

Essay:

Once were Westies

Author:

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As a guest on a western Sydney community radio program recently, I noted the ease with which the young radio jocks – each born and raised in the city’s west – referred to themselves as ‘Westies’. They transformed the pejorative term into one of identity. The Westie was a creation of the 1960s and ’70s as young, working families were encouraged westward into the newly built, rather austere public and private housing subdivisions on Sydney’s urban fringe. It was a term of division and derision, and became shorthand for a population considered lowbrow, coarse and lacking education and cultural refinement.

The phrase became iconic after Michael Thornhill’s 1977 social realist film *The FJ Holden*. The classic Westie was a male of Anglo-Celtic origin who lived in the vast, homogenous flatlands west of the city. The checked flannelette shirt symbolised his attire and vandalism, cheap drink and hotted-up cars his behaviour. ‘Westie chicks’ had a secondary status – much like the ‘surfie chicks’ of this misogynistic era – they were considered tougher, albeit more dimwitted than their beachside sisters and more prone to teen pregnancies. Westie became a rhetorical device to designate the ‘other’ Sydney: spatially, culturally and economically different from the more prosperous and privileged Sydneysiders of the north and east.

The expression, at least in the pejorative sense, is less frequently heard these days. Although not entirely obsolete, today’s Westie must compete linguistically with an expanding dictionary of derisive terms for the increasingly diverse ‘other’ that now characterises Sydney’s west: ‘Westie-Bogan’, FOB (fresh-off-the-boat), Leb, ‘Westie Arse Kicking Hoff’ (following the Cronulla riots), ‘Hoon’, ‘Westie Skank’ (when ‘Westie chick’ just doesn’t cut it) and Boon. To this lexicon of derision, the interchangeable terms ‘Aspirationals’, ‘CUBS’ (cashed-up Bogans) and (until recently) ‘Howard’s Battlers’ can probably be added.

Aspirationals came to prominence in the late 1990s to describe a seemingly new constituency of voters living on the urban fringes who appeared to have clawed their way out of the *real* battler class and into big cars, big houses and even bigger mortgages. In reality, as the one-time leader of federal Labor, Mark Latham, both promulgated and epitomised, Sydney’s Aspirationals are mostly grown-up Westies who have taken advantage of dual incomes, easy finance and housing-based wealth.

The term has come to incorporate others, including a mix of blue-collar contractors/service providers who live on the fringes of other Australian cities.

In keeping with its pejorative nuance, University of Wollongong academic John Robinson notes that the term resonates more with outsiders. Viewed as self-interested and materialistic, Aspirationals are reckoned to hold a more selfish set of values and morés than other Australians. As one of Robinson's interviewees from Sydney's privileged eastern suburbs puts it: 'They are people who want to be middle-class but are not. They are into credit and consumption, living in suburbs they can't afford to be in and in houses they can't afford, with lots of goods they can't afford to have.'

It is this moral undertone that gives the term its pejorative nuance. The concentration of Aspirationals within new master-planned estates located in marginal electorates on the metropolitan fringes gives them political punch. As a constituency, Aspirationals have been wooed by the two major political parties since the 2001 federal election. As Sean Scalmer notes, 'representing the Aspirationals can be a powerful ideological claim'. Media commentators suggest that, like their Westie predecessors, Aspirationals are not particularly smart, easily 'gulled' and 'duped' into misunderstanding their real class interests. The swing to Labor in outer urban electorates in the 2007 federal election undermines this suggestion, however.

This essay takes a fresh look at the Aspirationals by examining the rise of their preferred residential haunt: the master-planned estate (MPE). These estates have a holistic approach to planning, designing and developing a given project site and are the dominant form of contemporary green-field development in Australia's major cities. Developed essentially for middle-income households in conventionally lower-income regions like Sydney's urban fringe, the estates are a cultural artefact which encapsulates the fears, ambitions and way of life of the Aspirational constituency. The MPE promotes a particular ideological form of community, one which is used to buttress residents' social, physical and economic security in a regions which must increasingly contend with cultural diversity, the challenges of multiculturalism, decaying public housing estates, the fear of crime and a variable housing market.

When I was a kid in the 1970s, I lived in a large, three-storey house on the crest of Black Charlie's Hill in Bankstown. The house had been built by the previous owners, a German couple, in the style of a Swiss chalet, complete with a functioning drawbridge at the entrance. The local media called it 'Bankstown Castle'; it was peculiar enough to ostracise any kid from stubbornly uncurious classmates. The property had sweeping views of the Blue Mountains to the west and Sydney's suburbs to the north. It was surrounded by other large double-brick, master-built homes favourably positioned to capture the views. With his own large brick pile just around the corner, this was Paul Keating territory. Jostling on the flatlands below was a 1970s subdivision of modest brick-veneer project homes on one side, and older fibro

bungalows on the other. As a frontier suburb, Bankstown was one of the first fibro municipalities; the young Keating spent his formative years living in one. By 1950, some 90 per cent of new dwellings were made of fibro, a material that quickly came to symbolise cheap, low-income housing. As Barry Humphries suggests in the foreword to Charles Pickett's *The Fibro Frontier*, the austerity material also hinted of dubious moral behaviour: 'There was another kind of house which one never found in the "nice" suburbs. The fibro house – it was rarely called a home ... From the beginning, fibro was always a little "déclassé" and though it is true that there were whole streets of houses in this material ... these were not "nice" homes ... Broken toys littered the yard and a pile of empty Victoria Bitter bottles were not seldom stacked up the sideway.'

In those days, Bankstown was the quintessential Westie suburb, challenged by the environmental and infrastructure pressures produced by pent-up demand and rapid suburbanisation following World War II. These were years in which lower-income and first-home buyers could secure a modest version of the 'Australian dream' by building a home in an infrastructure-poor subdivision on the city's fringe. As lower-income subdivisions and 'instant populations' populated a continually advancing urban fringe, pockets of higher-income residential development took advantage of waterways and other geographically distinctive areas, such as that atop my childhood hill.

It was a period which also witnessed the proliferation of large-scale public housing estates, initially at Green Valley and later Claymore, Minto, Airs and Macquarie Fields to the south-west, and the Mt Druitt estates further west. By the mid-1980s, the social character of these estates began feeling the raw effects of globalisation, deindustrialisation and the demise of unskilled work. Public housing was under pressure, and by the 1990s areas of economic disadvantage, social dislocation and exclusion were well established. The image of public housing estates as dangerous sites of dysfunctionality, delinquency, broken homes and riotous behaviour is now deeply etched in the local psyche, and strongly influences perceptions of life in Sydney's western suburbs.

Overseas immigration patterns also left their mark on the social fabric of western Sydney. While Italian, Maltese and Greek migrants settled there after World War II, from the '70s the suburbs became home to new waves of non-European immigrants, particularly from South-East Asia and the Middle East and more recently from North-East Africa. Many of these migrants arrived as refugees. Long-settled, white, working-class suburbs – particularly around railway lines and migrant hostels – began to experience aesthetic and cultural (although generally not economic) transformation. Drawn to the region by family reunion, and access to more affordable housing and to areas offering migrant services, ethno-cultural familiarity and social networks, western Sydney remains one of the most popular settling places in Australia for overseas migrants.

Around the late 1980s, new residential development on the fringe began to change. Rather than being characterised by economically mixed groups of low- and middle-income residents, and less affluent first home-buyers fulfilling their 'dream', new developments were increasingly characterised by more affluent, second- and third-home buyers purchasing properties in master-planned estates. As vacant land on the urban fringe has become increasingly expensive due to release related scarcity and the passing on of government charges, infrastructure outlay and development costs to the end purchaser, both home purchasers and developers have attempted to capitalise on the value of the land by building larger, more ostentatious, status-oriented homes disparagingly referred to as 'McMansions'.

The McMansion describes a style of architecture invariably viewed as gaudy, overblown, mass produced, cheaply constructed and environmentally destructive – much like the famous burger chain after which the style was named. The term is also used by those who don't live there to criticise the values and lifestyle of those who do. While building materials may have changed over the past forty years, denigration of Western Sydney housing forms remains a constant.

In response to increased land values and decreased lot sizes, the new master-planned estates on Sydney's fringe have come to offer a higher standard of development through estate design, amenity, restrictive covenants and social and physical infrastructure. Grandiose entrances, along with lifestyle facilities such as tennis courts, pools, artificial lakes and playgrounds, are incorporated to produce a sense of exclusivity, and in turn marketability. This process of *value adding* increases the cost of developing each block of land and provides a useful acquisition barrier to those less well off. Only Aspirationalists need apply.

From a socio-spatial perspective the master-planned estate has been a method for creating determinedly 'middle-class' suburbs out of what has previously been considered a lower-income region befitting Westies, with their lower incomes, raucous behaviour, cultural blandness and, importantly, lack of political clout. The attraction of the master-planned estate for the Aspirationalists is the expectation of physical and social segregation, together with economic, cultural and ontological security. Protected from the anti-social character of nearby public housing estates, and migrant incursions into their childhood suburbs, the new master-planned estates support the desire for residents to express their social power as a status group. Their success, however, is contingent on wider social and economic opportunities and constraints, such as access to housing finance, public infrastructure (in particular, major road infrastructure) and employment opportunities. These concerns guide and tune the Aspirationalists' political antennae.

Harrington Park is a contemporary master-planned estate located within the federal electorate of Macarthur in the Camden local government area, fifty kilometres

south-west of Sydney's central business district. I spent months visiting and interviewing residents of the estate between 2000 and 2003 as part of a study into community formation in this and other master-planned estates. Harrington Park essentially comprises second- and third home-buying, middle- to higher-income families of Anglo-Christian mores, occupied in white-collar service jobs or as self-employed 'tradies'. Most of the residents of Harrington Park grew up in Sydney's western suburbs, although there are some interlopers from the Sutherland shire, attracted by the cheaper housing and the peculiar belief that Camden is not really a suburb of south-west Sydney.

The 2007 federal election results reveal the political sensitivity of the Harrington Park constituency. Although the Liberal Member for Macarthur, Pat Farmer, just managed to retain his seat, the Harrington Park booth produced one of the largest two party-preferred swings against him, nearly 15 per cent. This swing was replicated in other booths in Camden which drew voters primarily from master-planned estates. Narellan Vale booth, for instance, produced a 16.69 per cent swing against the sitting member and Mount Annan Central a swing of -15.49 per cent. The swing against Farmer in booths in the more established suburbs of Camden was far more moderate, ranging from 3.68 per cent in Cobbitty to 9.83 per cent in Camden South. The overall swing in Macarthur was 10.43 per cent.

Harrington Park stands on formerly rich pastureland and was owned and developed by the Fairfax family. The estate's main entrance off The Northern Road is impressive, with a formal sandstone entry and a wide, curving road stretching past tended agapanthus gardens, parks and the Harrington Park Lake – the primary aesthetic and symbolic focus of the estate. Street landscaping, particularly along the main thoroughfares, provides a formal feel, with mature deciduous trees dominating. It has well-resourced playgrounds and a green network of walkways, bike trails, wetlands and picnic grounds. A central community hub comprises a public school, shopping centre, community centre, playgrounds, tennis courts and a picket-fenced oval for those lazy afternoons of amateur cricket. In the main, the homes are large and brick veneered, with two and sometimes three garages. Mostly project built, they have features cherry-picked from bygone architectural styles: prim Georgian facades, Victorian fussiness, Queen Ann turrets, Federation finials and the occasional shady, over-constructed Californian porch. Front gardens are meticulous, and high-maintenance couch lawns are kept pristine with the assistance of mandatory household water tanks.

Stacey and Glenn built their substantial, double-storey, brick-and-tile house on a 635 square metre block in Harrington Park in 1998. Their garden has a formal feel and is well maintained. Inside, the house appears surprisingly spacious, in part because it is quite sparsely furnished, but also because it is so very clean. The formal lounge has become a games room and houses a large billiard table. The gourmet

kitchen overlooks a large family room where, on the evening I interviewed them, *The Simpsons* was blaring from the television. The couple's six-year-old son sat entranced in front of the big screen.

Stacey is in her mid-thirties and is friendly, energetic and confident, and could probably be intimidating in certain circumstances. Although she describes her household as being 'chaotic', she appears to be in masterful control of her domestic, social and business domains. Stacey likes to chat, although her language skills draw attention to her lack of education and working-class roots. Her father was a builder and her father-in-law worked in a railway workshop. She left school in Year Ten and became a secretary. Her husband left school in Year Nine to work for a tradesman. Glenn is a good-looking man in a 'Manpower' sort of way. With a glass of 'good red' in hand, he talks to me with friendly familiarity, the way tradesmen do, peppering his sentences with my name. Like his wife, he appears very confident about his social position and content with his lifestyle.

The couple work long hours – a fourteen-hour day is not unusual for Glenn – but both are financially successful, and between them earn more than \$150,000 a year from their air-conditioning business. Before purchasing this business, they worked for others, gaining the skills and experience they would need to operate it. 'Hard work' is their core value. It is a value that has been passed on to them from their own parents, and one which they hope to pass on to their son. As Stacey put it: 'I want him to learn to do a decent day's work for a decent day's pay. We were both brought up that way. Nothing we've got was ever handed to us. We worked bloody hard for everything.'

The couple's 'pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps' imagery was common among the residents I met in Harrington Park. Residents were keen to tell me of their success through hard work, determination, resourcefulness and sacrifice. Rather than perceiving themselves as prosperous people, having ridden the crest of a buoyant economy, property appreciation and easy access to finance over the past decade, they considered themselves 'average Joe Blows'. Two things are important here. The first is that many of the residents of Harrington Park are driven in the first instance by a disciplined work ethic, and material rewards follow. Secondly, they are comfortable with one foot in the camp of the Westie, and the other in the camp of an emerging middle-class.

The 'self-made' imagery also alludes to residents' general attitude towards those who receive social security, although they distinguished between the disabled (the deserving poor) and unemployed bludgers (the undeserving poor). As Jenny, another resident of Harrington Park, mother of four and part-time worker, explained: 'We have had to work very hard for what we've got. We've never been given anything. So everything that we've been able to achieve, we've been able to achieve together. And not through handouts or inheritance or anything like that. It's been through sheer blood and guts really ... Too many people wanting to have

everything for free and “the government owes me”. I think that attitude doesn’t achieve anything, you know. And let’s face it, a lot of people do feel like that: “The government owes them. Why should I work? I’ll just spit out all these children and the government will pay for them.”

Before moving to Harrington Park, Stacey and Glenn spent seven years in Rosemeadow, in the Campbelltown local government area, close to a public housing estate. The couple say they moved for better capital growth, but upgrading their status also played a role. As Stacey explained: ‘Although it would cost us a bit at the start, if later we wanted to move on we knew we would have made enough on the house. We could either go near the water or move somewhere where we really wanted to live if it didn’t work out here, and still not have lost money. Because we over-capitalised on our first place. We spent a lot of money on doing it up, backyard, extension and that, and we never made it back. We probably lost forty-five grand on that house. So yeah, we just wanted to build somewhere where we weren’t going to lose any money ... Although we never had any problems at Rosemeadow, and we were happy for the seven years we lived there, it just got to a point where we outgrew it. It was a young area, a lot of Housing Commission. We lived quite close to that. And we just wanted to get out of that. We wanted to be far enough away, I suppose, from the stigma of Campbelltown ... Campbelltown was always thought of as the sticks. And where the people I suppose ... like Mt Druitt. It’s where you go when you haven’t got any money and can’t afford to live anywhere else.’

Being on the ‘right side’ of the M5 motorway was the most frequently mentioned attraction of the estate. ‘The final big picture outlook’ of Harrington Park’s master plan also attracted them. As Stacey explained, it ‘looked pretty inviting. So we jumped in head first’. She liked the restrictive covenants intended to keep ‘standards’ high: ‘We thought they were fantastic ... I just like the idea of, I mean money talks. If people have to put money up they’re pretty serious about it. Our solicitor tried to stop the sale twice, because of the covenants ... He just thought it was ridiculous. Our solicitor is in Marrickville, an old guy, old school, no idea about new estates, never did any conveyancing in this area before, and he said, “This is crazy. How can [the developer] tell you not to put normal concrete in? Who do they think they are? Why do you have to pay this bond? And rah rah rah.” And we just said, “Look it’s cool.”’

Stacey now considers ‘community spirit’ and friendly neighbours to be the things she likes most about Harrington Park. Parents supervise the kids playing in the street, and offer each other support and assistance. She walks with a group of friends of an evening, and each year she and a neighbour organise the street’s Christmas party. Glenn also recognises the value of sharing a beer over the fence with the neighbours, but wryly remarks: ‘I don’t reckon on me having an affair. I don’t reckon I’d get away with it.’

Stacey also likes the estate's aesthetic – the large houses and well-kept gardens – and the social values these imply: 'It's just nice to see clean streets, nice gardens. To be able to go for a walk and admire people's homes rather than go, "Hmmm, when are they going to get rid of that bomb?" you know? It's just a totally different living on a day-to-day basis, as it is with just living in the suburbs.'

Other residents I talked with also made a connection between housing aesthetic and social values. Peter and Joan, a slightly older couple, had moved to Harrington Park from Engadine to be closer to their young grandchildren. 'The children here are very polite. They talk to you. People take pride in their house. If you take pride in the house, you will take pride in your children. I think people may be a middle-class type of person in this estate, and you know, that's the way they bring their children up. They can obviously afford to live in here.'

Unlike others I interviewed in Harrington Park, Glenn and Stacey believed that residents rather than the local council should be financially responsible for the upkeep of the estate, and they enthusiastically supported the developer's proposed security and maintenance scheme. The scheme failed to gain enough resident support to make it viable, which irritated Glenn: 'If someone couldn't afford a dollar a day to maintain the estate, well they shouldn't be here. Seriously, I mean what's \$7 or \$10 a week?'

Overall, however, the couple are extremely satisfied with their housing choice and feel 'lucky' to be living in the estate. 'I don't think I'd like to be living anywhere else, to be honest. I'm very happy. I get around Sydney everywhere and I don't think there is another place like it. We're just happy. Pretty much everything makes me happy here.'

The Harrington Park residents I interviewed and observed were generally a kind and generous lot, given to assisting each other with landscaping, child minding and downing the odd beer or two. They greeted each other when out walking and neighbours attended each other's pasta nights. Parents put great effort into raising good citizens. They volunteered at their children's schools, at sporting clubs and local tree-planting days. For the small proprietors and technical contractors amongst them, sensitivity to interest rates was as much about their business as their house mortgage. As a status group, Harrington Park residents worked hard and their confidence stemmed from their identity as self-made people. Believing so strongly in self-sufficiency, they were proud of their material achievements and despised people perceived to be society's slackers and freeloaders.

At first glance, it is difficult to understand why Aspirationals attract so much derision. Why are the attributes of hard work, drive and wealth creation held so highly in the privileged suburbs of Sydney's north and east, yet held to ridicule when practised by those who live in the city's west? More intriguingly, why do Sydney's privileged citizens hold the Aspirationals to a higher standard of moral behaviour?

Take, for instance, effort and ambition. Usually regarded as positive attributes, in Aspirationals they become 'grasping' and 'greedy'. Where substantial homes and water-guzzling gardens in the city's established leafy suburbs are symbols of success, in the west they are considered wasteful of space and utilities, and an aesthetic blight on the landscape.

While clinging to their harbourside homes, beaches and cooling sea breezes, the residents of Sydney's east condemn Aspirationals for ducted air-conditioning and in-ground pools. Despite their proximity to the inordinate concentration of publicly subsidised cultural facilities, residents of north Sydney snigger at the proliferation of home theatres in the new homes on estates. Those wasteful, materialistic Aspirationals are blamed for greenhouse gas production, growing carbon footprints and urban sprawl, even though on average each resident of Mosman has an ecological footprint of 14.7 global hectares, almost twice the Australian average, and Woollahra residents use nearly twice as much water as Sydney's more water-conscious suburbs and receive more water restriction infringement notices to boot.

During the 1960s and '70s, disparaging Westies facilitated the development of a rhetorical relationship between working-class culture and place. Derision and taunts were deployed to keep the residents of western Sydney politically disempowered and culturally, economically and spatially contained. Perhaps most significantly, confirming and reaffirming western Sydney as the 'other' established it as a chimera against which the rest of Sydney could positively and confidently appraise itself.

Today's Aspirationals, however, challenge this status quo on a number of fronts. Their use of material acquisition to indicate economic success challenges the perceived entitlement of Sydney's privileged residents to unrestrained consumption. Their petrol-guzzling four-wheel drives and large, air-conditioned houses with countless down-lights and over-sized televisions challenge the unfettered claims of the privileged to the world's dwindling supplies of energy. The Aspirationals' enthusiasm for private schooling challenges the claims of the privileged to superior education, and their political clout challenges the monopolisation of political influence. Perhaps most importantly, however, their master planned 'privatopias' challenge the apparent right of the privileged to segregate themselves away from the 'other' in status-orientated, spatial utopias.

On further consideration, the disparaging of the Aspirationals, at least in part, seems to be a response to this group attempting to move beyond its allocated social position. Or perhaps it is a subconscious reaction by Sydney's more privileged citizens as they catch a disturbing glimpse of their own rapacious selves. ■