

*Speculation, the picturesque and settler mentality:*

*The image of Western Australian urbanism*

12. ‘Australian Urbanism doesn’t exist.’ Discuss this idea in the context of other design theories encountered in the course, cultural ideas of dwelling space, \* and regional location.<sup>1</sup>

This essay will show that Australian Urbanism does exist by unpacking some of the historical prerequisites that nurture the predominant characteristic of urbanism regionally in Perth – that is one of vast and dispersed suburbanisation. Primarily it will identify how cultural preferences in regard to suburban settlement are intrinsically connected to private ownership and processes of land speculation that were established upon British settlement in 1829. It will identify the parallels between this speculative attitude and the aesthetic device of the picturesque in relation to the commercial dilution of the Garden City movement when imported into the local context. This dilution will be explored through the domestic scale of the home as a way to discuss cultural and political ideas of individualism – a central component of Australian urbanism.

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<sup>1</sup> For clarity of discussion I would like to substitute the term ‘dwelling space’ for that of ‘settlement space’ to avoid placing the essay within a phenomenological Heideggerian framework, which is beyond the scope of this essay.

Furthermore, I would like to advocate that ‘settlement space’ is an appropriate term to describe the morphology of Perth over the past 180 years.

As prominent Australian architectural historian Conrad Hamann points out, the suburbs have long been the “anvil” upon which dogmatic critics have teased out the straight jacketed views of suburbia as a homogenised, tedious, conservative and culturally devoid wasteland.<sup>2</sup> Cultural criticisms in this vein have come to be neatly wrapped up in adoption of terms like sprawl as the overarching definition for the “flat featureless frontier”<sup>3</sup> of Richard Weller’s *Boomtown 2050*. Conversely, it was the very public voice of modernist architect and critic Robin Boyd’s account of suburban ‘Featurism’ – defined as the pervasive and “contrived variety...of different tastes in decorative external styling,”<sup>4</sup> the “promiscuous plagiarism”<sup>5</sup> of exotic romanticism and historicist architectural elements, that fuelled much of the suburban disdain in post war Australia.

Polemics aside, the low density detached suburban bungalow remains, according to the preeminent suburban historian Graeme Davison a “remarkably adaptable, durable and popular form of city living. . . one which is deeply implanted in Australian consciousness.”<sup>6</sup> This is evidenced here in Perth by the State Government’s backflip on their anti ‘sprawl’ targets set out in *Directions 2031* with each new subdivision on the fringe.<sup>7</sup> (Alkimos being the latest, to which I will return).

These new suburban landscapes that emerge on Perth’s peripheral edges are an extension of historical forces and cultural values defined by the city’s colonial foundations. Casting the die for an ideal speculative city, the Swan River Colony’s foundation as a free enterprise has defined the urban character of the stretched metropolis that has been largely propelled by the production and consumption of the detached suburban dwelling. This is a foundational narrative that separates Perth from the other Australian capitals, of which as a majority, were begun as convict penal colonies.<sup>8</sup> This distinction makes Perth anomalous to the other Australian capitals that, in the words of Davison were “born urban and quickly grew suburban.”<sup>9</sup> And indeed, from a global perspective Reyner Banham’s concession in 1971 that Perth is the only city that could ever potentially rival his beloved Los Angeles as “the greatest City-on-the-Shore in the world,” is

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<sup>2</sup> Conrad Hamann, *Cities of Hope* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993): 2.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Weller, *Boomtown 2050: Scenarios for a Rapidly Growing City* (Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2009), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness* (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2012), 178.

<sup>5</sup> Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, 174.

<sup>6</sup> Graeme Davison, “The great Australian sprawl,” *Historic Environment* 13, no.1 (1997): 16

<sup>7</sup> Ian Alexander and Shane Greive, “Metropolitan Development in Perth: Strategic Planning or Strategic Spin,” in *Planning Perspectives from Western Australia: a reader in theory and practice*, ed., Ian Alexander, Shane Greive and David Hedgecock (Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2010): 64.

<sup>8</sup> Hislop, “Sketches in the sand,” 49.

<sup>9</sup> Davison, “The Past and Future of The Australian Suburb,” 63.

testament to the sheer linear spread and dispersed character.<sup>10</sup> Such spread, as Kate Hislop has investigated, is partly an outcome of the settlers “conceptualising of space in response to Western Australia’s natural environment” colliding with the emergent suburban sensibilities that had begun to take hold in Britain.<sup>11</sup> Before unpacking some of these sensibilities I would like to identify some processes of colonial land entitlement. This will be useful to establish ideas about individualism in relation to the home that have been a driving force in the popularity of the suburbs.

The Swan River Colony’s commercial success was heavily reliant on the domestic housing stock, reflected in the early dominance and low dispersed density of the suburban scale. The obsession with the domestic was perpetuated by a number of processes, many of which surround issues of ownership that unfolded during the early years of settlement. Shane Burke describes the “haphazard ‘entitlement to select phase’ of land allocation” that was implemented by the Colonial Office from 1829 by which land was made available to any settler who was deemed capable of ‘location improvements.’<sup>12</sup> Importantly, improvements were deemed to have been made upon the erection of a house and fence, and only then would the land be given over into full ownership to the settler.<sup>13</sup> This loose availability of land rapidly caused problems in the fledgling colony that was faced with a serious labour shortage. As Karl Marx illustrates in *Das Kapital*, 300 workers who arrived in the Swan River Colony with the “unhappy” Mr Thomas Peel quickly abandoned his venture to instigate cultivation and production of their own land.<sup>14</sup>

The conditions to force them to sell their labour did not yet exist in such a vast and open environment, and the colonial office was encouraged by capital interests to introduce acts of enclosure in 1839 to alleviate this flight of labour and resume land that was deemed to not to have been adequately improved.<sup>15</sup> Erection of houses, fences and other objects of demarcation in response to the threat of enclosure became the devices that would determine a settler’s freedom, assets and rights to land settlement. These acts of demarcation, as sociologist John Holloway

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<sup>10</sup> Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971) 19.

<sup>11</sup> Katherine Jane Hislop, “Sketches in the sand: speculative thought and the aesthetic foundations of the Swan River Colony 1826-1839,” (PhD thesis, University of Western Australia, 2011), 250.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume 1* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887): 543.

<sup>13</sup> Hislop, “Sketches in the sand,” 237.

<sup>14</sup> Shane Burke, “Fences, furrows, ditches and settlement policy in Australia: Rapid landscape change in the Swan River Colony.” *History Australia* 4, no. 1 (2007): 3.9.

<sup>15</sup> Burke, “Fences, furrows, ditches,” 3.10.

explains, simultaneously become the mechanism in which freedom is reconciled with domination.

<sup>16</sup> The placing of boundaries, the partitioning of life and the protection of one's assets becomes a crucial tool for the imperial agenda of colonisation, and in turn began to solidify the home as a central symbol of conservatism whilst paradoxically becoming the expression of individual freedoms.

How these boundaries were set, and how the houses were built in tandem with this schema of 'location improvement' indicates various aesthetic implications that profoundly influenced the emergence of the suburban landscape. It is commonly established that the earliest suburban allotments in Australia's capital cities were a response to the over-crowded and perceived insalubriousness of the London slum. What Davison describes as the "suburban logic of avoidance," was manifestly adopted by the fledgling colonies in order to forge out a "refuge" from the disease and vice seen as inherent in dense cities.<sup>17</sup> Along with the antidotal moral and hygienic narrative, this suburban logic brought with it particular aesthetic implications and ways of imagining and making domestic space. Land speculation was married to the visual representations of space for commercial objectives – the Colony was promoted, (through description, both painterly and literary) to prospective immigrants based on its speculative potential for house ownership and the entitlement to land that accompanied it.<sup>18</sup>

Succinctly described as the "reflex of the refugee, the art of the suburbs,"<sup>19</sup> by prominent architectural historian Vincent Scully, this aesthetic response was characterised by constructed visions of nature that shaped the colonial ways of seeing the landscape. Capability Brown's English gardens and the paintings of Claude Lorrain among other romantic painters of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, had a profound influence on the earliest Australian colonial painters like John Glover and Fredrick Garling's earliest depictions of the newly settled colonies.<sup>20</sup> Serving to obscure the settlements youth through artistic continuity to the traditions of the British Empire, picturesque conventions enabled settlers to identify, organise and take possession of the landscape according

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<sup>16</sup> John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today* (Chicago: Pluto Press, 2002): 206.

<sup>17</sup> Graeme Davison, "The Past and Future of the Australian Suburb," *Australian Planner* 31, no.2 (1993): 64.

<sup>18</sup> Hislop, "Sketches in the sand," 237.

<sup>19</sup> Vincent Scully, *Modern Architecture: The Architecture of Democracy* (New York: George Braziller, 2001): 15.

<sup>20</sup> Julia Alessandrini, "Picturesque Fremantle: Early colonial paintings and the long reach of Britain's aesthetic devide," *Studies in Western Australian History*, no.31 (2016): 44.

to a view into which buildings could be placed “as if landscape feature rather than an urban infrastructure.”<sup>21</sup>

Architecturally speaking these aesthetic and picturesque principals came to be codified and categorised in the cottage forms and gardens found in pattern books by designers such as John Claudius Loudon.<sup>22</sup> The early settlers, who brought with them from England Loudon’s pattern books and stylistic *Encyclopaedias*, adopted houses set back on the lot and surrounded by garden. This rural ‘cottage *ornée*’ style<sup>23</sup> not only embodied the romantic view of the suburban allotment as a moralising form but, as John Macarthur has pointed out, made domestic architecture a universally applicable and portable platform for the dissemination of a utopian vision - one that was ultimately manifest in the typically working and middle class suburbs of the newly founded colonies.<sup>24</sup>

This idea of an individual’s entitlement to private ownership upon domestication, and its collision with cottage form set the groundwork for the continual exploitation by private interests that shaped the suburban morphology in the proceeding century. Of particular interest here is the adoption and commercial dilution of Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City model when applied in the Australian context because it demonstrates how the engrained attitude to private ownership and its intersection with the picturesque had become a defining factor of Australian urbanism. Stipulated in his 1902 book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, Howard conceived a reformist model of urbanism, capable of the restructuring of society into one that self-governs, severed from capitalist modes of production through mechanisms of public land ownership.<sup>25</sup> But as Robert Freestone has observed, leasehold tenure – the public ownership of all land, as advocated by Howard, was historically functioning on shaky ground in speculative driven colonial settlement like Perth where the urban problems of congestion and low living standards were far less serious and therefore less conducive to reform than in industrial England.<sup>26</sup> Howard’s ideals were rapidly transformed into the lifestyle proffered in the highly lucrative, speculative market of the garden suburb.

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<sup>21</sup> John Macarthur, *The Picturesque: architecture, disgust and other irregularities* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007): 150.

<sup>22</sup> John Macarthur, “Colonies at Home: Loudon’s *Encyclopaedia*, and the architecture of forming the self,” *Architectural Research Quarterly* 3, no.3 (1999): 250.

<sup>23</sup> D.C Markey, “Pioneer Perth,” in *Western Landscapes*, ed., Joseph Gentilli (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1979): 353.

<sup>24</sup> John Macarthur, “Colonies at Home,” 255.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 87.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Freestone, “The Garden City Idea in Australia.” *Australian Geographical Studies* 20 (1982): 45.

The earliest adaptations of Howard's model in Australia during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century immediately did away with allusions to municipal socialism, land reform and leasehold tenures.<sup>27</sup> Replacing these socio-political imperatives were those more focused on the cultivation of individual morality and the visual coherence of the suburban street. The logic afforded by the consistent garden and cottage typology has been described by Patrick Troy - a senior figure in Australian urban studies - as the "stage" where the "easygoing" Australian was entitled to enjoy a "free and open built environment."<sup>28</sup> Troy is tapping into language that began to evolve as governmental wartime rhetoric. Begun by soon to be Prime Minister 'Billy' Hughes in 1908 - "a house without a garden is just house; it is not a home,"<sup>29</sup> and famously reiterated, by Robert Menzies in his 'Forgotten People' radio broadcast of 1942, in which he aimed to inspire the middle class to identify their political interest with domestic space of the home, that "little piece of earth with a house and garden which is ours."<sup>30</sup> The significance of these appeals to the domestic 'everyday' indicate, a shift away from the home as a productive entity, symbolic of subsistence and economic resilience, to a symbol of everyday life *outside* of the workplace.

In her semiotic breakdown of Menzies' speech, Judith Brett identifies how the Prime Minister very effectively attached the negative symbols of alienation and modern life to the labour movement's insistence on describing the individual in abstract social, economic and political terms.<sup>31</sup> Menzies' rhetoric effectively extended home ownership ambitions to the working class by positioning the home and garden as the individual's and familial refuge from capitalism's pervasive transformations of existence as the place "to which we can withdraw."<sup>32</sup> This clever political manoeuvre shifted working class aspirations into those of the middle class space of refuge, which was located between the city and the country; between the alienating factory and agrarian communality - this ideological position found its physical expression in the garden suburb.

The positioning of the home as a symbol of individualism had now come to be entirely collected together with paradoxes of freedom to land and cultivation of conservative policy. Despite Menzies' conservative agenda, it is important to note the positive aspects of home ownership that

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<sup>27</sup> Freestone, "The Garden City Idea," 34.

<sup>28</sup> Patrick Troy, "Saving our cities with suburbs." *Griffith REVIEW*, no.2 (2003): 83.

<sup>29</sup> William Morris Hughes, quoted in Robert Freestone, "The Garden City Idea in Australia." *Australian Geographical Studies* 20 (1982): 34.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Menzies. "The Forgotten People." 22 May 1942, <http://www.liberals.net/theforgottenpeople.htm>

<sup>31</sup> Judith Brett, "Menzies' Forgotten People." *Meanjin* 43, no. 2 (1984): 261

<sup>32</sup> Menzies, "The Forgotten People."

Troy, Davison and others encourage us not to forget. Among these is the ability to express individuality through modification of home and garden, choice of location, opportunity to accumulate wealth and high standards of living.<sup>33</sup> Notions of individualism highlight the complexities implicit in the suburban way of life which has come to embody the basic contradiction at the heart of consumer society. As prominent urban geographer David Harvey argues, the suburb functions at a “scale of action at which the individual loses control of the social conditions of existence in the face of forces mobilized through the capitalist production process,”<sup>34</sup> but simultaneously, as was espoused by Menzies and current conservative politics, provides an opportunity for a high quality of life and individual comfort and expression in the face of this hegemony.

We can identify this paradox of mass individualism in the earliest colonial adoption of Loudon’s pattern books in 1829, through to their current contemporary expression. Browsing the catalogue of any home building developer working in Perth currently reveals the range of home types, elevational variants and internal finishes deployed in suburban fringe developments like Alkimos Beach. The faux stone wall or patterned wall paper a customer can choose has come to represent the largest piece of resistance to the homogenising production process on the outskirts of the city. The ‘Manhattan,’ with its “New York style Front Elevation,”<sup>35</sup> is what distinguishes an owner from the owner in the ‘Milano’ project home across the road. These names are meant merely to evoke the connotations of a style, but could be used to reflect on the changing position of the suburb in our culture. British derived names, once more popular in the 70s, 80s and 90s, yet seldom used now, attempt to capture notions of heritage, monarchy and authority, with popular names today being derived from American and highly urbanised European centres.<sup>36</sup> More than just revealing a move away from traditional notions of the British garden suburb, they suggest an evolving attitude to suburban settlement and ‘dwelling’ space.

These innuendos toward higher density housing and bustling urbanity, according to Troy, are linked to the emergence of an advanced stage of capitalism that sought to reduce public

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<sup>33</sup> Steven Bourassa, Alistair Greig and Patrick Troy, “The limits of housing policy: Home ownership in Australia.” *Housing Studies* 10, no.1 (1995): 2.

<sup>34</sup> David Harvey, *The Urban Experience*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989): 122.

<sup>35</sup> My Homes WA, accessed November 3, 2016. <http://www.myhomeswa.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Manhattan-Pearl.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> Kim Dovey, “Dreams on Display,” in *Beasts of Suburbia* ed. Sally Ferber, Chris Healy and Chris McAuliffe, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994), 142.

expenditure on provision of service.<sup>37</sup> This shift and increasing processes of deinstitutionalisation, are wrapped up in the advent of an advanced stage of capitalist economy in the 1970s, one in which the flexible production of a diverse range of varied goods replaced the mass production of standardised goods and monopolistic corporate dominance of the Menzies post war era.<sup>38</sup>

Consequently the suburbs were further spread, becoming a series of diversified lifestyle options, scattered across the vast terrain of the deinstitutionalised suburban realm. Much of this disparity can be glimpsed in the advertising languages of new subdivisions that espouse a schizoid combination of “thriving” density next to the “pristine” natural landscape.<sup>39</sup> The spectre of the picturesque garden suburb still exists in these campaigns, but is being diluted with urban insinuations – lattes are replacing refuge. At Alkimos we can observe this pseudo-urbane mutation in the image myth of urbanity that peppers the catalogue – rendered illustrations of vibrant commercially sustained communal living juxtaposed next to the kids playing cricket on the freely accessible beach. By remodelling the original suburban ideal, developers, hand in hand with the government, are substantiating their increase in profits through the decreasing size of allotments, gardens and the civic realm.<sup>40</sup>

The existence of Western Australian urbanism is characterised by the opposing notions of freedom and control. These impulses are mediated by the construction of lifestyles, shaped by the aspirations of an emerging middle class and the agenda of speculative investment. Just as romantic visions of a picturesque cottage and garden initiated the linear extension of the city, evolving advertising and marketing regimes have begun to restructure not only the new developments on the fringes of the city, but also the emerging landscape of infill that is challenging the older modes of settlement. Attention should be paid to the symbolic constructs embedded within these new developments so that architects and planners can successfully engage with the swing away from our traditional garden suburb models to this new illusionary urbanism.

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<sup>37</sup> Troy, “Saving our cities with suburbs,” 85.

<sup>38</sup> David Gartner, “Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Post-Fordism?,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 39, no.1, (1998): 121.

<sup>39</sup> Lendlease and Landcorp, *Alkimos Beach Brochure*, [http://communities.lendlease.com/alkimos-beach/-/media/communities/au/alkimos-beach/documents/alkimosbeach\\_projectbrochure\\_v5.ashx](http://communities.lendlease.com/alkimos-beach/-/media/communities/au/alkimos-beach/documents/alkimosbeach_projectbrochure_v5.ashx)

<sup>40</sup> Troy, “Saving our cities with suburbs,” 85.



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