

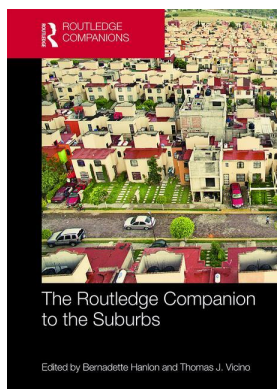
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### Suburbanization in Australia

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# Suburbanization in Australia

*Robert Freestone, Bill Randolph, and Simon Pinnegar*

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## Introduction

In *The Lucky Country*, Donald Horne (1964) characterized Australia as “the first suburban nation.” The label has stuck. Australia has been a deep-seated suburban society since the European take-over in the late eighteenth century. But the suburban environment in physical, demographic, economic, cultural, and environmental terms is neither homogenous nor static. It is increasingly a realm of difference and diversity, with emergent forms and challenges distinct from the legacies of the early colonial and early twentieth-century eras. Australian suburbs have often been approached in a simplistic way. While they may remain “the crucible of Australian life,” they are nonetheless “poorly understood and their dynamism is so often not appreciated” (Gleeson, 2002, p. 229). This chapter seeks to address a phenomenon at once both taken-for-granted and *terra incognita*. In so doing, we intersect with new historical and contemporary perspectives in suburban studies: approaching suburban history through a lens of longitudinal transformation and metropolitan integration (McManus and Ethington, 2007) and present day suburban forms as ongoing enterprises in place-making to optimize social requirements (Kirby and Modarres, 2010).

A suburb in the Australian context has no formal political or administrative status. The difference between city and suburb is not legally defined. Suburbs connote the great extent of suburban space outside Central Business Districts (CBDs), but many suburban local government entities are designated “cities” just to complicate things (O’Hanlon, 2005). There is an archetypal definition of the suburb as peripherally located, country as much as town, low-density, socially segregated, dominated by single-family dwellings and commuting. But this is increasingly contested when set within a dynamic city of shifting spatial, functional, and morphological characteristics (McManus and Ethington, 2007). Predominantly high value inner suburbs begin at the edge of the CBD; the outer suburbs define the periphery of the metropolitan footprint and accommodate an upwardly mobile suburban population; and in between, come the aging low-density middle ring or “third city” suburbs far from static and facing distinctive challenges (Randolph and Freestone, 2012). All three zones – albeit declining outward – are now punctuated by high-density and/or high-rise development zones, which have revalorized discarded brownfield land and in so doing complexified simple geometric models of socioeconomic and

life cycle change. But “a minority urban tradition has long existed beside the suburban majority” back to the flats, boarding houses, and hostels of the late nineteenth century (O’Hanlon, 2005, p. 187). That tradition has intensified, as discussed later, but the main focus in this chapter is on the traditional lower-density areas, enscribed decisively from the late nineteenth century.

Our analysis blends a review of recent literature<sup>1</sup> and original research. The first half of the chapter is contextual and synoptic. It examines the cultural and ideological notions of Australian suburbanism, the basic demographic parameters of suburbia, and its physical evolution. The second half selects four contemporary issues for closer examination: densification, social polarization, suburban regeneration, and metropolitan governance. The conclusion reflects on the distinctiveness of the Australian experience.

## Suburban hopes and fears

Leaving aside the romance of the outback, suburbia has always been a more realistically quintessential encapsulation of Australian living standards:

A portrait of the typical twentieth century Australian male would show not a heavily muscled sheep shearer, but a more rotund figure in t-shirt and stubby shorts, a can of beer in one hand and a garden hose in the other, maintaining the suburbanite’s long summer vigil to keep his front lawn green, or at least alive.

*(Davison, 1995, p. 40)*

At various junctures suburbia has stood positively for different ideals: egalitarianism, populism, independence, security, privacy, healthy living, and family values. Well into the 1970s, metropolitan planning policies enthusiastically privileged suburban development.

A countervailing tradition of anti-suburbanism has an equally long history (Gilbert, 1988). Cultivated by the intelligentsia and mirroring overseas critiques, suburbs have been portrayed by a succession of social critics as dull, dreary, unfulfilling, homogenous aesthetic wastelands. Before World War I, playwright Louis Esson wrote, “the suburban home must be destroyed . . . the suburban home is a blasphemy. It denies life . . . in the suburbs all is repression, stagnation, a moral morgue” (Esson, 1973, p. 73). After World War II, comedian Barry Humphries mocked the banality of suburbanism through his archetypally drab middle-class personae, Edna Everage. Architect Robin Boyd spoke for many peers in declaring “the Australian suburb has been consistent in its ignorance and emotional immaturity for nearly a century” (McKay et al., 1971, p. 8). There has thus been a deep ambivalence towards suburban development (Davison, 2006) and tension between the majority of the population and cultural elites (Flew, 2011).

But the nature of the Australian suburb has fundamentally changed since the 1960s, “as the form and density of many new housing developments has changed, as accommodation has become less affordable for younger people, and as Australian cities have become more cosmopolitan and diverse” (Hamnett and Maginn, 2015, p. 7). Multiple positionalities are evident. If anything, anti-suburban strains have become stronger; suburbs continue to be “mined for comic effect” (Turnbull, 2008, p. 15), and have latterly become the realm of crass, commercial, and conformist “bogans” (Nichols, 2011). Suburban design standards are seen as inferior to urban hot spots, and in many other ways the terms of reference have changed for the worse. Suburban life is critiqued for its unsustainable dependence on automobiles, profligate consumption of land, distancing of people from social and economic opportunities, cultural conservatism, and high energy consumption.

Nevertheless, suburban life endures as a populist dream for many latter-day advocates, politicians, and commentators. Hugh Stretton in *Ideas for Australian Cities* (1970, p. 20) made an articulate and influential defense of suburbanism: “You don’t have to be a mindless conformist to choose suburban life.” Patrick Troy’s (2004) suburbs represent a deeply ingrained and sensible housing preference that have become a target for neoliberal hegemony, as governments engage in a “race for the bottom” to minimize public expenditures on maintaining quality urban environments and infrastructure. Brendan Gleeson’s (2006a) endorsement is expressed through similar fears and warns that despite their innate resilience, the “heartlands” of Australian cities are under siege from powerful forces intent on impoverishing the public realm.

The battleground has been scaled up and become more complex. According to Davison (2012, p. 27), the suburb is now “as wasteful and dangerous as it once seemed safe and boring.” Dodson (2016, p. 26) captures the challenges posed by broader cultural and political attitudes to planning policies:

Australian suburbia now finds itself in a place of ambiguity. No longer is Australian suburbia assured of its position as the promised land of the post-World War II Australian imagination where opportunity beckons for households holding aspirations of a better life through homeownership. The contemporary social, cultural, and political complexity, the interwoven contradictions and combinations of opportunity and vulnerability, the environmental costs and the infrastructure needs of Australian suburbia now come together as a ‘problem’ in national life.

Suburbs – far from being a classic “place apart” – find themselves at the epicenter of debates about the future of Australian cities, which are seen as increasingly divided “between young and old, rich and poor, homeowners and renters, the outer suburbs and the inner-city” (Kelly and Donegan, 2015, p. 184). They face pressures from all fronts – population growth, changing household size and composition, densification and renewal, social and economic polarization, and changing mobilities (Randolph, 2004).

## Suburban cities

Most Australian city dwellers continue to live at relatively low suburban densities. The scale of Australian suburbanization was evident within a century of white settlement. In 1899, American statistician Adna Weber not only observed “the most remarkable concentration of population” in Australian cities (p. 138) but that its “movement towards the suburbs” was outpacing the rest of the world, including the United States. He included figures for Sydney in the 1880s showing that, while the growth of the central city had stalled, the suburbs more than doubled their population to a ratio of 2.5:1. This was all the more noteworthy given the relatively low population density of the center. He endorsed the “rise of the suburbs” as furnishing “the solid basis of a hope that the evils of city life, so far as they result from overcrowding, may be in large part removed” (Weber, 1899, p. 475).

The suburban condition has persisted, a compelling illustration of powerful centrifugal forces of path dependency. Recent demographic research by Gordon et al. (2015) confirms Australia’s status as “a suburban nation” based on a transit modal share analysis. State and territory capital cities are on average 85 percent suburban (see Table 6.1). Moreover, this conclusion is reinforced by the distribution of recent population growth, with a substantial majority in suburban neighborhoods, mostly in automobile-oriented commuter suburbs.

Table 6.1 Population structure of Australian capital cities

City	Population (2011, '000s)	Active cores	Transit suburbs	Auto Suburbs	Exurbs	Total suburban
<b>Sydney</b>	4,392	16%	14%	66%	4%	84%
<b>Melbourne</b>	4,000	14%	6%	73%	7%	86%
<b>Brisbane</b>	2,066	10%	8%	71%	1%	90%
<b>Perth</b>	1,729	13%	9%	71%	7%	87%
<b>Adelaide</b>	1,225	9%	13%	72%	7%	91%
<b>Canberra</b>	392	18%	7%	74%	0%	82%
<b>Hobart</b>	212	19%	13%	39%	29%	71%
<b>Darwin</b>	121	8%	0%	74%	18%	92%

Source: Based on Gordon et al. (2015)

Table 6.2 Comparative population densities of Australian cities

City	Weighted population density (persons per hectare)
<b>Brisbane</b>	25
<b>Melbourne</b>	32
<b>Sydney</b>	52
<b>Vancouver</b>	65
<b>Montreal</b>	71
<b>London</b>	97

Source: Spencer et al. (2015)

A complementary analysis by Spencer et al. (2015) shows that, benchmarked against three representative global cities, Australian cities have relatively lower proportions of their total populations living in mid-density areas (between 60 and 200 persons per hectare) and instead feature pockets of high-density against a pervasive background of low-density (see Table 6.2). Moreover, related work suggests that the average population densities of Australian cities have in fact been falling at about 0.8 percent per annum since the early 1990s (Roberts, 2007).

## Evolution

Davison (1995, p. 52) wrote that, “European Australia was born urban and quickly grew suburban.” Indeed, suburbia has reigned supreme across successive phases of capitalist economic development from the early colonial era. The predominant urban form has been promoted by numerous interlocking factors. Australia was constructed willfully but wrongly as a *terra nullius* of wide-open spaces, and the social and geographic marginalization of Indigenous Australians into fringe camps or inner-city ghettos was institutionalized early (Johnson, 2015). European settlement came when the suburb was emerging as a solution to urban ills, with public health professionals concerned by the link between density and ill health; in these terms Australia was “the farthest suburb of Britain” (Davison, 1995, p. 52). British imperialism promoted the bungalow abroad while the limitations of early building technology impeded higher rise development. Housing

development was fueled by the desire for outright homeownership of detached dwellings. After early privations, the trajectory of development was inexorably toward a relatively high standard of living, and investment in suburban housing became a critical economic development driver (Butlin, 1964). Provision of community infrastructure by colonial then state (from 1901) governments significantly lowered the threshold of development costs. In time, rules and regulations around minimum space and other building standards locked in a distinctly suburban morphology, making departures at least difficult and at worst illegal.

The first suburbs were created in Sydney as the state granted large allotments for the colonial elite. As the town established itself, the immediately surrounding residential quarters were developed from the 1830s as closely packed neighborhoods of attached terrace and row housing. Frost (1991) differentiates Sydney (along with Brisbane and Hobart) from later capitals as exemplifying a land intensive urbanism more typical of the older new world cities of the Atlantic coast and distinct from the expansive metropolitan forms that would follow in, for example, the later settled Adelaide and Perth. Terraces were the dominant housing form in Sydney and Melbourne for the inner suburbs from the 1850s to 1890s, becoming increasingly ornate into the late Victorian era. They were built incrementally by owner-builder landlords and the subdivision of lands further out was similarly spawned by small-scale speculative behavior.

The cities began to become truly suburban in the 1870s, with the physical separation of home and work for the majority of workers bridged only by train and tram commuting. The first services were provided by private enterprise before soon falling into public ownership. The Government Statistician of Victoria – himself a land speculator – provides a picture of greater Melbourne in the 1890s with a radius of 10 miles with the “suburban portions . . . scattered – gardens, grounds, and paddocks, some of large size, being attached to most residences” and with “room for much more building, without crowding” and “extensive suburban villages . . . springing up outside the metropolitan limits” (Hayter, 1892, p. 546). The enduring norm was the “quarter acre block” (over 1000 square meters), more rhetorical than reality, with 800–900 square meters more typical of suburban blocks to the mid-twentieth century.

From the early twentieth century the garden city movement stood against inner-city apartment and tenement development, endorsing a more manicured, pre-planned version of the suburban idyll, but it was the ordinary, do-it-yourself suburb that proliferated. Extensions and electrification of metropolitan railway systems further promoted suburban expansion, but from the 1950s road building and increased car ownership saw growth “eventually outrun” public transport systems to create far-flung cities (Frost and Dingle, 1995, p. 20). The “national hobby” of land speculation continued to fuel broad acre subdivisions (Sandercock, 1979), but this form of growth was reined in during the post-war period with the implementation of statutory regional and local planning.

State governments assisted with low-cost loan schemes from the early 1900s, while the federal government launched a War Service Homes program in the late 1910s. From the 1930s, states also progressively introduced public housing schemes, and an historic financial agreement with the federal government in 1945 formed the basis for development of extensive suburban estates into the 1970s (Troy, 2012). Houses were usually constructed of cheap materials and their public tenants, predominantly working-class families, were precariously dependent upon manufacturing employment. A distinctive suburban form emerged, dubbed “Holdenist suburbia” after the locally designed car mass-produced by General Motors that was the lifeline for these fringe communities from the 1950s (Winter and Bryson, 1998). Many suburban pioneers roughed it in “do-it-yourself” dwellings alongside the growing diffusion of the “cream brick frontier” (Davison et al., 1995). The bleak, often treeless fringe suburbs sparked corrective aesthetic, environmental, and social responses from the 1960s, with calls for more innovative site planning as cluster or

courtyard homes, environmentally sensitive design, more compact and denser neighborhoods, and better integration with transport and employment planning. The public housing estates were the subjects of revitalization programs in the 1990s involving exterior refurbishment, internal upgrades, the “de-radburnization” of layouts, and also privatization.

At least three broad macro physical trends are evident into the twenty-first century. First is the shrinking size of average suburban blocks. Older, more generous allotments promoted self-sufficiency in food production, water and waste management, and during World War II, an estimated 48 percent of suburban households produced some sort of food (Gaynor, 2006). In the mid-1990s, the average site area of new houses in Australian capital cities was around 800 square meters; by the early 2000s, it was down to about 700 square meters; in the 2010s, it has fallen further. In Melbourne, the most common block size now is approximately 650 square meters with even smaller blocks of 180–200 square meters common (Charting Transport, 2016). The backyard as an iconic feature of traditional Australian suburban spaces, supporting biodiversity, food production, and social interaction has been shrunk or effectively eliminated in new suburban estates (Hall, 2010).

Second, and not unrelatedly, the average new Australian house has increased from a cottage of around 100 square meters in the early 1900s to a 245 square meters house just over a century later, despite average household size steadily decreasing. Most of the increase is attributable to larger living spaces and in the number and size of bedrooms (McMullan and Fuller, 2015). The “gigantic proportions” of such houses are said to make them some of the biggest new suburban houses in the world (Johnson, 2015, p. 124); this heralded the phenomenon of the “McMansion.”

Third, the rough and ready owner-built suburb gave way almost entirely to master-planned communities as the dominant suburban form. These estates were very different from post-war “cookie-cutter” and “Holdenist” subdivisions of suburban “battlers.” Here, community is a commodity spruiking a range of sales features: lifestyle, safety, security, infrastructure, and amenity. These Australian adaptations of American-style “privatopias” have attracted a significant niche academic literature (Dowling et al., 2010), with assessments ranging across the spectrum from pariah to panacea (Johnson, 2010). While influenced by the new urbanism, these are neither neo-traditional in design nor physically gated, the latter a less pervasive phenomenon mostly found in lifestyle and tourism regions such as the Gold Coast.

## Contemporary issues

Is there an average Australian suburb? One recent attempt to measure that against national norms identified Oak Park in Melbourne’s northwestern suburbs as the most statistically typical, with an average deviation of less than 4 percent across a range of social indicators: with a household size of 2.54 persons, median age of 36, 29.4 percent born overseas, and mortgages and tertiary qualifications almost identical to the Australian averages of 35 percent and 22 percent, respectively (Id, 2013). The wider reality is heterogeneity. Studies of residential differentiation abound since the 1970s. Working with a basket of indicators, Healy and Birrell’s (2006) cross-sectional analysis of the residential population of Melbourne produced five suburban types: high amenity near-city suburbs dating from the pre-1940s; transitional near-city suburbs undergoing gentrification (see Table 6.1); Holdenist low-amenity suburbs built predominantly in the 1950s and 1960s with increasing concentrations of social disadvantage; middle-class suburbia as legacy of a dynamic suburban fringe; and outer suburbia defining the current suburban frontier. Even further out could be added peri-urban suburbs, the exurban rural-residential zone latterly coming under increasing growth and environmental pressures (McKenzie, 1997).

This typology is evident in other large Australian cities, emphasizing a range of housing sub-markets with their own distinctive social ecology and policy implications. Forces of physical, social, economic, and environmental change since the 1970s have produced uneven outcomes and challenges. These include economic restructuring and loss of jobs; social isolation; lack of public transport and other community services; exposure to rising costs of both mortgages and fuel (Dodson and Sipe, 2008); places now defined by minority, ethnic or racial identities (Turner, 2008); loss of biodiversity and urban heat islands; and obesity and climate change concerns. At the same time residents in the more vulnerable communities resist stigmatization and can display considerable resourcefulness in improving their quality of life (Kirby and Modarres, 2010; Johnson et al., 2016).

In the following sections, we focus on four trends and challenges confronting many Australian suburbs: densification through medium and high-rise development, social polarization intensifying the unevenness of life chances, the renewal of suburban fabric through spontaneous owner interventions, and the problem of effective governance.

## Densification

Attempts to densify Australia's suburbs have been ongoing since at least the 1980s, with metropolitan planning policies increasingly promoting market-driven higher density development (Bunker, 2014). Growing pressure on land and the mounting costs of providing infrastructure for low-density development challenged economic and environmental sustainability. Early attempts by Australian land use planners to encourage greater suburban densities under the mantle of "urban consolidation" took the form of lowering block sizes in fringe development, splitting large existing blocks into two titles ("dual occupancy"), and permitting secondary dwellings – so-called "granny flats."

But the real driver of greater densification in Australian suburbs is the transformation wrought by the passage of world-leading strata title legislation in the early 1960s that allowed sale of individual apartments (Randolph and Easthope, 2014). This sparked a rapid process of redevelopment, especially in Sydney, as local councils, pushed by local development interests, rezoned land with the capacity for higher density with a focus on the edges of suburban town centers near railway stations. The suburban apartment market mushroomed as detached suburban home sites were redeveloped into three or four story apartments, typified as "gun-barrel" blocks because of their layout, stretching back from narrow street frontages. Elsewhere, suburban densification has been more gradual, mainly reflecting differential pressures of land value. Melbourne has rapidly caught up in the early twenty-first century (Buxton and Tieman, 2005), although medium-density development had been a feature of suburban renewal since the 1950s (Lewis, 1999). Densification in other cities has been less pronounced until more recently. In Perth, for example, suburban densification has been modest and undertaken primarily by redevelopment of separate house blocks into single-story attached home units and villa developments, typically with six new homes on the one lot (Bunker and Troy, 2015).

However, the promotion of higher urban densities has now reached new levels. Stimulated in large part by investors from both home and overseas, the transition of the development industry from one that delivered a predominantly low-density single house product on the suburban fringe to one where multi-unit housing provides 50 percent of all housing supply has been transformative. Figure 6.1 charts this change, which has overtaken many suburbs in the last decade, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne. The question is how far and quickly this process will progress, and exactly what impact it will have on community structures. Large-scale developments in established communities are frequently contested. Critically, they also test the capacity of existing and new infrastructure – hard and soft – to support rapidly growing suburban populations.



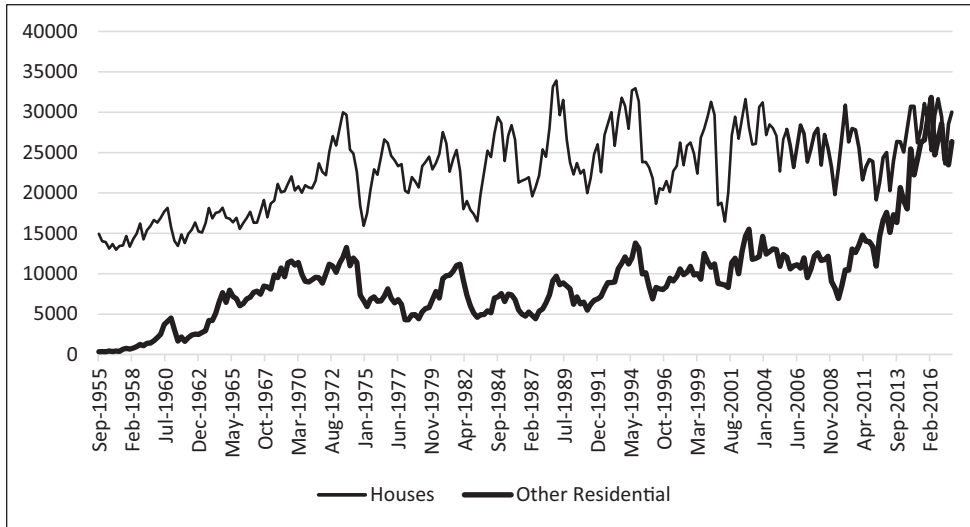


Figure 6.1 Australia quarterly private sector dwelling units commenced, 1955–2016

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016)  
Series 8731.0 Building Approvals Table 10

## Socioeconomic disadvantage

Systemic spatial variations in service provision, social dysfunction, and poverty have been recognized by urban academic researchers and policymakers for decades (Stimson, 1982). These have been exacerbated through major changes over the last 30 years. The collapse of manufacturing industry and the decline of transport infrastructure hubs (docks and rail) from the 1970s led to widespread job losses in inner-city industrial cores (Stimson, 1982; Troy, 1981). The corollary was the outwards shift in new jobs, often based on servicing the growing suburban population, as well as out-of-town office employment and administration, and road-based warehousing and logistics. Urban development, driven by land speculation and heavy public investment in road transport, accelerated the process. However, within a generation, this picture has radically changed. In line with trends elsewhere (Katz and Bradley, 2013), the inner cities have been revitalized as new knowledge-based industries have centralized in parallel with widespread gentrification. Much of this has been spurred by government planning policies and major public investment, especially in large-scale revitalization projects that have pump-primed renewal in older industrial and dockside locations.

The resulting spatial “inversion” of urban socioeconomic fortunes has been profound (Ehrenhalt, 2012; Randolph, 2017). While there has been long-standing concern over the social position of Australian suburban development, in large part a result of major post-war “Holdenist” building led by state housing commissions (Winter and Bryson, 1998), the outcome of 30 years of socio-spatial restructuring has meant that Australian inner-city suburbs no longer feature as places of disadvantage, beyond a few residual public housing estates. Instead, the weight of disadvantage has shifted to the middle and outer suburbs (Randolph and Tice, 2016). Figure 6.2 illustrates the changing location of the 15 percent most disadvantaged census tracts in Melbourne between 1986 and 2011, as measured by the Australian Bureau of Statistics Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage. The resulting shift in the locus of disadvantage, in part driven by the arrival

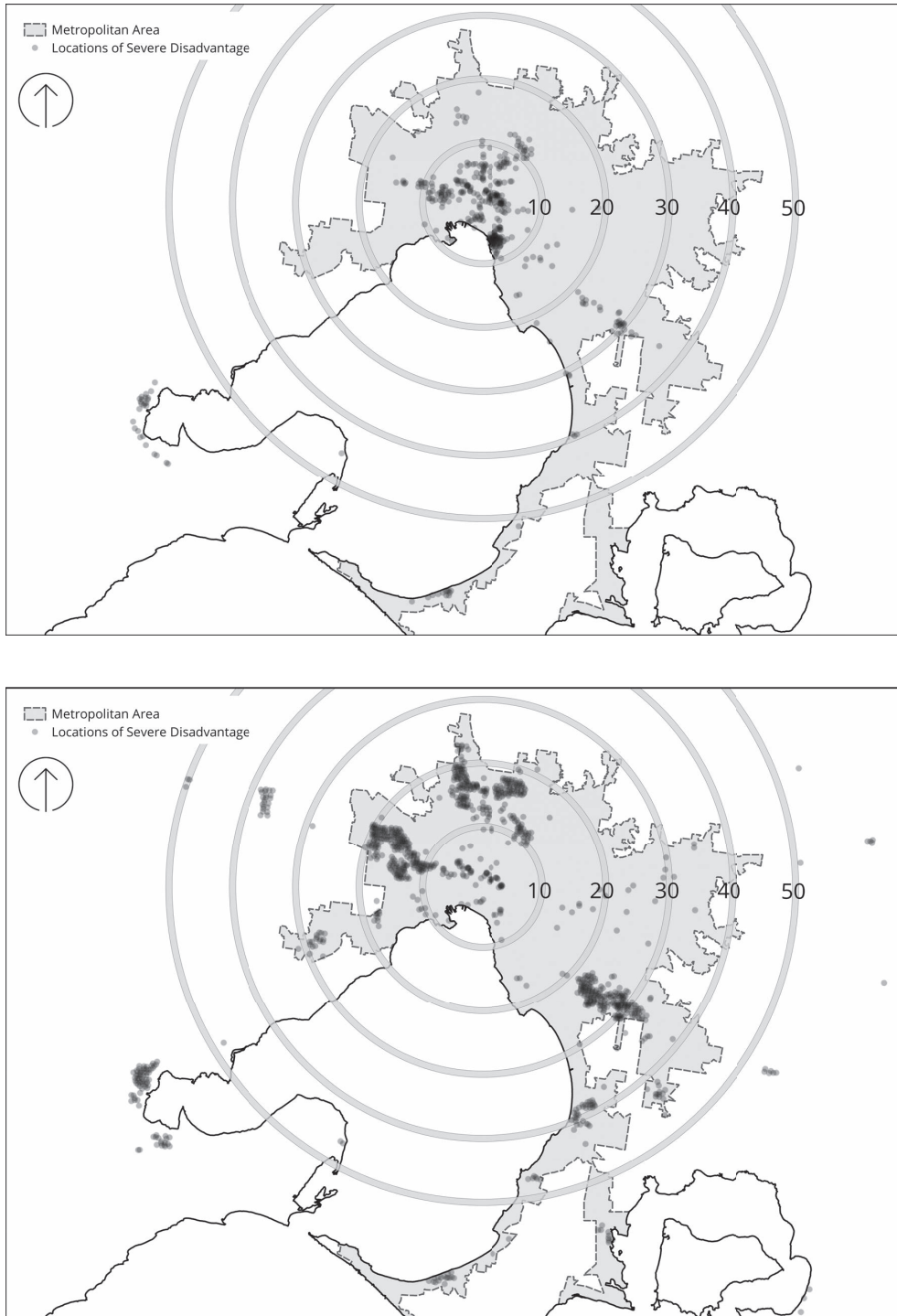


Figure 6.2 Spatial distribution of disadvantage in Melbourne, 1986 (top) and 2011 (below)  
Source: Randolph and Tice (2016)

of new immigrant communities, has significant implications for the delivery of urban services, infrastructure, and broader urban policy (Dodson, 2016).

Badcock (1997) was one of the first to point out that the 1980s was a pivotal moment when peaks of urban social disadvantage had begun to relocate away from the inner-city. Randolph (2004) and Baum et al. (2005) both echoed this observation, noting the emergence of a distinct band of social disadvantage in what had become middle suburbia, focused on concentrations of lower value privately rented flats and apartments around suburban town centers. More recently, Pawson et al. (2015) have documented this shift more extensively and identified both housing and labor market drivers. But it is not all bad news. Gleeson's (2006a) perceptive commentary on the changing fortunes of the Australian suburban "heartlands" acknowledges shifting fortunes but robust communities working toward a better life.

### Suburban renewal

With Australia's cities continuing to experience strong population growth over the last two decades, strategic planning aspirations to promote the compact city through infill and urban renewal have demanded a reworked engagement with suburbs. Urban consolidation can be tracked through the relative split of new development provided through land release in greenfield fringe locations and through additions in existing built-up areas. Housing market and policy settings have colluded to encourage residential development into the latter, with Sydney's infill ratio rarely falling below 70 (existing areas): 30 (new release) since the early 1980s. Australia's other cities are further behind in their drive to higher densities; in Melbourne's most recent plan, the target split moving forward to 2050 is 65:35.

However, "infill" is an inadequate term for capturing the myriad drivers and built form outcomes reshaping existing suburbs, and it is instructive to break down current suburban renewal activity into three parallel strands. The first, and of primary interest in a strategic planning context, relates either to brownfield redevelopment around activity centers, typically transit nodes, or opportunities for large-scale, multi-unit development in rezoned priority precincts. In recent instances, residents themselves have taken a combined and coordinated approach into negotiations with developers to maximize their sales prices. The second strand captures the relatively few, but high profile, public housing estate renewal projects delivered through complex public-private partnership arrangements. Such projects also evince a systematic approach to suburban renewal underpinned by extracting the benefits of densification through the reworking of government-owned land.

Suburban renewal is also taking place to an equal if not greater degree through a third category: more diffuse and less strategic spontaneous, incremental activity. The distinctive characteristics of the post-World War II build-out of Australian suburbs, where independent owner-builders contributed a significant proportion of housing stock, are still conducive to change through individually led, small-scale activity. These inherent characteristics are reinforced by dwelling obsolescence as those neighborhoods age and upward shifting land values. Such conditions are highly favorable to more incremental forms of renewal, such as "knock-down rebuild," the one-for-one replacement of single-family homes on an individual lot (Pinnegar et al., 2015; Pinnegar et al., 2018). A desire to foster a more coordinated policy focus for these incremental processes is captured in the concept of "greyfield" regeneration to enable benefits of scale through more community-oriented locally driven arrangements (Newton and Glackin, 2014).

Research into housing choice and constraint in the face of affordability concerns has also thrown an increased spotlight on the "missing middle" in terms of the limited diversity of

housing types (Kelly, 2011). Addressing a lack of mid-sized options between single detached dwelling and high-density units – whether in the form of townhouses, terraces or innovative low-rise schemes – has been pitched as one means of improving affordable housing supply and choice. In late 2016, the New South Wales (NSW) Government ran a *Missing Middle Design Competition*, encouraging architects to find innovative solutions for low-rise, medium-density housing.

## Metropolitan governance

Integral to the above three issues shaping Australia's contemporary suburban landscapes are questions of urban governance, and the ongoing challenges posed by reconciling complex drivers and outcomes in cities experiencing high levels of growth. While Australian cities can demonstrate a long trajectory of strategic planning at the metropolitan scale (Bunker and Searle, 2009; Freestone, 2010), implementation of those plans has been more challenging (Dodson, 2009; Hamnett and Freestone, 2018). In part, this reflects the fiscal imbalance between the three tiers of government (commonwealth, state/territory, local) and in particular reconciling state government attempts to offer citywide direction across a fragmented jigsaw of under-resourced local authorities.

While there have been continually evolving formal, informal, and voluntary attempts to institute stronger spatial arrangements at the appropriate scale (for example, through council amalgamations or entities such as the Regional Organizations of Councils [ROCs] in NSW), effective governance arrangements at the subregional scale have been elusive. Thus, outside the strategic gaze focused upon the CBD and major knowledge-based centers, much of suburbia has played a rather subservient role in recent decades. Councils are frequently treated as receptacles for top-down strategic pronouncements – merely to accept their fair share of intensified housing supply targets, for example – rather than as genuine partners in the “global, liveable” narratives that infuse current discourse. The result is impaired capacity to implement major infrastructure initiatives and tackle fundamental issues such as social polarization (Tomlinson and Spiller, 2018).

The clarion call for a rethink on Australian metropolitan governance has been heard, and recent developments in both Sydney and Melbourne are instructive, not least in terms of holding out the prospect for communities to gain a stronger “voice for their collective will” (Spiller, 2014, p. 361). The establishment of the Greater Sydney Commission in 2015 through an Act of Parliament hands over responsibilities for strategic planning at the metropolitan and subregional level to an independent statutory authority. The *Greater Sydney Region Plan* rearticulates Sydney's global city narrative beyond the CBD and global economic corridor and envisages a metropolis of three cities (Greater Sydney Commission, 2018). The “Western Parkland City” marks a significant re-engagement with large tracts of the city's outer ring suburbs, as well as a more networked understanding of future growth around a new airport. It is instructive that one of Australia's first “city deals” (a policy import in name at least from the UK) is for Western Sydney, and it signals the most recent foray of Commonwealth Government interest in encouraging an enhanced and collaborative commitment to infrastructure provision and productivity in the major cities. The development of five *District Plans* – subregional documents with the task of linking citywide strategic issues to more local implementation – as one of the first deliverables of the new authority also holds out the prospect for better strategic engagement with suburban Sydney.

Melbourne's restructured metropolitan governance arrangements have taken a different tack. The Victorian capital shares Sydney's need to break down the preeminence of its historic city center, particularly in terms of jobs density, and encourage a more polycentric urban form. However, rather than establishing a metropolitan body, overall responsibility for the city's new strategic framework, *Plan Melbourne 2017–2050*, is retained in a restructured Department of Environment, Land, Water, and Planning (DELWP), but makes it clear the importance and close

synergies with other agencies (Goodman, 2018). Within DELWP, a new ministerial portfolio for suburban development has been established. This will be responsible for creating five-year plans focused on jobs, services, and infrastructure for each of Melbourne's six metropolitan regions.

## Conclusion

Many of the themes and trends explored here will resonate internationally but there remains a distinctive Australian suburbanism. Despite low urban densities, state and territory planning systems progressively put in place after World War II have ensured that unbridled scatteration has not resulted. Land release, growth management, development control, and infrastructure planning inject a significant public oversight of land development. The legacy of the traditional twentieth-century suburb is “relative design diversity,” as owners have customized their living quarters to changing needs and contemporary organic renewal processes perpetuate the variegated landscape (Gleeson, 2006b, p. 12). Influences from abroad abound but their impacts have been adapted through cultural filters. While master-planned estates are an increasingly mainstream business model, few have adopted “the picket-fence purity of North American New Urbanism, or the theme park whimsy of its niche spin-offs” (Gleeson, 2006b, p. 12).

This chapter has reviewed philosophical, physical, policy, and related attributes of Australian suburbanisation, highlighting different historical and contemporary attitudes to suburban culture, the increasing heterogeneity of suburban development, and a number of issues posing future challenges, particularly for policymakers. Kellett (2011, p. 266) argues that “the morphology of Australian cities appears to be at a crucial point in its history” with increasing densification. Yet, “despite continuing attempts to promote a more compact and cosmopolitan form, detached living in suburban settings remains the preferred housing type and setting of most Australians” (Burton, 2015, p. 504). In this sense, the future trajectory of Australian cities still appears to be “decidedly suburban” (Gordon et al., 2015, p. 3).

## Note

1 Our thanks to Caitlin Buckle for her initial assistance in pulling together some key recent works.

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