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URBAN HISTORY AND THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIAN CITIES

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Urban growth is a major theme in economic development and a policy imperative for developed countries that seek to create sustainable cities. We argue that the past weighs heavily on the ability of societies to sustainably manage urban environments. The policy implications of urban history are revealed in comparisons of cities across times and between places. The special issue presents some of the best recent work on the economic and social history of Australian cities. We aim to encourage historians to incorporate urban variables into studies of historical processes and to persuade policymakers to consider historical trends in their analysis.

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Almost 40 years ago, this journal published a special issue of papers on nineteenth-century Australian urban history. John McCarty was editor of *AEHR* (and its predecessor, *Business Archives and History*) from 1961 to 1974; Boris Schedvin was co-editor from 1965 to 1972. The idea of a collection of essays on the history of Australian cities came from McCarty and stemmed from his interest in the role that cities played in the development of regions of recent white settlement.[1] For the September 1970 issue McCarty and Schedvin solicited broad-brush interpretative essays from experienced practitioners such as Weston Bate, and case studies by three postgraduate students, Graeme Davison, Max Kelly, and Bob Jackson, who would go on to make significant contributions to our

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1 C. B. Schedvin, personal communication, 26/10/2008. The issue was reprinted in 1974 as Schedvin and McCarty, *Urbanization in Australia*. McCarty and Schedvin edited a further volume, *Australian Capital Cities*, in 1978.

knowledge of our urban past. Australian scholars, like their North American, European, and Asian counterparts, had written about cities in a negative way.[2] Although Australia's first white inhabitants were town dwellers and the nation remained heavily urbanised as its economy developed, the mythic heroes of Australian history were non-urban people: explorers, squatters, pastoral workers, selectors, and miners. Australian historians neglected the study of cities and towns and tended to focus on topics such as the evolution of political institutions and the labour movement, and the establishment and growth of primary export industries.

It was scholars from other disciplines who first displayed an appreciation of the significance of city growth to modern society. As H. J. Dyos, a pioneer of British urban history observed, when historians entered the field of urban studies 'they arrived like prospectors late for the first rush. Geographers, sociologists, economists, social psychologists, and civic designers were already out panning the gold'.[3] In 1966, Dyos organised a conference at the University of Leicester that brought together people from several disciplines who were working on the history of towns to discuss the nature of urban history and its research materials and methods. His aim was to 'impose a certain rigour' to a growing body of work. In an essay titled 'Agenda for urban historians', he concluded 'that the field is as yet a very ragged one and that those in it are a little confused as to what they are doing'.[4] Across the Atlantic, Richard Wade, whose *The Urban Frontier* (1959) prompted social scientists to rethink the role of cities in the white settlement of North America, published a list of potentially worthwhile topics for urban historians.[5] Wade, who visited Australia as a Fulbright scholar in 1964, saw comprehensive historical studies of individual cities as starting points for scholars in other disciplines who were studying the differences that urban development made to national experiences.[6] Although McCarty and Schedvin wrote no introduction to the September 1970 issue and did not identify it in any way as a special issue, McCarty wrote a long article, 'Australian Capital Cities in the Nineteenth Century', that discussed how urban studies might inform research into wider issues of Australian history.[7]

In these interpretative essays, Dyos, Wade, and McCarty maintained an academically catholic approach and made no attempt to circumscribe the study of 'urban history'. The field was immense, and as the volume of scholarly work from a wide range of disciplines increased Dyos found that 'people got the thrilled excitement of it and the sense of getting into a whole new territory that was there

2 For a discussion of this anti-urban bias, see Frost, Across the Great Divide; Williams, *Country and City*.
3 Dyos, Agenda for urban historians, p. 3.
4 Stave, Conversation with H. J. Dyos, p. 483; Dyos, Agenda for urban historians, p. 46.
5 Wade, *The Urban Frontier*; An agenda for urban history.
6 Wade also commissioned and edited 25 monographs based on urban history dissertations for the *Urban Life in America Series*, published by Oxford University Press.
7 McCarty, Australian capital cities.

for anybody and everybody to use'.[8] When Dyos died in 1978 he was organising a further conference that would consider the state of urban history, and a group of his colleagues at Leicester ran the conference as a tribute to him. The title of the published volume of conference papers – *The Pursuit of Urban History* – suggested that practitioners in the field had not yet agreed on the methodology and scope of the sub-discipline.[9] The very concept of urban history was under attack from Marxist sociologists, who rejected the division of society along spatial lines into 'town' and 'country' sectors, arguing that these constituted no more than settings for historical change.[10] In Britain, urban history entered a period of decline in the late 1970s and the 1980s, as its practitioners worked on more modest, traditional urban topics such as city-building and governance. In America, the so-called 'new urban history' aimed to understand how society was reshaped by urbanisation, through quantitative studies of topics such as social and residential mobility. Although this approach stimulated a flood of new research into American urban history, one of the leading figures in the field, Stephan Thernstrom, dismissed the suggestion that these processes were confined to the city and thought that his work could be described more correctly as case studies in social history.[11] In a 1981 review essay, Michael Ebner described the state of American urban history as 'youthful, growing, yet filled with apprehension'.[12]

For Australia's urban historians, on the other hand, the 1970s and 1980s were a time of great flowering as doctoral theses were turned into books and empirical studies found their way into journals and essay collections.[13] The history of individual towns was explored in scholarly monographs, and official celebrations, notably the Bicentennial in 1988, encouraged Australians to reflect on the urban aspects of their past.[14] But like their British and American counterparts, most Australian urban historians worked within well-defined disciplinary perspectives, specialising in short temporal periods and exploring the complexities and peculiarities of single cases. It was far less common for urban historians to attempt studies that were 'concerned with general processes' and 'revealing the mechanisms and dynamic qualities, both visible and invisible, which align one place with another, or indeed distinguish it from others'.[15] The tendency for individual urban historians to focus on 'their' town resulted in a somewhat narrow vision, with little account of literature relating to towns in other regions. In a sub-discipline that encompassed a range of ideas and methodologies, practitioners appeared to find

8 Stave, Conversation with H. J. Dyos, p. 484.
9 Fraser and Sutcliffe, *Pursuit of Urban History*.
10 See Abrams, Towns and economic growth.
11 Stave, Conversation with Stephan Thernstrom, p. 198.
12 Ebner, Urban history, p. 69.
13 See for example Davison, *Marvellous Melbourne*; Fitzgerald, *Rising Damp*; Hirst, *Adelaide and the Country*; Kelly, *Nineteenth-Century Sydney*; Lawson, *Brisbane in the 1890s*; Roe, *Twentieth Century Sydney*; Wotherspoon, *Sydney's Transport*.
14 See for example Bate, *Lucky City*, *Life After Gold*; Kelly, *Paddock Full of Houses*; Williams, *Making of South Australian Landscape*. On anniversary histories see for example Davison, The capital cities; Dingle, *The Victorians*; Fitzgerald, *Sydney*.
15 Rodger, Urban history, p. 7.

it difficult to keep up with what other researchers were doing. While historians played key roles in setting agendas for urban issues by observing long-term trends and identifying cases that offered lessons to policy-makers, much of the interdisciplinary momentum was lost as scholars working in more clearly defined fields such as urban planning and economics ignored the past almost completely.

This new special issue focuses on Australian cities in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As with the 1970 special issue, it showcases some of the best recent work being done on cities by economic and social historians, and will, hopefully, encourage others who are working, or plan to work, in this vibrant, important area of historical enquiry. The aim of this introductory article is to help prevent further fragmentation of work in urban history and to encourage scholars to consider ways of incorporating urban variables into studies of broader historical processes. We make two key points. First, we argue that there is abundant scope for urban researchers to do work that offers useful lessons that may be applied to cities across time and space, rather than confine themselves to studies of individual cases. As with economic history in general, urban history offers the potential to inform broader issues because 'history provides an immense variety of institutional arrangements that allows us to arrive at conclusions with a general validity, rather than simply improving our understanding of an institution embedded in particular time and place'.[16] Such an approach requires historians to understand the power that cities have to transform economic and social life both internally and in their hinterlands, and their significance as lumps of physical and human capital. Second, work in urban history carries important policy implications. In choosing their topics and methods, urban historians have been, and continue to be, strongly influenced by current debates about society, and the structure and condition of contemporary cities. Our work has the potential to show how urban problems that might appear to be 'new', such as the sustainability of urban growth in the face of rising housing and infrastructure costs and the impact of negative externalities, have often been shared by those who lived in cities during earlier periods.

ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

McCarty's argument that Australia's capital cities were, like San Francisco and Buenos Aires, examples of commercial cities, created to serve the needs of the capitalist world economy, anticipated Fernand Braudel's ideas about the commonalities of town functions. In *Civilization and Capitalism*, a book that appeared in an English translation in 1981, Braudel wrote that 'a town is always a town, wherever it is located, in time as well as space'. What he meant was that cities have the power to shape and reshape the complex spatial systems within which they

16 Hatton, O'Rourke and Taylor, Introduction, p. 2.

function, by encouraging people in their hinterlands to become specialist producers.[17] Towns connect the resources of particular regions to larger, more distant markets by providing inputs, and commercial, finance, and transport services that are essential for market-minded producers. To these generic characteristics that allowed towns to act 'like electric transformers' to their regional economies, Braudel might have added the importance of towns as concentrations of physical and human capital.[18] The commercial functions of cities required heavy investment in dock facilities and defence installations. City growth called for capital formation to provide housing, street paving, drainage, sanitation, and water supplies for large numbers of people. Towns are conducive to the generation of agglomeration economics, derived from the advantages of bringing workers with valuable and diverse skills together. Productivity was raised by the formation of human capital that allowed information to be created and spread through face-to-face contact.[19] The accumulation of social capital through the development of community-based networks benefited city life by 'creating the conditions for collective action to deal with urban diseconomies and in establishing the conditions for powerful external economies'.[20] Braudel's observation that 'over and above their distinctive and original features . . . [towns] all necessarily speak the same language', suggests that we should be able to detect a specifically urban contribution to the development of any region.[21]

For McCarty, commercial cities were created under similar conditions and for an identical purpose – to draw resources from their hinterlands using capital and labour from Industrial Europe. As a result, this group of cities could be expected to resemble each other more closely than they would the traditional or the manufacturing city. McCarty made a case for the use of comparative history by using the method to examine two relationships: first, between Australian capital cities and their hinterlands, and second, between relative levels of capital and labour and the spatial structure of the capital cities. 'There were large peripheral slums in Latin America but not in North American or Australian cities; there were inner city ghettoes in North American but not in Australian cities', a result that McCarty attributed to capital flowing in to develop highly profitable resource-based industries at a faster rate than the arrival of immigrants.[22] This generated labour shortages and high average incomes, and provided the capital needed to build expensive suburbs. A further implication of McCarty's work was that the economic structure of Australian capital cities could provide the basis for comparisons to be made with other commercial cities.

This proved to be an enduring and influential argument that informed subsequent comparative studies of the 'urban frontiers' of Australasia and the American

17 Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, p. 481.
18 Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, p. 479.
19 Simon and Nardinelli, Talk of the town.
20 Daunton, Introduction, p. 53.
21 Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, p. 481.
22 McCarty, Australian capital cities, p. 117.

West. In *New Towns in the New World*, David Hamer explored contemporary perceptions of the role that town growth played as an agent of civilisation in the moral triumph over the 'primitive' elements of 'new' societies.[23] Pamela Statham edited a collection of essays that allowed comparisons of the foundation and siting of Australia's capital cities to be made.[24] Lionel Frost's *The New Urban Frontier* extended McCarty's work by examining the varying levels of public subsidy for developers of suburban land. These institutional frameworks produced variations in the quality of the built environment between commercial cities.[25]

Yet McCarty, and the comparative urban historians who followed his lead, only scratched the surface of the range of urban problems and experiences that warrant investigation. In 1970, urban history was in its infancy throughout the world and only a small number of works existed that could guide any scholar who wanted to draw up a comparative sketch map. Furthermore, research at that time was strongly affected by location-specific constraints. Researchers could only find studies by perusing library shelves and book reviews, or through personal contacts. The process of searching for knowledge was inexact and it seems inevitable that gaps occurred. McCarty drew heavily on the writings of a few scholars: development and international economist Ragnar Nurkse, political scientist Louis Hartz, Wade's *The Urban Frontier*, and Sam Warner's study of suburbanisation in Boston.[26] He appears to have been unaware of several North American studies that would have been of substantial use to him, notably Robert Fogelson's definitive account of the rise of Los Angeles and the making of its urban landscape, Mel Scott's history of the San Francisco Bay Area, and Earl Pomeroy's study of America's Far Western states.[27]

Because McCarty's focus was on major port cities in what Nurkse called 'regions of recent settlement' – settler societies such as Australia, the United States, Canada, Argentina, and New Zealand – he considered the experience of Asian and other Latin American cities only briefly. But his comparative method may be fruitfully extended to consider cases and problems drawn from the Asia–Pacific region. Asian cities that were established or controlled by European trading interests were also influenced by the expansion of the capitalist world economy. Most Westerners doing business in these colonial ports aspired to make a fortune and then return home, with their interests being protected by colonial governments that were generally uninterested in the welfare of indigenous citizens. But the railway and steamship technology that linked inland primary producers to world markets, and the magnetic effects of job opportunities in coastal ports, meant that European commercial motives had 'powerful catalytic effects' on local economies.[28] These effects were also evident in Asian cities that developed

23 Hamer, *New Towns*.
24 Statham, *Origins of Australia's Capital Cities*.
25 Frost, *New Urban Frontier*.
26 Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs*.
27 Fogelson, *Fragmented Metropolis*; Scott, *San Francisco Bay Area*; Pomeroy, *Pacific Slope*.
28 Murphey, Traditionalism and colonialism, p. 78.

trading functions before the intrusion of Europeans. The history of Suzhou in East China, with its rivers and canals that integrated other commercial centres and made possible the optimum use of land, labour, and capital in its hinterland, may therefore inform debates about the nature of the later impact of North American cities on their 'inland empires'.[29]

In this sense, the built environments of Asian and developed world cities that came to resemble each other as the world was 'flattened' by globalisation in the late twentieth century may also have developed strong similarities during and before the colonial period.[30] In studying the urban history of the Asia–Pacific, connections may be detected that transcend national boundaries and may pass unnoticed in studies that are limited in their coverage of time and space. For example, rapid population growth placed towns everywhere under stress, in many cases due to them being built 'in the face of local site problems inevitably resulting from the choice of spots whose advantage for trade were accompanied by serious disadvantages for the physical welfare of traders'.[31] Shanghai, for example, was located on a site that drained so poorly that a Western doctor found it 'a subject of considerable surprise that the inhabitants can live at all among so much filth in the canals, in the streets, and in their own houses'.[32] In Valparaíso, the major port for the mining and export of Chilean nitrates, institutional constraints prevented effective public health responses to overcrowding and defective sanitation as the city's population grew from 70,000 in 1865 to 193,000 in 1930.[33] Such experiences resonate in studies of Sydney, where the 1870s and 1890s 'witnessed the steady deterioration of the physical environment as rapid urban growth proceeded without adequate provision of the amenities likely to preserve the quality of living or basic health of the citizens'.[34] The study of cities where different solutions to urban environmental problems were developed under different cultural and economic circumstances, such as the careful collection of human waste for sale to farmers as fertiliser in Edo (Tokyo) and Osaka, is also instructive.[35] The reaction to the 1900 pandemic of bubonic plague from public health authorities in Honolulu may inform studies of the different response that was made in Sydney.[36]

The problems that cities face today, and the ability of policy-makers to do anything about them, are often shaped by the ways in which previous generations attempted to solve problems. The effects of decisions about urban planning and land use are often long-lasting and operate in a path-dependent way, when choices are made about the allocation of resources from which it is difficult or

29 See Marmé, *Suzhou*; Meinig, Spokane and inland Empire.
30 Dick and Rimmer, Beyond third world city; Friedman, *World is Flat*.
31 Murphey, Traditionalism and colonialism, p. 78.
32 Quoted by Macpherson, *A Wilderness of Marshes*, p. 69.
33 Pineo, Public health care.
34 Fitzgerald, *Rising Damp*, p. 226.
35 Hanley, Urban sanitation.
36 Mohr, *Plague and Fire*; Curson, *Times of Crisis*.

impossible to turn back.[37] Decisions made for what seemed at the time to be logical reasons may exert a lasting impact through positive feedback, limiting the choices that can be made in the future. For example, Gavan Daws observes that when Honolulu began to grow rapidly in the second half of the nineteenth century, its haphazard layout of streets and buildings had lasting implications. 'At any given moment the people of Honolulu were likely to be ruminating upon (though not necessarily correcting) the municipal errors of the past, and observing at the same time with the greatest complacency the commission of newer, greater blunders'.[38] Examples of path-dependent connections between the urban past, present and future abound in the Asia–Pacific region. Sydney's response to the heavy pollution of Sydney Harbour in 1875 – by extending the drains and pumping raw sewage into the Pacific – made it cheaper and easier for subsequent governments to extend the old system, rather than build a new one that treated sewage effectively.[39] The development of low-density suburbs in the nineteenth century made it difficult for cities such as Melbourne and Los Angeles to maintain effective connections between residence and workplace, and provide infrastructure in a cost-effective way in the twentieth century.[40]

WRITING THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY CITY

In 1901, 2.3 million people – 61 per cent of the Australian population – lived in inland and rural areas west of the Great Dividing Range; a further 34 per cent of the population – 1.3 million – lived in the capital cities. Over the course of the twentieth century the Australian population was redistributed from 'the bush' to the capital cities and provincial towns along the coast. While the population of inland Australia increased to 3.3 million by 2001, the capital cities increased their population to 12.3 million. Some of these grew because of twentieth-century industrial expansion, such as Newcastle, Wollongong, and Geelong; others are 'lifestyle' towns within commuting distance of other urban areas; others are places that hardly existed in an urban sense at the end of World War II, such as the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast. In 1901 around one in three Australians lived in a capital city; by 2001 the proportion had increased to two in three. About 3.6 million people – one in five Australians – lived in provincial areas on or near 'the beach'.[41]

As David Merrett observes, this shift was both a consequence and an important cause of the changing structure of the Australian economy.[42] Domestic demand

37 See David, Historical economics.
38 Daws, *Honolulu*, p. 266.
39 Coward, *Out of Sight*.
40 Frost, America's cities and suburbs; Bottles, *Los Angeles*; Dingle and Rasmussen, *Vital Connections*.
41 Salt, *The Big Shift*, p. 59.
42 Merrett, Australian capital cities, p. 171.

for primary products grew more slowly than the economy in general, due to the income elasticity of demand for food being less than one.[43] The elasticity of supply for farm products was high, and food prices declined after 1914 as more land was brought into production worldwide. In Australia, however, the supply of farm land was inelastic, as most of the land that was capable of supporting a rural population was already being used.[44] After World War I, mechanisation, rising costs, and generally falling commodity prices encouraged farmers to increase the size of their holdings. A reduction in the demand for farm labour and the greater mobility afforded to rural families by cars and improved roads meant that increases in rural output no longer automatically generated work in country towns. The decline in the share of primary products in national GDP, employment and capital formation that took place between 1901 and 1939 was offset by a rise in the manufacturing sector's share of output and employment.[45] Industries grew in clusters around the new technologies of electricity and the internal combustion engine that allowed for significant economies of scale.[46] As in Britain and the US, time-saving appliances such as washing machines and refrigerators reduced labour costs and created higher levels of demand for consumer durables.[47] Spending on leisure and entertainment activities increased. Entrepreneurs and firms were assisted in responding to these opportunities by state government investment in roads, bridges, public transport, and large-scale power generation and transmission. Between 1911 and 1947, the capital cities increased their total populations from 1.7 to 3.8 million, and their share of Australia's population from 38 per cent to 51 per cent.[48]

The growth and condition of cities loomed large on the nation's social and political agenda during the post-war period.[49] A programme of assisted immigration and rises in post-war marriage and birth rates helped to provide both consumers and a labour supply for a manufacturing sector that was assisted by further rounds of tariffs and import controls. Australia's population rose by almost three million between 1947 and 1961, with the capital cities that acted as magnets for jobs and people contributing 68 per cent of this increase.[50] The cities were already crowded – interruptions to house building during the Great Depression and World War II had left Australia with a post-war housing shortage that some experts estimated was as high as 480,000 dwellings.[51] By 1954, more than

43 Freebairn, Natural resource industries, pp. 146–7.
44 Frost, Across the Great Divide, pp. 63–71.
45 Merrett, D. and Ville, S. (2007). Tariffs, subsidies and profits: a re-assessment of structural change in Australia 1901–1939. Paper presented to the Australian and Pacific Economic and Business History Conference, University of Sydney.
46 Fleming, Merrett and Ville, *Big End of Town*, pp. 85–8.
47 Bowden and Offer, Household appliances.
48 Merrett, Australian capital cities, pp. 172, 175.
49 See Maddock, The Long Boom.
50 Merrett, Australian capital cities, pp. 172, 190–3.
51 Barnett, Burt and Heath, *We Must Go On*, p. 34. The various estimates of the housing shortage were based on the decline in rates of house building relative to rates of marriage compared with the pre-war period, or on estimates of the number of heads of households that were sharing

40 per cent of the houses constructed in Australia had been self-built by their owners.[52]

As in Britain and America, the deterioration and renewal of old neighbourhoods, and the apparent need to increase the capacity of urban roads close to city centres raised issues about environmental damage and social disadvantage that demanded attention.[53] Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide already had large industrial bases – manufacturing accounted for around 40 per cent of all jobs in 1954, compared with one-quarter of all jobs in Brisbane, Perth, and Hobart – and could offer economies of scale to firms that moved to new industrial areas on 'greenfield' sites in outer suburbs.[54] Firms that needed space for large, single-storey buildings and easy access to main roads found it at Dandenong (Melbourne), Broadmeadows (Melbourne), Parramatta (Sydney), or Elizabeth (Adelaide).

People followed the factories out to the suburbs; investment in housing and associated amenities added further to the economic momentum. Rising incomes, low unemployment, and cheaper cars fuelled a boom in automobile ownership: in 1945 there was one car for every 14 Victorians; by 1960 there was one for every five.[55] Trucks freed factories and other workplaces from the need to locate close to railway lines. While there was still plenty of vacant suburban land within walking distance of public transport routes at the end of World War II, the decentralisation of employment within capital cities turned many workers into cross-town commuters, something that was generally difficult to do using public transport. In his brilliant *Australia's Home*, architect Robin Boyd observed that post-war material shortages engendered austere housing styles, and that the ordinary person had to pay 'the price of privacy' by building in suburbs 'beyond the reach of the pipes and wires which conveyed twentieth-century comfort, and . . . so remote from his work that at least one-eighth of his waking hours would be taken in travel'.[56] The new suburbs were an 'unplanned mess' of poorly drained streets and mostly unsewered houses (Fig. 1).[57] Once people began to use their cars for commuting and new suburbs began to develop away from public transport routes, a fresh set of urban problems emerged quickly. The growing volume of traffic throughout metropolitan areas increased both the private costs (by increasing commuting times) and the social costs of motoring (through increases in traffic jams, accidents, and pollution).

'The interest of historians in particular aspects of the past often reflects the current concerns of the society in which they live and write', Schedvin and

houses or flats with other families. They also included estimates of the number of families living in old housing that was no longer fit for habitation.

52 Dingle, Necessity the mother of invention, p. 68.
53 See Davison and Yelland, *Car Wars*.
54 Frost and Dingle, Sustaining suburbia, p. 33.
55 Dingle, *The Victorians*, pp. 225–6.
56 Boyd, *Australia's Home*, p. 129.
57 Dingle and Rasmussen, *Vital Connections*, p. 217.

Figure 1. A new Melbourne suburb, probably in the late 1950s. The houses and consumer goods came first; made roads and other infrastructure came later.
Source: State Library of Victoria. Reproduced courtesy of the State Library.

McCarty observed in 1974.[58] In Australia, historians responded to the increasing problems of the emergence of the car-based suburban city by focussing attention on the importance of urbanisation to the Australian economy during the first Long Boom, from around 1860 to the 1890s. In *Australia's Domestic Product*, published in 1962, Noel Butlin constructed estimates of key economic variables in Australian economic development.[59] Two years later he published *Investment in Australian Economic Development*, an analysis of this quantitative data.[60] By demonstrating that the size of the urban sector and its demand for manufactured goods and housing were crucial influences on both the development of the Australian economy during the Long Boom and subsequent period of slower economic growth, Butlin established firmly the study of urbanisation as a legitimate

58 Schedvin and McCarty, *Urbanization in Australia*, p. 5.
59 Butlin, A*ustralian Domestic Product.*
60 Butlin, *Investment.*

component of Australian economic history. Butlin's argument, that urban private investment during the first Long Boom starved the public sector of capital that might have been used for social overhead, suggested an explanation for the poor quality of the built environment during the second Long Boom. It was no coincidence that Butlin's historical research explored a major issue that was of contemporary relevance – the case for urbanisation as a means of providing greater well-being for ordinary people. As Graeme Snooks observed, 'Noel had a strong and passionate concern for the progress of humanity'.[61]

Although important work on Australian suburbs and country towns had previously been published by local historians,[62] Butlin's *Investment* remains the seminal publication in the rise of urban history in Australia. By 1970, a group of young scholars that had absorbed Butlin's influence while at the Research School of Social Sciences and Urban Research Unit at the ANU had completed PhDs and were beginning to publish their work.[63] Several studies later tested and extended Butlin's conclusion about the nature and ownership of the housing stock.[64] During the 1970s and 1980s a flood of literature, much of it relating to Sydney, drew a picture of a crowded, substandard urban environment. In its exploration of the inadequacies of Sydney's suburban railways and tramways, and lack of effective sewerage and water supply systems, this work enriched Butlin's argument about the public squalor of Australian cities.[65] Other historians followed with a series of case studies of Australian cities during the first Long Boom. 'The emphasis was now firmly on social history and the lived experience of ordinary people – "history from below", or perhaps from the back streets'.[66]

WRITING THE MODERN CITY

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, Australian cities underwent a series of profound changes in their function and spatial structure. As Mark Peel observes, landscapes such as the planned industrial town of Elizabeth that were created and nurtured during the Long Boom were left exposed as the Boom came to an end during the 1970s.[67] During the 1980s governments in many developed countries

61 Snooks, In my beginning, p. 6.
62 Bate, *Brighton*; Blainey, *History of Camberwell*.
63 See for example Buxton, *The Riverina*, a regional history in which towns play a large role; Davison, *Marvellous Melbourne*.
64 See for example Jackson, House building; Dingle and Merrett, Home owners; Dingle and Merrett, Landlords; Mein Smith and Frost, Suburbia and infant death; Mein Smith and Frost, Homeownership in Adelaide.
65 See for example Fitzgerald, *Rising Damp*; Clark, 'Worse than physic'.
66 O'Hanlon, Cities, suburbs and communities, p. 175. For examples of social history, see Stannage, *People of Perth*; Lack, *History of Footscray*; Davison, Dunstan and McConville, *Outcasts of Melbourne*; McCalman, *Struggletown*.
67 Peel, *Good Times, Hard Times*, p. 84. Also see Eklund, *Steel Town*, on the impacts of the restructuring of the steel industry on Port Kembla in the 1980s and 1990s.

pursued neoliberal policy agendas that sought to dismantle regulatory structures and wind back levels of protection and market intervention. In Australia, the major focus of economic policy was on developing the capacity and flexibility needed to compete in a global economy. These reforms were guided by the principle that the market would send the right signals to help firms to decide on their most efficient location and encourage workers to migrate to where jobs were being created. Old inner city industrial areas and dockside districts that were built to handle the movement and processing of *products* were transformed by the arrival of new industries whose core business was the processing and distribution of *information*. New retailing and office jobs were created in 'edge cities' close to areas of suburban housing, many of them on sites that were largely rural in character during the 1970s.[68] Given the emphasis that governments placed on the creation of best practice in the provision of infrastructure, it was inevitable that this re-distribution of population created concern over the cost of provision of urban services. State governments began to pursue policies aimed at reducing the *per capita* length of pipes, wires and roads by increasing population densities close to public transport routes and reducing the size of new housing lots.[69]

Microeconomic reform improved the efficiency of the Australian economy, and as a result productivity growth surged during the 1990s, making Australia one of the fastest growing member economies of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.[70] The geographical spread of the gains from this growth were uneven, however, as capital sought out areas where the returns were highest, while areas of disadvantage emerged in regions where investment in infrastructure had been cut back and levels of labour force skills were low. So far, only a small number of Australian urban historians have addressed these issues. Peel's study of Elizabeth explored the ways in which the work of the South Australian Housing Trust to incorporate community facilities into the town planning process complemented the formation of community groups and networks within the largely immigrant population.[71] Jenny Gregory's work on East Perth, and Nancy Cushing's and Tony Dingle and Seamus O'Hanlon's articles in this issue focus on the revival of old neighbourhoods and the reinvention of formerly industrial spaces and regions as places of chic housing and 'lifestyle location' in the wake of de-industrialisation and economic restructuring.[72] The Australian shopping mall and edge city await detailed historical investigation, although Peter Spearritt's work on twentieth-century Sydney and the history of shopping represent starting points.[73]

Patrick Troy, one of the pre-eminent urbanists to emerge from the Urban Research Unit that was established at the Australian National University in the

68 Garreau, *Edge City*.
69 Troy, *The Perils of Urban Consolidation*, pp. 3–9.
70 Parham, Sources of productivity revival.
71 Peel, *Good Times, Hard Times*, pp. 85–106.
72 Gregory, Obliterating history?
73 Spearritt, *Sydney's Century*; Spearritt, I shop, therefore I am.

1960s, has lamented the fact that in recent decades 'government urban policy has been developed with seemingly little understanding of the origins of urban planning or why Australian cities take their present form and structure'.[74] In this collection both Jenny Gregory and Andrew May begin the task of remedying that situation. Gregory documents the redevelopment of the Perth CBD in the post-war years. She sees the emergence of an American-style Modernist office core as an outcome of both national economic restructuring and the growth of the resources-based economy from the 1960s onwards, and the inability of grassroots citizens and local government bodies to withstand the political muscle that key players at the 'big end of town' could bring to bear on development-hungry state politicians. May, on the other hand, suggests that historians and others should look the other way, and seek to understand the structure of our cities, not as an outcome of government policy or intangible economic forces, but in the desires and aspirations of millions of 'ordinary' people for the comfort and privacy that the detached home in the suburbs could bring. Revisiting some of the ideas first enunciated by Hugh Stretton in his influential *Ideas for Australian Cities* in 1971, May suggests that even after more than 200 years of colonisation historians are yet to fully comprehend the social and cultural meanings of suburbia to millions of Australians, past and present.[75]

CONCLUSION: A SUSTAINABLE URBAN FUTURE?

Writing at the tail end of the second Long Boom, Stretton argued that the 'Australian preference for family life in private houses and gardens is probably intelligent', and suggested that the most economically efficient and fair way of continuing to achieve this outcome was to create new smaller cities, and to design them along linear lines, 'already practised and proven . . . in Canberra and Adelaide'.[76] In the new century, environmental concerns, most notably around the impact of carbon emissions on global temperatures, have seen the emergence of the concept of the 'sustainable city' as an important policy imperative. The whole concept of 'sustainability' is of course 'multi-faceted and still emergent, and requires open-ended working definitions'.[77] However, if we accept an environmentalist definition of sustainability as 'living in such a way as to not detract from the potential quality of life of future generations',[78] it is clear that past decisions about city building and the formation of communities weigh heavily on our ability to create sustainable cities for the future. As we have seen in the cases of Honolulu

74 Troy, *Perils of Urban Consolidation*, p. 2.
75 Stretton, *Ideas for Australian Cities*, Karskens, *The Rocks*; O'Hanlon, Cities, suburbs and communities.
76 Stretton, *Ideas for Australian Cities*, pp. 4–5.
77 Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, *Sustainable Cities*, p. 1.
78 Flannery, Now or never, pp. 2–3.

and Shanghai, Los Angeles, and Melbourne, selection of a site, implementation of the first town plan, and construction of the first railway are defining events in the histories of cities that can have profound impacts on the ways they develop decades and even centuries later.

Forty years on from Stretton, Spearitt's article in this collection suggests that the unplanned emergence of a 200 km linear city in South-east Queensland might be a somewhat mixed blessing, in economic, social, and environmental terms. A city form that may have seemed rational as recently as the 1970s, may now be incompatible with environmental sustainability and contemporary demographics.[79] But debates about how we might shape our urban futures need to proceed from solid understandings of our pasts. Fortunately, urban historians have begun to address issues of both sustainability and dwelling form and, like their predecessors writing during the second Long Boom, have attempted to show that ideas about more compact cities and sustainable urban economies have historical precedents. Alan Mayne and Susan Lawrence's cross-disciplinary work, based on an archaeological dig in central Melbourne, suggests a method of retrieving information about the ways in which communities operated in compact neighbourhoods that have now vanished.[80] O'Hanlon's work on the history of Melbourne's communal dwelling culture and Andrea Gaynor's recent history of domestic food production in Perth and Melbourne are perhaps harbingers of a new trend that may see urban history again act as a guide to future policy agendas as the most urbanised nation on earth attempts to maintain living standards while not destroying its environment.[81]

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79 Karskens, *The Rocks*; O'Hanlon, Cities, suburbs and communities.
80 Mayne and Lawrence, Ethnographies of Place.
81 O'Hanlon, *Together Apart*; Gaynor, *Harvest of the Suburbs*.

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