

Towards a New Australian Suburbanism

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A Focus on Suburbia

This brief presentation is in two parts. The first reflects critically on new urbanism. The second part then sketches a possible alternative based upon a renewed and transformed version of the traditional approach to Australian suburban development.

Given the time available, the focus of the presentation is suburbia and especially its growth frontiers. Of course, the question of inner urban redevelopment can't be brushed aside. Given the consolidation targets now firmly embedded in most contemporary metro strategies in Australia, including the new SEQ Plan, the quality of redevelopment is likely to become the greatest concern of urbanists generally.

But, equally, neither in this new scenario should the issues surrounding new fringe development be cast aside or submerged in the new tide of interest flowing towards redevelopment. Many Australian households will continue to desire, and need, detached dwellings for at least part of their housing careers. Given expected population growth, this will mean that we can't avoid Greenfield expansion.

But that's a negative cast. I think if we do it very well, new Greenfield growth can contribute to, not undermine, the national project of achieving a more sustainable development path. That will require, however, that we recast how we do Greenfield development, meaning that we need to speed up the process of improvement that has already been underway in this sector for a few decades now.

It will also mean, departing from some of the more flawed changes that have been manifest in new urban developments in recent years. Two practices stand out for reform:

1. the tendency still for suburban growth to be small scale, ad hoc increments at the urban fringe; and
2. the rise of new forms of social exclusion in fringe development, marked by gating, 'designing out' of non-residents and by the absence of public realm.

I'll record some remarks on these issues as I outline broadly some imperatives for sustainable suburbanism.

Will new urbanism be the pathway to sustainable Greenfield development? I'm not convinced. Let me begin my remarks by explaining why.

New Urbanism the Saviour?

I'm not an expert on new urbanism. I think that's largely because I'm a social scientist –geographer/planner – and not a designer or architect. The point is telling for me. I think in the planning profession and within the other non design focused urban professions, we have largely only felt the echoes of new urbanism. I see it largely as a design based approach to urban improvement, but which also makes broader claims on the intellectual and practical territory inhabited by the spatial professions, notably planning.

'Smart growth' is an allied reform movement or ideal that has been the megaphone for new urbanism which has carried its message beyond the design professions and into other urban management domains, including planning. New urbanism and smart growth seem to enjoy a close embrace and seem often indistinguishable as urban reform projects.

Given mounting global concern about the threat to sustainability, it's understandable that the broad claims of these twin movements meet with widespread interest and even approval. Segments of the development industries in many western countries have embraced them with enthusiasm. Why shouldn't we all plunge into this rapidly flowing reform movement and go with the flow? Let me record a few points of scepticism.

First a typical codification of new urbanist principles:

- ❖ Walkability
- ❖ Connectivity
- ❖ Mixed-Use & Diversity
- ❖ Mixed Housing
- ❖ Quality Architecture & Urban Design
- ❖ Traditional Neighbourhood Structure
- ❖ Increased Density
- ❖ Smart Transportation
- ❖ Sustainability
- ❖ Quality Of Life

These sorts of principles are largely those cherished by traditional planning in Australia, evident for example in many decades of development and planning practice in Canberra. They may carry a somewhat more contemporised feel, and a stronger explicit concern with ecological sustainability, but the directions are largely already well charted in Australia. Much old ground has been claimed anew by new urbanism. One example is

the long embedded concern in Australian planning for urban containment – the localisation of journeys – which we received from British thinkers.

What this betrays for me is the strong North American roots and preoccupations of new urbanism. In that country, these basic planning principles are widely regarded as novel, even contentious: hence, the ‘new’ in new urbanism.

In general, we have to be very careful about the origins of any new urban reform movement and consider whether the context in which it emerges is relevant to our own. Do the concerns and the remedies translate meaningfully to the Australian city with its unique form and structure, and institutional histories? If we aren’t careful about this we can do enormous harm by importing new principles and practices that lack relevance to our own challenges, and which may undermine whatever gains we have already made.

New urbanism and smart growth oppose ‘sprawl’; a very emotive term and a powerful rallying cry for the movement. But sprawl is a specifically North American term, much misused in Australia, which correctly defined means **unregulated low density urban development**. This is a big problem in the US, and new urbanists and smart growthers are right to tackle this beast.

But this is not our problem, and hasn’t been for half a century. We have development control systems, regional & local infrastructure planning mechanisms and public transport networks that American new urbanists would dream of. Imperfect, perhaps, but they are there.

The problem here is not so much getting the basic mechanisms for smart growth in place, but to make more effective the ones that we have and to recast them in the light of new scientific understandings of sustainability pressures. We have been slow to apply new ecological insights to planning legislation and practice. Our development assessment systems remain largely innocent of ecological impacts, though this situation is beginning to change – witness the new sustainability assessment system in New South Wales’ planning system, BASIX.

We already possess many of the forms of urban infrastructure sought by new urbanists, but, again, we have allowed them to suffer obsolescence. We have, by comparison with Canada and the USA, massive metropolitan rail networks. But comparatively, hardly anyone catches our trains. More people catch Toronto's tiny network than use Brisbane’s extensive system.

Why? It wasn't always so, and it's not only because of the rise of the motor car. This is surely a consequence of the growing mismatch between our older transport networks and the spatial structures of our activity generating land uses. Structural mismatches are amenable to correction but I can't see this analysis in New Urbanism.

Urban structure concerns the fundamental patterning of, and relationships between, land use, urban activity and infrastructure. New urbanism with its strong design focus, and limited recourse to the spatial social sciences that examine urban structure, is rather silent as far as I can tell on this issue. It is much more concerned with issues of urban form: the density, extent and appearance of the urban fabric.

Our strong, though often episodic, record of metropolitan strategy making in Australia is evidence of the stronger traditional focus on urban structure here, relative to the US experience. Where these structurally focused strategies have worked well, new suburban development has not sprawled but crawled in tandem with the infrastructure that tied them into the metropolitan system and which provided the social facilities locally when they were needed. This prevented waste, including unnecessary travel and costly development of isolated, ad hoc infrastructure.

Corridor planning along defined transport networks and urban service trunks – popular in previous decades – was a key example of how our urban policy system functioned at times in a way that was hardly reminiscent of sprawl. The problem in Australia is not to get in place the basic tools to guide development sustainably, but to improve and make more effective those that we have and to mobilise the political will to do so.

The new SEQ Regional Plan, and the process that saw it produced in a timely, well debated manner, is an example of the sort of political will needed to make our planning systems effective. This process had broad support, including from both major poles of party politics; something rarely evident in the US brawl against sprawl.

A final note of doubt about new urbanism. I'm concerned that it is often translated into development practice in a reductionist manner. Much of the ecological and social principles get cast aside with the surviving emphasis on design coming to the fore. Frequently, along with a design focus, a very singular emphasis on 'community' remains, as a sort of surviving residual form of new urbanism's social inclusion principles.

In the US, we often see the practised form of new urbanism producing designer communities: projects where it is promised that social capital can

be conjured from the drawing board. New urbanism invites a return to the happy urban village that was humanity's haven before it was swept aside by modernisation and its urban depredations.

Just as Sea-Monkeys could be willed into life by adding water to a strange powdery substance in a mail-order packet, now community is willed into life by pouring money, lots of it, into nostalgic combinations of bricks and mortar. Millions have answered the call and now live in *Truman Show* stage sets across North America, though even Hollywood detected the underlying unease about the 'cookie-cutter' communities created by new urbanism.

Australia's master-planned estates have not adopted the picket-fence purity of North American new urbanism or the theme-park whimsy of its niche spin-offs, such as the Walt Disney Company's traditional (circa 1996) mid-western township Celebration.

This may reflect Michael Pusey's observation that Australians 'typically have cooler feelings about community' than Americans and view the ideal in aesthetic rather than moral terms. 'Community' is a morally charged notion in the United States. In Australia, the master-planners have acted on much more pragmatic instincts, sensing that lifestyle, not necessarily nostalgia, is the quality of community sought by the local discerning classes. It comes down to provision of high-quality facilities and outdoor amenity from the moment the lots are sold off.

I'm concerned about variants of this very North American approach to new urbanism being imported into Australian development practice, especially the tendency to heavy nostalgia and conformism in the US. These features have no discernible cultural or intellectual foundations in Australia.

The tendency to inflict design conformity in the name of new urbanist principles is, I think, anathema to the Australian experience. Importantly, design conformism works powerfully in North American suburbia which has been based on an underlying social conformism, not evident, at least yet, in Australia.

This audience knows very well, that in North America 'suburb' is direct code for white and middle class. 'Urban' means poor, non white and dysfunctional. Many commentators have pointed to the way in which social segregation is a driving force in American suburbanisation. Fear fuelled sprawl has proved costly in many ways. I'm not convinced that New Urbanism tackles this tendency head on and may even, in practice, 'innocently' abet its continuation.

There is the danger that a new conformism will be inflicted on Australian suburban development in the name of new urbanism that could, paradoxically, produce socio-economic segregation in our cities.

Traditionally, our suburbs have been marked by relative design diversity, even chaos. As our great urban analysts, Patrick Troy and Hugh Stretton, have pointed out, this has reflected our willingness to allow people to pursue their own housing projects quietly, on their own terms and in their own time in the suburbs. The price was scruffiness, and the regular mystification of visitors from Northern Europe. But the rewards were great, allowing individual expression across the classes and nourishing in a subtle, but powerful way, our democracy. Many angers, born here and overseas, died quiet deaths in the suburbs, consumed by the messy preoccupations of daily life in these mixed up, scruffy landscapes.

Of course, there were many problems, including the poor timing and coordination of services and a lack of housing choice. Masterplanning has helped us to address this failing, but we must be aware of the dangers of **overprogramming** our new suburbs. Forcing conformism on domestic landscapes, ultimately invites the human need for individuation to emerge at some other level. In North America, individuation seems to re-emerge at the community level, reflected in gating and other communal forms of exclusion that try to assert difference at the social scale by keeping defined groups out.

This sort of individuation should be resisted in Australia. The drift in cities to what one observer in the UK calls an ‘archipelago of enclaves’ raises a real threat to society. The health of liberal democracy relies upon a strong public domain and upon a minimum amount of everyday social mixing. Civil society cannot thrive or even survive if we turn our cities into landscapes of incivility.

This is a foundational premise for democracy that both major ends of the political spectrum have understood in Australia historically. Canberra, for example, was the urban project where the ideal was pursued most vigorously, largely by conservative administrations, particularly that of Menzies. We seem to have forgotten about this democratic keystone in recent years. I’m not sure that new urbanism has helped us to remain aware of it.

It is no exaggeration to say that the development industry have a key role to play in the fostering of democracy in Australia. Like any important economic sector that directly influences the process of community creation,

it can work with or it can work against the long term health of liberal democracy.

The era of the white shoe is surely over. The developers I speak to, and with whom my centre works collaboratively, are all committed in various ways to sustainability and mindful of their legacy. The impact of development on democracy is surely one key legacy.

Having raised a few doubts about new urbanism, at least in the Australian context, what principles should consider for future suburban development in Australia? A few points to close.

Three Principles for a New Australian Suburbanism?

First, I do not dismiss new urbanism and its many valuable principles. I just wish to see these concerns relocated within the long established trajectory of Australian urban policy which has dealt with our unique urban challenges.

Openness and Diversity. Much contemporary Greenfield development is for the exclusive end of the market and produces exclusive, sometimes exclusionary communities. This often, understandably, reflects the soaring cost of raw land. But we can't allow land costs to drive exclusion.

We need to turn the wheel back a little to find ways of producing more socially balanced suburban development. The land costs are a problem for this goal. The task will therefore involve governments and the community sector in helping the developers to find ways of making new suburban communities more representative of our rich social diversity.

Developers can themselves help the process by rejecting exclusionary design practices, and by making sure their new communities include public domains rather than exclusive community title domains. Some developers, such as Delfin Lend Lease, are finding ways to deliver sustainable public domain without recourse to community title by working in partnership with local government.

Larger Release Scales. To aid the goal of social inclusion, new suburban development should be conducted at large **new town** like scales, rather than through our more traditional, ad hoc, incremental approach to fringe expansion. Only development at this scale is likely to really reap the benefits of masterplanning and provide the security and financing needed to support social inclusion initiatives and hard wired sustainability features (e.g. water independent design).

Large scale developments invite public sector partnership, as well as multiple private partnerships, to secure the interlocking goals of profit, sustainability and inclusion. We have plenty of precedents for this. And Sydney seems to be returning to the model with its new suburban development corporations.

Democratic design not Conformism. Leaving most of the design to householders has been a great feature of our national suburban democracy. We should continue this and allow people to busy themselves with home design and making that matches their own needs and tastes, even if we don't share these tastes. The dangers of externally imposed conformism seem apparent.

But we need to constrain those practices which are ecologically harmful and provide rigorous sustainability standards for all dwellings, including higher density development. None of this sentences us to conformism: rainwater tanks may need to be obligatory but households can be left to make their own decisions about many aspects of energy and water use if this use is well framed by sustainability provisions.

To counter the drift to conformism, we may need to temper down a little, 'deprogram', some of the more heavy handed approaches that have been encouraged by masterplanning and new urbanism.

But let's not lose the gains we have made, especially via masterplanning. Design of public realm should be thoughtful and need strong external input from developers and public agencies. But again, there is surely a role for residents and local communities in helping with this process. Not everything has to be painted and posted by the time the early blocks are released.

Conclusion: In Praise of Scruffiness

In summary, new urbanism has admirable preoccupations. But their **thoughtless** translation to Australia needs to be resisted. Australia is a nation of marvellous suburbs with a rich urban institutional history. We face serious sustainability threats but we need to meet them by first better understanding the unique structures and qualities of our cities before we import ideas from other contexts. Let's be open, let's debate carefully, what sort of new urbanism **we** want.

We might be surprised by the answers that would emerge. We might decide that the scruffy democratic Aussie suburb wasn't so bad after all. We might want our children to experience some of its roughshod splendours.