slate and later employed the imported Marseilles terracotta tiles, with an exciting variety of ornamental ridge cappings and finials. Combined with a flowering of ornamental woodwork, the garden suburb of Haberfield emerged as a rich sample of Australian Federation style, building materials, techniques and ornamentation.

(Haberfield Proprietary Company's prospectus, c.1915)
J. Spencer-Stansfield, the English architect to whom the majority of Haberfield's homes are attributed, was a sensitive designer possessing imagination and innovation. He interpreted Stanton's garden suburb vision in cottages which were reminiscent of the Queen Anne style with simple asymmetry and broken gables, towers and turrets. An abundance of bay windows and timber-ornamented verandahs strongly related the houses to their garden settings. The Art Nouveau mood was evident in applied decoration, as motifs of entwined vegetation in leadlight windows, door furniture, ornamental plaster and fretted woodwork.

Although individually distinctive, (no two properties are of one design) the family resemblance of Haberfield's homes, in their professionally planned garden settings, made the estate a remarkable exercise in private planning and development for the period.
Stanton's prospective purchasers were the burgeoning middle classes liberated from the economic depression of the 1890's and responsive to the nascent spirit of the Federation years. Stanton was a prominent local advocate of Federation, and Haberfield, in its street names of Barton, Deakin and Forrest, its leadlight kookaburras and waratahs, and the plaster flannel flowers and lyrebirds which embellished its houses, reflected the optimistic nationalism of the Commonwealth's formative years.

The Australian Coat of Arms and the motto *Advance Australia* were emblazoned across the rough cast gable end-walls of pairs of semi-detached cottages, and the rising sun motif was frequently incorporated.

For city workers, Haberfield was conveniently accessible from Summer Hill railway station and was within thirty-two minutes of the G.P.O. by the electric tram along Ramsay Road which was in the centre of the estate. A ferry service also operated between the wharf, at Barton Avenue, and Circular Quay.

For a mere 10% deposit and a Haberfield Proprietary Company loan, at 5% per annum interest, Stanton offered either ready-built cottages, fitted with the buyer's own selection of fittings and finishes from the on-site showroom, or the opportunity to commission a home which was individually designed by the Company architect. The Company engaged an expert gardener to lay out the front gardens of each home and to supervise and tend the extensive street plantings of this *horticulturalists' paradise*. 4.

With the economies of scale which Stanton's method of development achieved, cottages could be made available at reasonable prices - 700 pounds to 2,500 pounds. The Company developed cottages all over the estate, simultaneously, so that no one section developed separately from another. By 1904, most streets were lit, kerbed and guttered and Stanton was soon able to report a 100% increase in the land values.

George A Taylor, foundation secretary of the Town Planning Institute of New South Wales, was swift to praise Stanton's entrepreneurial initiative, stating that ... (Haberfield) *provided striking evidence of the accruing profits from land properly planned, combined with good business management; (Richard Stanton was) practically the first (person) in Australia to make community housing with garden surroundings financially successful.* 5.

Taylor estimated, in 1913, the value of land in the Haberfield Estate to be 1,000 pounds per acre, and that Stanton's profits on land sales alone were in excess of 87,000 pounds, declaring that... *the purchaser is still winning the profits continually, as the freehold system allows him to reap the harvest of quickly accumulating values given by surrounding properties.* 6.
Stanton's interest in local government and planning had drawn him to the position of Alderman for the Summer Hill area on Ashfield Council for many years and to the office of Mayor in 1893-4 and again in 1906. Well to the forefront in real estate activities, he became President of the Real Estate Institute of New South Wales in 1923 and travelled abroad representing these interests. He had been elected a foundation councillor of the Town Planning Association of New South Wales, in 1913, when (Sir) John Sulman was elected as its first President. Stanton's early initiatives in the garden suburb style of development may well have been prompted by his personal and professional associations with John Sulman, whose appreciation of the British Garden City experiment is documented in his town planning lectures published in 1921.

The British Garden Cities and Town Planning Association set down in 1919 their definition of a garden city as a town designed for healthy living and industry of a size that makes possible a full measure of social life, but not larger; surrounded by a rural belt; the whole of the land being in public ownership or held in trust for the community.
Sulman's own definition indicated the conceptual adaption made in the Australian context stating that ... the special characteristics which differentiate (garden suburbs) from the ordinary town or suburb, are the allocation of special quarters or sites for each kind of building, the absence of congestion of dwellings and their better arrangement, the ample provision of parks, playgrounds and open spaces and planting with trees and grass of part of the width of the roads where not required for traffic and the provisions of greater opportunities for social intercourse. This concept of a garden suburb omitted the physical and economic independence and co-operative ownership inherent in the British garden city philosophy, but it indicated the ways in which properly planned suburban development could raise the quality of life in Australian cities.
In 1912, Sulman (in association with J.F. Hennessey and J.D. Fitzgerald) had prepared a plan for the model garden suburb of Dacey Gardens, the first public housing project in New South Wales. Some five miles south of the G.P.O., 273 acres were set aside to erect working men's cottages for moderate rentals amid model garden suburb conditions. The original suburb design was of major roads which radiated from the Nine Ways intersection at Anzac Parade and minor roads, in concentric rings, which were named after Australian explorers and those fallen in the Great War. Designed to extend to Pagewood, this garden village was never completed. However, over three hundred houses, six shops, a baby clinic, a public hall and a park were actually constructed and extensive street planting of trees and flowering shrubs was initiated in the hitherto barren sandy soil.

The housing on the estate was based on the competition winning design of S.G. Thorpe of the architectural firm of Peddle and Thorpe. These designs merged the Californian bungalow-style with that of the English cottage; producing numerous cottage and attached dwelling variations, in a late Federation theme. Cottage building blocks were designed to be forty five feet by one hundred and thirty three feet but were later reduced to a thirty five feet frontage. Initially construction was carried out using day labour but later the Housing Board undertook various contract arrangements none of which appear to have proven satisfactory. All dwellings were constructed of either brick or concrete with roofs of tile or slate. The dwellings were let on weekly tenancies at an average rent, in 1918, of 15/6d. A condition of the lease was the maintenance of individual gardens by their tenants, assisted by the Board's payment of all excess water rates and the provision of lawn mowers for the use of tenants. Encouraged by the Board's annual garden competition, one of the first local branches of the Horticultural Society of New South Wales was formed, in Dacey Gardens, in 1918 and the legacy of its public and private planting activities remains today.

In 1915 the suburb's population had reached one thousand and the Housing Board determined to introduce other features of garden suburbs in the old world such as a public hall for the recreation of the people... (and afforded) opportunities for the establishment by the residents of a co-operative store and vegetable garden. Strong community spirit was evident in support of these proposals, but by 1922, labour union and Municipal problems when allied with frequent Ministerial changes and policy alterations, had virtually brought an end to development at Dacey Gardens.
That year also marked the winding up of Stanton's Haberfield Proprietary Company. Purchasers with debts outstanding to Stanton obtained bank loans to pay out their interests and the care, control and management of the Garden Suburb became the responsibility of Ashfield Municipal Council. Other adjacent developers had adopted Stanton's garden suburb principles though not the practice of covenants, and the Dobroyd Point Estates of the Haymarket Permanent Land, Building and Investment Company reflect a similar unanimity of architectural style and layout.

Elsewhere in Australia, other experiments on model suburbs and villages emerged from the drawing boards. The Town Planning Company of Australia Ltd's Model Industrial suburb at Rosebery; the community-built suburb of the Voluntary Workers Association, the Matraville Soldiers settlement; Burley Griffin's plans for Leeton, Griffith and Castlecrag; and W. Scott Griffiths' many proposals for Newcastle suburbs and a garden city at Port Stephens, seemed to indicate that the future was assured for garden suburbs and city planning.

At the 1918 Town Planning Association Conference, Charles C. Reade, an English architect previously employed at Letchworth Garden City and whose services had been secured by the South Australian Government, presented his plans for the garden city of Mitcham in South Australia. W.N. Hurst, Assistant Secretary for Lands in Tasmania, exhibited plans for the Springfield Garden Suburb in Hobart. Walter Burley Griffin's controversial plan for Canberra was also on display and Dr. T. Price and his associates discussed their theories for the development of an industrial garden city at Darra, in Queensland.

Very few of these plans grew to fruition. Many, like Canberra, were reduced to shadows of their original concepts by the bureaucracy. Some, like Port Stephens, faded with their political patrons. Matraville Soldier settlement was steadily demolished as its occupants passed away. In the cases of Haberfield and Dacey Gardens, benign neglect retained the fabric of the suburbs but, by 1980, the original communities were almost gone and a new chapter of development opened. In October, 1980 the Housing Commission of New South Wales placed on public exhibition its redevelopment proposals for Dacey Gardens.

Dacey Gardens had been identified by the National Trust of Australia (N.S.W.) in August 1978. The Recorded listing proposal stated that:
Little altered since its construction, and apparently built as designed, the Dacy Garden Suburb gives a living indication of the ideas of forward thinking residential designers of the early part of this century, and is one of the few examples in this country of axial, City Beautiful layout.

While certainly not grand nor particularly distinguished, the suburb has a pleasant, unified atmosphere, the buildings being harmonious and well-placed, and the streets quiet and generally well detailed. The whole suburb should be listed for both its historical importance and its present character.

The Trust, while not seeking total preservation of the suburb recommended that any new development take into account the special architectural and planning qualities of the area.

The Housing Commission accepted the maintenance of these key elements, noting that although one block of the development was more cohesive, in architectural terms, the original design intent and setting could be lost without the preservation of adjacent streetscapes.

At the time of the Commission's investigations, some twenty seven of the original houses had already been demolished and a further thirty seven were vacant, boarded up, and awaiting demolition. All the original houses required repair and renovation of facilities and services. Estimates in July 1978 had fixed these costs at between approximately $22,000 and $32,000 per house.

The Housing Commission's redevelopment proposals attempted to strike a balance between the need to capitalise on the development potential of the site; to provide more public housing in the Eastern Suburbs; the suburb's historic value; the economic factors of rehabilitation; and the accoustical constraints imposed by the proximity of Sydney Airport.

The Commission's exhibited strategy is to renovate and retain approximately 170 of the original dwellings, with complementary infill buildings where necessary, and to redevelop the remaining 50% of the site with sympathetically designed medium density housing, arranged on a grid layout. Substantial street closures are proposed with grouped areas of public open space rather than large individual house blocks.
New buildings have been designed to complement the original low scale Federation dwellings. Architectural features such as articulated gable-ends and covered entry porches are incorporated in the designs which also echo the window proportions and roof pitches of the original cottages. The apparent scale of the new buildings is reduced by the expression of roof forms at first floor level and specific material and design aspects will assist sound attenuation.


The low density house-with-garden concept of Sulman's design are not part of the new redevelopment plans. The road closures and formal grid pattern of the location of new buildings will regale the planned vistas and views of open layout. However, the admirable sensitivity of infill buildings and the rehabilitation of half of the remaining suburb will provide evidence of the original model suburb of Dacey Gardens.

While design control and broad planning strategies are enforceable in an area which is predominantly in public ownership, such as Dacey Gardens, Haberfield's 1,500 houses in private ownership present a very different range of conservation issues.

Haberfield's physical location, north of Parramatta Road, coupled with the withdrawal of the electric tram services, had done much to isolate the suburb from the pressures of re-development experienced in Ashfield Municipality. The absence of a major shopping centre and the diverting attraction of the adjacent Leichhardt shopping nucleus had also limited the pressures for redevelopment. However, by the late 1970's, a significant population change was evident and modernising practices such as the complete replacement of original dark exterior brickwork with white and blonde brick (re-skimming); the removal of turned wooden verandah posts and timber bay windows and their replacement by aluminium corinthian columns and sliding windows; demolition and the subsequent construction of incompatible dwellings, were incrementally destroying the character of the suburb and the architectural integrity of its houses.

In 1978, the National Trust of Australia (N.S.W.) aware of these trends in Haberfield, Recorded two conservation areas suggesting that the
special qualities of the area be considered when new development was proposed and that appropriate planning measures be prepared to ensure the conservation of the area.

The Trust's listing proposal stated that Haberfield was recorded:

For its historic significance as a prototype of the familiar Australian suburb, and an early example of departure from the denser pattern of 19th century development, and for the visual and townscape significance of its fine individual houses, gardens and tree-planted streets. Most elements of Federation style domestic architecture and residential planning are to be found here, of high quality and in good condition. The southern area is distinguished by the Art Nouveau detailing of upper shop fronts and by two churches which form landmarks on the Dalhousie Street ridge.

At the time of the Trust's listing, Ashfield Municipal Council was in the process of preparing a draft planning scheme for certification by the Minister for Planning and Environment, and sought the advice of the newly formed Heritage Council of New South Wales as to appropriate planning strategies for the area.

The Heritage Council drafted guidelines for the conservation of the area to enable Ashfield Council to assist and guide development.14. These proposals were placed on simultaneous exhibition with the certified Ashfield Planning scheme, in January 1981, to facilitate public examination and comment on the conservation guidelines but were not incorporated as part of the Scheme, and were without any legally enforceable status.

These guidelines explained the importance of Haberfield and its heritage of Federation architecture and gave detailed advice as to house maintenance, designing extensions, additions, appropriate building materials, accommodation for vehicles and public landscaping.

To seek the comments of Haberfield residents on the conservation guidelines, the Heritage Council published an explanatory brochure in English and Italian which was distributed to every household in the conservation area. In May 1981 a seminar was held by the Heritage Council for Haberfield residents and Council officers and Alderman on the Conservation of Federation Houses. The seminar featured expert practical advice on repair and maintenance; the design of extensions and additions; the
maintenance of Federation gardens and of Federation interiors. A directory of Sydney-based services and suppliers, necessary for the repair and maintenance of Federation houses, was also prepared and distributed during the four month exhibition of the conservation guidelines.

In mid 1980 a group of residents from all parts of the suburb of Haberfield formed the Haberfield Association in response to the perceived threats to the architectural integrity of the suburb. The Association actively campaigned in support of the Heritage Council's conservation guidelines, conducting door-knock campaigns to explain the effects of the certified Ashfield Planning Scheme on the area and the conservation proposals and organised a variety of community events and newsletters to increase the local appreciation of the suburb's importance.

Whilst clearly recognising Haberfield's significance as an item of the State's environmental heritage, the Heritage Council has not moved to place an interim conservation order under the Heritage Act, 1977 over the suburb. Such an order would have the effect of transferring the responsibility for initial approval, on heritage grounds, of all development to the Heritage Council before any building or development application could be considered by Ashfield Municipal Council. Rather, the Heritage Council has encouraged the assumption of local responsibility for the suburb's conservation, as provided for in the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act, 1979. It has provided the detailed conservation guidelines, publications, exhibitions, seminars and on-site design advice to assist Ashfield Council and Haberfield residents to develop local expertise in handling conservation issues in Haberfield.

In response to the frequent requests of Federation home owners in Haberfield and elsewhere, an architectural handbook for Federation buildings is currently being prepared on behalf of the Heritage Council. It will contain drawings to scale of a variety of Federation architectural details - fences and gates, verandahs, chimneys, windows, doors, as well as design proposals for sympathetic car ports, garages and boathouses. The handbook is designed for general use and will assist council officers to illustrate the variety of appropriate design choices and to provide scale drawings in a format which can be readily copied and utilized by builders and home renovators.

In July 1981, Ashfield Council declared a moratorium on all development, not consistent with the Heritage Council's guidelines, in an attempt to prevent the incremental erosion of the quality of the suburb, this
moratorium awaited the co-operative preparation of a detailed, development control plan could provide Ashfield Council with the legally enforceable ways and means to actively promote the conservation of Haberfield.

The outcome of the Dacey Gardens redevelopment proposals and the Haberfield Conservation Guidelines will doubtless be of interest to communities and conservation practitioners who must plan for the future of similar urban areas: utilising a variety of political and planning mechanisms to achieve the conservation of Australia's planning heritage.

NOTES

2. Later, a small neighbourhood shop development was provided at the Ramsay Road tram stop.
6. ibid.
7. J. Sulman, An Introduction to Town Planning in Australia, n.p., 1921.
11. Report of the Housing Board to the Legislative Assembly, n.p., 1915. (Dacey Garden Suburb and Observatory Hill (The Rocks) resumed area.)
13. The Trust has since amended its conservation areas and classified the entire conservation area proposed by the Heritage Council in October, 1950, with minor additions.

Photographs by Lindy Kerr, for the Heritage Council of New South Wales.