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IDEAS FROM AUSTRALIAN CITIES: RELOCATING URBAN AND SUBURBAN HISTORY

By Andrew May*
University of Melbourne

This article draws on preliminary research into the social history of Melbourne, on the ways that suburban life in the post-World War II era provides both explanation and counterweight to persistently negative stereotypes of suburbia. Over recent decades, suburban histories have been eschewed in favour of historical reconsiderations of the inner city or the bush. The history of the Australian suburb, particularly since 1945, is yet to be written. Oral history and municipal archives will be crucial to the writing of such histories. The article suggests several research pathways, including intergenerational life stories, a wider scale of geographical analysis, and a subtler reading of cultural conformity and social differentiation.

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Steven Carroll's novel, *The Time We Have Taken*, is set in Melbourne's suburbs in the summer of 1970. The fictional character Peter van Rijn casts his mind back to the Olympic year of 1956 when he first put a television set in the window of his television-and-wireless shop to illuminate the hearts and minds of passers-by. In his reminiscent mood, the television becomes a metonym of the suburb's past and present, a key symbol of progress, and the passage of time suddenly '*feels* like history'.[1] In 1994, in the real Melbourne suburb of Nunawading, the real Margaret Neville recalled her childhood in the 1950s when a gaggle of kids would meet up at the fish and chip shop with their little camp stools, armed with a shilling's worth of chips and potato cakes: '. . . we'd all go and sit out the front of the shop window with all the other kids around Nunawading and the guy used to turn the TV up and we used to all sit outside on the footpath.'[2]

* This article develops ideas first explored in collaboration with former colleagues in the History Department at Monash University.

1 Carroll, *The Time We Have Taken*, p. 7.

2 Margaret Neville, interviewed by Andrew Brown-May, 06/05/1994.

Television broadcasts were indeed inaugurated in Melbourne and Sydney in 1956. Melbourne's first station was HSV-7, which commenced broadcasting on November 4, just over a fortnight before the start of the Melbourne Olympic Games. While newsreader Eric Pearce dedicated the station to 'Australian life – the happy families in their homes', in the Melbourne suburb of Croydon a crowd of a thousand had in fact left their domestic comforts to gather at Roly Leopold's Television Centre in Main Street, where an HMV television receiver had been installed in the shop window. The excited throng jostled for positions well ahead of the 7.00 p.m. start, and many stood outside in the cold for the whole three-hour transmission. A woman on her way home from the city stopped briefly to watch the show: 'She became so engrossed that it wasn't until an hour later that she suddenly remembered that her husband was still waiting at home for his tea.'[3]

Suburbia has long featured as a motif in Australian creative arts, and the spate of baby-boomer recollections in the late twentieth century signalled a generational coming of age. But the stereotypes of the 1950s have become cloying, and that post-war generation is now told to 'just f* off it's our turn now' by Generation Y.[4] Urban historians too, while generally asserting the central hold of the suburb in the social and economic development of the nation, and in narratives of the construction of cultural identities, have really only skirted its boundaries. The boom middle suburbs that experienced their demographic peaks in the 1960s and 1970s were, by the early twenty-first century, being spurned for cheaper lands at the urban fringe or the apparent convenience and cosmopolitan delight of the inner city.[5] While it may be unfair to characterise the trend as a stampede, historians have also tended to flee the suburbs either for the inner city or the outback.[6] So is there much more to be said about the world's 'first suburban nation'?[7] Has the suburb been comprehensively covered? At the outset, this article speculates that sole reliance on the twin fictions of the novelist's pen and of baby-boomer nostalgia for our predominant images of post-war suburban history precludes the prospect of developing more sophisticated historical narratives. It also asserts that there is a continuing need for urban social historians to mine the archive – whether municipal, organisational, or institutional, and in newspapers and through oral histories – to do justice to the life stories of suburban dwellers, in the same way that the inner-city underclasses found a voice in urban histories of the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, using Melbourne as exemplar and showcasing a sampler of interview and archival material, it establishes that life stories, micro-geographies of the place, and a subtler reading of cultural conformity and social

3 Groves, Television, p. 712; *Ringwood Mail*, 08/11/1956.
4 Ryan, *Please Just F* Off.*
5 Rollins, Melburnians desert middle suburbs in droves, *The Age*, 26/01/2001, p. 5, reporting on the Victorian Government's Suburbs in Time study.
6 Mayne, *Beyond the Black Stump*; O'Hanlon, *Together Apart*; Davison and Brodie, *Struggle Country*; Brown-May, *Melbourne Street Life*.
7 Davison, *Australia: The First Suburban Nation?*

differentiation might be productive interpretive pathways along which future reconsideration of the Australian suburb might be pursued.

RESHAPING SUBURBIA

If my ambition is avowedly polemical (in that the historical reality of urban life still demands attention), my title is also deliberately resonant. Nearly four decades ago, Hugh Stretton's (1970) influential treatise *Ideas for Australian Cities* brought popular attention to the plight of Australian cities, and in the face of rising urban problems of density, cost, and congestion, sought a new vision for the country's urban future. Stretton's work was radical; his intention was to analyse planning intentions and to marry effective policy with both citizen interest and general economic policy. To the modern reader his book may appear naive in terms of its implicit trust in planners to get it right or in the face of the more recent imperatives of globalisation and environmental pressure. But as a self-professed impressionistic essay and political tract, it opened up important debates about lifestyle choice and urban improvement. In its plea for 'civilised cities', there was less sense, however, of the ways in which individual citizens experienced their lives as actually lived in the suburbs. My intention is to turn this focus around, to suggest that histories – and therefore urban futures – might be sought *in* cities rather than reading them through external shows or apocryphal stereotypes. The 'windscreen' surveys of Melbourne's inner-city slums during the 1960s, 'when two planners drove around and designated particular streets as slums for demolition without getting out of their car', are notorious for their clinical superficiality; the student of the city should be wary of doing a similar cursory 'drive-by'.[8] The future of the city is already enough ransomed to the uncertainty of the housing market and the premonitions of planners; the historian should stand on firmer ground.

In claiming suburban history as fertile territory, I am also simply reiterating that there is unfinished business for Australian urban history, reviving claims for examples made by Tom Stannage in the early 1980s. Stannage noted the limitations of urban history, in particular its inability to deal with social experiences and its omission of the 'rhythms of private experience'. Historians, wrote Stannage, might be interested in the subjective and real interests of people, not simply the policy preferences revealed by political participation.[9] As Max Kelly argued, historians needed to put people 'in their place in their time'.[10] In 1994, Chris Healy demanded that critics avoid the wild opposites of nostalgia and hatred that characterised, for example, the representations of Barry Humphries's characters Dame Edna and Sandy Stone.[11] Healy's claim that suburbs are such slippery

8 United Nations Human Settlements Program, *The Challenge of Slums*, p. 16.
9 Stannage, *Australian Urban History*, p. 174.
10 Kelly, *Urban History Goes Social*, p. 78.
11 Healy, *Introduction*, p. xvi.

places, appearing only as traces, 'never as they were remembered but are always in a state of transformation', in some ways lacking a geographical location, perhaps warned off other historians who thought they might attempt to catch hold of them.[12] In the twenty-first century, the history of Australian suburban life is yet to be written. Discomforting and unrewarding stereotypes of suburbia are still naggingly lodged in both popular and historical consciousness: suburbia can still be characterised as 'synonymous with blandness – row upon row of cookie-cutter houses along identical streets in neighbourhoods seemingly devoid of anything interesting to see or do'.[13]

While suburbia may on the one hand be 'the focus of intellectual scorn',[14] on the other hand it is represented as an idealised past replete with familiar, comfortable, and innocent icons. This representation has Australia as 'the great suburban southland . . . a nation of suburban boys and girls, each with a fondness for our own quarter acre; it's where most of us grew up and its icons are part of our collective psyche. They gave us individuality through conformity, and helped forge our identity'.[15] The 1950s became retro in the 1990s, defended against the fashionable criticism of their blandness, complacency, and sterility.[16] But as Janet McCalman wrote, the tropes of the baby-boomers 'are back yards (Melbourne), the beach (Sydney), Hill's hoists, Holden cars, Mum's in the kitchen, Dad's in the toolshed, Grandma's still in the inner suburbs (where real life goes on)'.[17] The nostalgic version has the suburbs as 'the way it ought to be', clean, quiet, natural, domestic places:[18] 'it was a time', supposedly, 'when you could leave your front door open on a hot night, when daughters could walk home late at night safe and unmolested'.[19]

In the face of a wealth of suburban analysis by geographers, planners, sociologists, and economists, over a decade ago Barbara and Graeme Davison challenged the role of the historian in relation to the suburban debate, wondering 'whether there is anything left to do other than to read all the scholarly monographs and articles and distil them into vivid narrative prose'. But the historian, they argue, has the advantage of placing the suburban experience 'as part of a longer unfolding . . . a longer trajectory of history'.[20] Historians must be 'neither out-and-out opponents nor uncritical defenders, but friendly critics . . . prepared to penetrate the thin veneer of cream brick, to listen to the voices of those who made and inhabited them, as well as those who visited and condemned; to

12 Healy, *Introduction*, pp. xvi–xvii.
13 Vedelago, The new suburbia, *The Age*, Domain, 01/04/2007, p. 4. My thanks to Susan Reidy for this reference.
14 Jackson, *Foreword*, p. xi.
15 Bedwell, *Suburban Icons*, p. 11.
16 Sheridan, The '50s: why they weren't so bad, *Australian Magazine*, 18–19/09/1993, p. 5.
17 McCalman, *Suburbia from the Sandpit*, p. 549.
18 Hummon, *Commonplaces*.
19 Sheridan, A time of innocence, *Australian Magazine*, 18–19/09/1993, p. 6.
20 Davison and Davison, *Suburban Pioneers*, p. 41.

deconstruct the myths of uniformity and standardisation'.[21] Robin Boyd's trenchant criticism of the suburban pioneer has all too often been taken for granted. The historian might have more sympathy for the processes of place-making, for the vicissitudes of personal experience, of hardship and innovation, of suffering and achievement.

LOOKING FOR SUBURBANITES: LIFE STORIES ACROSS GENERATIONS

In Google Maps Street View, you can be a virtual traveller through the suburbs and neighbourhoods of Australian cities and towns. You can pan down Main Street in Croydon, where Leopold's television shop once stood, and through the street trees and parallel parked cars see the real estate agent and the hardware store, the fast food outlet and post office, the newsagent, op shop, Thai restaurant, pharmacy, bakery, and travel agent. You can rotate the view across the plethora of Australian main streets, from Box Hill to Blacktown, zoom around the courts, avenues, crescents, and retail strips of the great suburban vastness. I could likely see your house, and you could see mine. And if you wanted to peep behind the curtains and doors, go to one of the real estate search engines, click on the property pictures, and view the material culture of suburbia, old and new, from the green Formica kitchen tables and dusted knick-knacks on the mantle pieces to the double garages and spaciously framed backyards. Yet, like the blueprints and planning schemes, this is a setting observed but not yet understood. At the pedestrian crossing in Main Street Croydon, you can see (until the next Google Street View drive-by) a person in a wheelchair crossing to the western side.[22] Even if we could stare in from the outside at the town replete with all its people, like Mr Gleason's miniature replica town in Peter Carey's short story 'American Dreams', its inhabitants can easily become caricatures of themselves, distant, objectified, colonised, misunderstood.[23]

Suburban development across Australian cities must be understood in terms of overarching economic, demographic, and cultural preferences, imperatives, and patterns. But the suburbanite can too easily be parcelled up as a post-war pioneer, snap frozen as an inner-urban émigré, filed in one or another compartment of decadal stereotype, labelled retrospectively by our knowledge of what came next, when in fact their individual choices and futures were far more contingent. Urban scholarship has contributed greater understanding to our knowledge of city economies and labour markets, politics and urban decision-making, land development, residential patterns, and the generally low-density character of suburbia, but the city can be explored afresh as a site of engagement, attachment,

21 Davison and Dingle, *Introduction*, pp. 16–17.
22 Google Maps, http://maps.google.com.
23 Carey, *American Dreams*.

territorialism, community, and social networks. These attributes and mentalities mean different things to different people, within and across suburbs, at different periods, and importantly, across generations.

The novelist's caricatures are drawn with specific purposes and premises in mind. On the cusp of the 1950s, for example, socialist writer John Morrison's 1949 novel *The Creeping City* suspiciously viewed Melbourne from the Dandenongs as a conformist, upstart, and upper class city 'marching out', where wattles were replaced by roses in gardens that succumbed to the 'tractable paraphernalia of the gardens of Toorak and South Yarra'.[24] There is no doubt that this creeping city was a contested terrain as older rural areas succumbed to residential incursion, and the fruit- and flower-growing agricultural and pastoral districts of the 1940s became the flourishing suburban villages of the 1950s. Each municipal history of Melbourne's suburbs documents the inescapable transition, as the 'market garden surrendered its rows of cabbages to houses of brick veneer in the . . . drama of rural subdivision'.[25]

Morrison's creeping city at the threshold of the 1950s resonated with tension and resentment: the city versus the country, the wealthy suburban neophytes invading a land already claimed by previous generations of settlers, the street imposed on the bush, indigenous flora supplanted by exotic. By implication, the new suburbanite was self-possessed and superficial, preferring to clean the slate and favouring a standardisation of landscape. This was the pioneer and arboraphobe of Boyd, who 'has never a moment's doubt that what he puts up will be better than what he tears down'.[26] But these fixed stereotypes – as immutable as many histories of both Australian and American suburbia in this period – have been criticised for failing to cope with the suburbs 'as the eventual domain of common people'.[27] Any history of the suburbs must be a history in which suburbanites would recognise themselves.

While popular imagery of suburbia is often negative, individual suburbanites consistently affirm the positive aspects of their lifestyle in everyday ways. Much of the physical and institutional landscape of the post-war suburb is the legacy of the immediate post-war idealism, galvanised by the pursuit of common goals, inspired by dreams of privacy, home ownership, and a better environment to bring up a new generation. In a way, a lack of confidence in suburbia is as much the result of generational change as it is of broader cultural and economic factors. The stories pioneer suburbanites tell you about the way they battled to make good on the suburban frontier, in effect, comprise a foundation mythology. Such mythologies all too often sanction dispossession, as Peter Conrad has it, 'by telling grandiose untruths, licensing the city's robbery of terrain and devising for it the glorious past it feels it deserves'.[28] Keith Rooney bought land in Nunawading in

24 Morrison, *Creeping City*, p. 191.
25 Bate, *History of Brighton*, p. 399.
26 Boyd, *Australian Ugliness*, p. 92.
27 Wunsch, *The Suburban Cliche*, p. 646. See also McCalman, *Suburbia from the Sandpit*.
28 Conrad, *Art of the City*, p. 4.

1951 and moved there later in 1957: 'I always remember coming out here . . . my father-in-law came out with me and stood on the block of land and he said to me "Where's the blackfellas, where are they going to have their corroboree?" '. Rooney recalls moving in on a Saturday, 'and on Sunday morning I was out picking up the clay out the front trying to establish a lawn, you know, trying to get a bit of tradition going'.[29]

The suburb is made more complex and more meaningful in the way people empower their own memories in reminiscence. With a gleam in their eye, they will tell you their personal histories, how they killed five snakes digging the driveway in, how they used to burn kero and sump oil in the gutters to get rid of the mozzies,[30] how women pushed prams for miles along rutted unmade roads to get to the shops, how men who had never been handy in their lives suddenly turned their hands to all manner of tasks. The legitimacy of the suburb might be vouched for in positive ways, turning the uncertainties and mistakes of the past into future prospects and possibilities, placing social and environmental well-being as a consequence of the past and the present.[31] Barbara and Graeme Davison's 1995 interpretation of the reminiscences of older suburbanites sanctioned a new application of the pioneer ethos, recognising the suburban landscape as the locus of broadly based social desires to which we all as social beings aspire: 'ideals of independence, familiarity, social status, identity, and security – physical, financial, and psychological'.[32]

If the uncomfortable stand-off that currently stands for a history of suburbia is reshaped with issues both of personal and communal heritage and responsibility in mind, then the suburb might not only be more comfortable with its past but may also predicate a future less as a community of exclusion than an interactive and sustainable human setting. The experiences of those individual suburban pioneers and their inheritors, mistrusted by Morrison and criticised by Boyd, are therefore in some respects finding new legitimacy. Another wave of immigrants was 'pioneering in suburbia' in the 1960's Avondale Heights, a new frontier of 'bloody bush', and many critics would agree with the claim that while such places 'have not become utopias, yet they have also not become the graveyard of the human spirit in the way that critics claimed they would'.[33] Beyond the pioneer status of neophyte suburbanites, histories of suburbia that take account of intergenerational and new-wave suburban experiences will be able to shape much more relevant and radical understandings of the meanings of everyday places in Australian lives.

29 Keith Rooney, interviewed by Andrew Brown-May, 19/05/1994.
30 'Mozzies' is the Australian slang for mosquitoes; 'kero' is short for kerosene.
31 Rome, *Building on the Land*.
32 Davison and Davison, *Suburban Pioneers*, p. 42.
33 Ellingsen, Pioneering in Suburbia, *The Age*, 14/12/1987, p. 23.

REAL SUBURBAN PLACES: PERMEABLE HISTORIES

Individual suburban histories from the immediate post-war decades onwards often merely catalogued civic achievement for their municipal sponsors, with a familiar chronology of the development of transport, parks and gardens, schools, and other institutions.[34] From the 1950s municipal histories would turn their gaze to an ever-increasing ring of suburban locations: from slab hut to city, from 'cattlemen to commuters', 'from sand, swamp and heath', 'from orchard to brick veneer'.[35] Suburban boosterism was similarly expressed in the annual municipal newsletter, heralding the latest advances, for example, in street improvement: 30 miles in 30 months; 'Streets . . . only 10 miles to go!'[36]

There were also histories respectful of the deeds of the pioneers, yet perched unsure and self-consciously on the threshold between past and future, themselves nostalgic for an idealised past. As she stood on Doncaster hill in the mid-1950s, Jean Field looked backwards and forwards. In the face of what she saw as the rampant materialism and greed of land speculators and developers, she questioned the uniformity of building design and the homogeneous physical and moral direction of Melbourne's sprawl: 'we might profit today if we could bring ourselves to shed some of the luxuries of modern living, and return to the simple things once again!'[37] But the post-war suburban push was irrepressible. Land was cheaper and more available, and as the *Argus* trumpeted in May 1950, 'the air is fresher out there and it's a good place to raise a young family, away from the heavy traffic and the congested shopping areas. It's healthy, the young mothers tell you. In fact, for the first few weeks you find yourself eating like a horse'.[38]

The 'real places' of the modern suburb all have a history, a traceable chronology (as do the temporal peak-hour or the drive-in theatre). A vacant block has been a playground, a gap, a future orientation, an investment, a fire hazard, an affront to regularity, a place of nefarious activity, a backward sign. Not just the house and the backyard but also the nature strip, milk bar, corner store, scrub, orchard, food hall, car park, parents' room, vending machine, and bus stop. Not just subdivision but also traffic calming, working bee, walkathon, garage sale, and street party. Not simply suburbanite but neighbour or pioneer. A history of suburbia is a history of 'a revolution in places, a turnover in their accessibility, their names, looks, ownership, and functions'.[39] Here, there, centre, edge, front – how are these places labelled, interpreted, and negotiated? To friends and families of new 1950's suburbanites, subdivisions 10 miles to Melbourne's east were at the end of the world. As almost five decades of urban growth have left once frontier homes square in the middle of a vast metropolitan region, older suburbanites may

34 Currey, *Local Government*; City of Broadmeadows, *Centenary Souvenir*.
35 Uhl, *Dandenong*; Priestley, *Cattlemen to Commuters*; Murray and Wells, *Sand, Swamp and Heath*; Green, *Orchard to Brick Veneer*.
36 *Nunawading Municipal Newsletter*, 1965, 1967.
37 Field, *And So Today*, pp. 32–3, 57.
38 Where our people live, *Argus Women's Magazine*, 09/05/1950, pp. 8–9.
39 Clay, *Real Places*, p. 3.

still refer to their location as 'out here'. As the sprawl supplanted former landscape patterns, the new settlers could appropriate not only the land itself but also the poetic of an earlier dispossessed generation as an instrument of colonisation and control. In the May 1956 edition of *Australian Home Beautiful*, Mary Onus furnished the new home owner with a list of Aboriginal names suitable for houses: indeed she had been asked to name 'a Scout Hall, a gift shop, a caravan, several nursing homes, a ballet, and a New Australian baby'.[40]

This new landscape – half under construction, half illusory – slowly interposed into the pre-existing order of orchard rows and bush tracts. The transition could be measured in fact and in image. The intended suburban landscape began to have no room for the rural industries that had flourished before the war. The fat-rendering plants, poultry-killing establishments, and piggeries were eradicated, to be replaced by a new generation of suburban offensive trades of motor-wrecking yards and rubbish depots. These changes did not happen within the administrative boundaries of one suburb or another, but were part of a broader pattern of transformation across the metropolis as a whole. The ways in which territorial mentalities and preferences were shaped and negotiated in such a period of transition need to be gauged in post-war municipal archives, a hitherto under-explored historical source. Where Morrison's immediate post-war fiction laid bare the anti-urban anxieties of the outer rural fringe, just prior to World War II, Nunawading residents were fashioning their claims to this liminal landscape. Opposing piggeries in the suburb, they constructed new suburban places as the nursery and vanguard of national advancement:

> such a trade will greatly interfere with our health, and especially the children . . . that the district is a very desirable one for outer suburban residences, land in the vicinity having been subdivided with that view in mind, the continuance of pig licences will stop progress, as a residential area – people in other parts of the shire, are erecting very fine residences, a drive through the Shire will reveal this.[41]

Histories of one suburb are also histories of others, and the individual suburb is better looked at historically as an unbounded and outward-looking place while still being cognisant of local particularities. After the farms and bushland were subdivided and allotments purchased, desperate recently engaged home-seekers in 1950 sought permission to build a temporary bungalow ahead of constructing their weatherboard home and struggled to find a footing in a frustrating landscape and an equally discouraging bureaucracy:

> we have been out there every weekend clearing the land of blackberries etc. and I can assure you that should permission be given to us to build . . . we shall not waste a moment in completing the house to the best of our ability . . . At the present time we are both boarding out this way (East Brighton) and although we rise first thing on Sunday morning to get out to our block as soon as possible we feel that considering the time we

40 Onus, Aboriginal house names, *Australian Home Beautiful*, May 1956, p. 3.
41 Public Record Office Victoria, VPRS 10532 unit 12, petition 10/10/1939.

> lose in travelling etc we would be facing an almost impossible task of attempting to build the house withoout [sic] living on the spot. Should permission be refused us we shall then have to face another task of finding somewhere to live. In Conclusion, might I stress once again how sincere and earnest we are in wanting our own home to commence our life together on the right footing.[42]

In the eyes of a Heidelberg resident in 1950, the perceived threats to 'the peace and beauty of the lovely tree-lined streets that breathed the culture and traditions of previous generations' came not from immigrants or bureaucrats but from residents of well-settled suburbs such as Armadale, Malvern, or Hawksburn, who 'prefer concrete and telegraph poles to the noble trees'.[43] Police were called to the scene of a disturbance near a cafe next to the Heidelberg Town Hall in 1945: 'the youths responsible were said to be from another suburb'.[44] Beneath the undifferentiated rubric of suburbia that is spread like a comforting blanket over the Australian city lie much more subtle micro-geographies of place and identity. Some senses of order might be sought defensively; others could be more internalised. In the name of public-spirited self-help, citizen movements such as the Fairfield and Alphington Ratepayers' Association sought to 'refurbish' their suburb, to 'encourage the ratepayers of our district to take a greater civic interest in the progress and betterment of our suburbs' through mowing nature strips, fixing fences, and repainting houses.[45]

It is perhaps no wonder, as Graeme Davison has observed, that places 'based on the logic of avoidance' with 'essentially negative virtues' developed a reputation for boredom, conformity, and exclusivity.[46] But a great myopia of Australian history has been the conflation of practical with creative conformity. An instinct of the immediate post-war generation was certainly to escape conditions of inner-city deprivation, and their protection of a newfound predictability and self-determination was certainly a defence against a difficult past that was all too recent in their memories. Kindergarten teacher Inez Murphy had worked through the Depression in Port Melbourne and Montague, where pale-faced children 'sewn into their clothes for the winter' were 'always hungry': 'We used to have jars of flowers on the tables. On Fridays when we threw the dead flowers out, the kids would search through them for one with a bit of life to take home to mum.' Inez took up a post at a Blackburn kindergarten in the 1950s, liberated from the era when haughty patrons would come round on their annual inspections. But even here she continued to be well aware of the need for the ongoing and special needs of her charges for stimulation and education, taking 30 of her children on an annual excursion to collect autumn leaves, lichens, mushrooms,

42 Public Record Office Victoria, VPRS 10532 unit 20, 23/08/1950.
43 *Heidelberg News*, 20/01/1950.
44 *Heidelberg News*, 09/02/1945, p. 2.
45 *Heidelberg News*, 22/09/1950.
46 Davison, *Past and Future*, p. 17.

and insects at Emerald.[47] The suburban frontier is fixed in metaphysical as well as material ways. In 1970, a Nunawading resident objected to the Council about the renaming of Colbar Street to Efron Street:

> My father . . . lived in Mitcham since his arrival from England in 1911 and loved it dearly, being an Orchardist he subdivided only because he could not pay the rates not to make a profit, being a family cutting up their home (not a company subdividing for business reasons) he put a great deal of thought into naming the Streets, Lemon Grove because it went through his lemon patch Savage Court after his parents and Colbar St after his two children Colin and Barbara . . . I would like to request that the council might bend a little and take Colbar St right through to Springvale Rd if only to leave just a little of father in Nunawading forever.[48]

Once established, suburbs do not inevitably atrophy or turn in on themselves; they carry the past as well as the future with them, transcending boundaries of time and space.

FRIENDS AND NEIGHBOURS: CONTEST AND DIFFERENTIATION

In teasing out the actualities of lived places, I have already suggested the need to be alert to the role of nostalgia in the creation of suburban historical narratives. Everyday experiences of social life might be analysed in terms of transformation rather than as decline. Neighbourliness can be seen as a negotiation and a process as much as a static sociological marker, and again, these histories of shared spaces have yet to be adequately constructed.

In his history of United States suburbia, Ken Jackson writes of 'the loss of community in metropolitan America'.[49] This widely observed phenomenon of contemporary suburban life – reframed a decade later in Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* as a loss of social capital – is characterised by the privatisation of social life, weakened sense of community in the face of a drive-in culture, increased fear of crime, reduced sense of neighbourliness, and the home as a hermetic centre of entertainment and social exclusion.[50] Again, municipal archives can be mined for the range of ways in which such understandings of territorialism are created and contested:

> Last Saturday he ripped branches off our Crepe Myrtle & Camellia tree not cut or pruned it . . . If he had asked us we would have done it . . . The other complaints I have are that they light their incinerator up after dark . . . They also have a German shepherd dog which I do not think is registered . . . It has got into our property twice and trampled

47 John Hamilton, 'On the spot' column, Kinders bubble with joy, unsourced newspaper clipping c. 1972, Les Sutherland private collection.
48 Nunawading Municipal Archives, A1/10, Administration, Tenement Numbers, Part 9, No. 57, 14/05/1970.
49 Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, p. 272.
50 Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

over pot plants . . . Every time I have tried to explain something to him he has got into a rage and pokes the pruning shears at me.[51]

For Jackson, perhaps the death of the front porch is symbolic of the closing down of this fluid interface between public and private; one of my interviewees used to scrub it down every week 40 years ago, but now she hardly bothers to sweep it. The life of the 1950's suburban street and the open front yard has vanished: 'residential neighbourhoods have become a mass of small, private islands.'[52]

Yet the stark contrasts of backyard rage and cuddly communalism might be exceptions that prove the rule, belying everyday alliances. Stereotypes again ignore the suburb's historical and future capacity to accommodate social differentiation, to actively appropriate assertions of individual and shared identity, as well as employ aesthetic or cultural subversion. The disappearance of the neighbourly ideal that features in the memories of older residents was popularly lamented in the 1990's newspaper headlines: 'Loathe thy neighbour'; 'Gone are the days of greeting strangers in the street or park. The chill wind of urban paranoia has seen to that'; 'Neighbours tune out to those next door'; 'Garden delights lost behind high fences'; 'Learning to love thy neighbor'. It is in television soapies such as 'Neighbours', Australians were told, that suburbanites find their surrogate community.[53] While the growth of outer suburban areas outstripped the capacity of the existing police force, crime reports in suburban newspapers through the 1950s and 1960s (from juvenile delinquency, car theft, vandalism of phone boxes, and fowl stealing, to sex attacks on young girls) consistently defy the sanitised memories.[54]

In popular lore, even in the cartoons of *Home Beautiful*, if suburbanites were not trying to keep up with the Joneses, they were feuding with them over the back fence. To what extent is this social closure the suburban reality? To what extent is it created by, or reflected in, written and covert regulations? To what extent are such laws and social protocols inevitable, immutable, and reversible? Niall Brennan, writing the history of Nunawading in the early 1970s, pointed to the replacement of a community of neighbourhood by a community of interest: 'the latter is too narrow a foundation on which to build a community of people . . . Community of interest may not be as valuable as community of neighbourhood, but it is better than no community at all.'[55] Just what was this community of neighbourhood? Brennan suggested that it was most in evidence when hardship

51 Nunawading Municipal Archives, A1/30, Administration, General Items, Part 51, No. 62, 26/04/1983.
52 Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, p. 280.
53 *Sunday Age*, 28/03/1993, Agenda, p. 3; *Australian Magazine*, 22–23/05/1993; *Sunday Age*, 08/07/1990, p. 14; *The Age*, 31/03/1992; *The Age*, 07/06/1995, p. 20.
54 For example, Wild vandalism wave shocks C.I.B., *Eastern Post*, 21/10/1965; The man in the black sedan, *Ringwood Mail*, 19/01/1956; Fowl stealing rife, *Heidelberg News*, 01/12/1950.
55 Brennan, *History of Nunawading*, pp. 136, 138.

brought pioneering families together and 'meant that a little daughter of one family learned something from the grandmother next door and that one father could be associated with the sons of others'.[56] More recent approaches to spatial history have overturned such narrow conceptions of community, uncoupling 'place' and 'community' as coterminous concepts, in order to forge more global meanings about place and locality.[57]

It has been argued that the 'imposition of conformity by the few on the many leads to a denial of social and environmental diversity'.[58] The pressure to conform is the suburban leitmotif, but the instinct to contest, innovate, and adapt is its liberating corollary. 'Don't be one of these', chided the *Argus* in 1950:

- The man who refuses to cut his nature strip so that it stands as an untidy blot in an otherwise trim street
- Who allows weeds to grow and garden rubbish to accumulate in his backyard so that snails, slugs, and other pests can thrive and move into neighbours' gardens
- Who plants one of those annoying trees or hedges that scatter their seeds all over the neighbourhood
- Who covers the dividing fence with an untidy creeper, or worst of all
- Keeps fowls and allows them to stray next door[59]

Yet there is always slippage between protocol and practice. Looking back on 2009 from a century in the future, we might easily presume that all motorists travelled the gazetted speed limit of 50 kph in local streets. In the same way, the historian of the suburbs should be alert to all manner of subversions of any presumed suburban monotony and standardisation. Changes in attitude and behaviour might also be read more longitudinally and with a greater eye for why particular issues become resonant at particular times in the city's history. In other words, why do particular communities of interest galvanise around particular environmental, social, or other issues at particular moments in the city's history? Public health concerns that justified by-laws against spitting in early twentieth century Australian cities, themselves overlaid previous regimes of social control over idlers and larrikins.[60] The planting of nature strips with native grasses – an 'untidy blot' in the 1950s, or decried by neighbours as a weed heap and a fire hazard in 1988[61] – is becoming *de rigeur* in the twenty-first century era of climate change.

56 Brennan, *History of Nunawading*, p. 136.
57 Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*.
58 Hough, *Out of Place*, p. 99.
59 Don't be one of these, *Argus*, 28/03/1950, p. 13.
60 Brown-May, *In the Suburbs*, pp. 28–31.
61 *Herald*, 30/03/1988, p. 3.

CONCLUSION

Histories of Australian suburbia might yet be of great interest, not simply for informing broader national narratives, but as Richard Harris has argued, for lending comparative power to the interpretation of urban development in other times and places.[62] The role of the historian is not simply in 'celebrating the suburbs'[63] but in formulating new models for writing the histories of metropolitan places. As Mary Corbin Sies argues, this involves not only economic and demographic dynamics, but a sensitivity to 'community lifeways', reflected in 'residents' work lives, their domestic practices, consumer patterns, associational lives, leisure activities, belief systems, religious activities, political affiliations, and typical daily routines'.[64] McCalman could once criticise suburban scholarship for 'unimaginative grassroots research . . . in which the empirical is but a wan handmaiden to the theoretical'.[65] For a time perhaps the pendulum swung the other way – as social history itself was seen as old-fashioned and too time-consuming – but there are promising signs among a new generation that collaboration and synthesis of macro and micro processes are possible, as well as integrated analysis of both material and cultural phenomena. Perhaps the latter decades of the twentieth century were still too close for comfort for urban analysts to objectively stand back and see a larger view, and it is to a younger cohort of scholars that we can turn for histories that re-energise the field. John Laverty noted John Lack's questioning of 'the appropriateness of the suburb as a subject for historical enquiry because of its existence as part of a seamless metropolitan area'.[66] There is yet new work, both in Australia and elsewhere, that establishes suburbia as a site of engagement rather than detachment, and the city and the suburb as being much less differentiated than 'variations within the city and among the suburbs'.[67] Laura Balderstone's research into associational life in post-war British Midlands suburbs challenges the stereotypical suburban rhetoric of conformity and community decline.[68] Carla Pascoe is uncovering children's experiences of neighbourhood across inner and suburban spaces of 1950's Melbourne.[69]

Carroll's novel can still lyrically invite the suburbanite to recognise the sum and import of their quotidian lives: 'the street that started bare and filled overnight with weatherboard box houses and gardens that bloomed while you watched . . . the coming and going back from station, work, school and home, throughout the years that saw a suburb born.'[70] The novelist's evocation of place

62 Harris, *No Terror Souses*, p. 247.
63 O'Hanlon, *Cities, Suburbs and Communities*, p. 183.
64 Sies, *North American Suburbs*, p. 321.
65 McCalman, *Suburbia from the Sandpit*, p. 549.
66 Laverty, *Study of City and Regional History*, p. 113.
67 Harris and Lewis, *Geography of North American Cities*, p. 283.
68 Laura Balderstone's preliminary work has been reported to the Suburbs Building and Society lecture series at the centre for Continuing Education, Oxford University, May 2007, and the British Urban History Group meeting at the University of Nottingham, July 2007.
69 Pascoe, *Mapping Koonung Creek*.
70 Carroll, *The Time We Have Taken*, p. 327.

and belonging in the Australian city is a clarion call to the historian. It is now a more broadly accepted although uncomfortable truth that top-down planning has often sold Australians well short when it comes to providing viable, sustainable, equitable cities.[71] If this article may have taken liberties in its selectivity of time and place, it is because the social history of Australia's suburbia, on which the lineages of future needs and desires are to be based, is yet to be written.

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71 Farrelly, The suburban nightmare, *The Age*, 13/10/2007.

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