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# Renovating reality TV

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### Renovating Reality TV

By Ian Buchanan

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Real estate today has become a form of  
yuppie pornography.

- Marjorie Garber, *Sex and Real Estate*

*The Block* was Australia's hit TV show of 2003. Its viewing audience regularly topped the 2 million mark, easily surpassing all the other 'lifestyle' shows - *DIY Rescue*, *Burke's Backyard*, *Backyard Blitz*, *Changing Rooms*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Location Location*, *Auction Squad*, *Hot Auctions*, the list is practically endless. Australian made TV drama has meanwhile delivered its worst ratings performance in years, virtually guaranteeing *The Block* will not only be repeated but cloned as well. David Castran, the managing director of Audience Development Australia, explains it this way: "recent world turmoil has brought people closer to home to focus on what they control" such as the colour of the dining room wall and the type of turf you sow in your backyard. Meanwhile social researcher Hugh Mackay attributes the turn toward lifestyle TV to a cultural shift in attitudes. On his view, Australians are becoming "more self-obsessed and less compassionate".<sup>1</sup> Why we are so willing and seemingly find so much satisfaction in making these kinds of pronouncements about the deteriorating quality of the national character is a question we will have to come back to because it touches on what I see as one of the central themes of Reality TV, namely civil society. But before we get to that, I think we need to start with the obvious: no viewer of *The Block* can have failed to notice, nationally, we are in the middle of an unprecedented property boom - no state or territory, not even the traditional laggards NT and Tasmania, has been left unaffected

Not only that, the figures indicate our appetite for renovation is all but insatiable, both in reality and on TV, even if as the existence of these shows implies our actual capacity to conduct the renovation we enjoy watching is limited. Australians now spend in excess of \$5 billion per annum on renovation, although according to the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) not all of this expenditure is 'value adding'. Indeed RAIA say much of it, including the apparently shoddy work done by the stars of *The Block*, actually devalues the property!<sup>2</sup> Always alert to the next trend, TV has followed the first big wave of DIY shows with a string of DIY blooper shows revealing just how amateurish we really are. This blend of success and disaster in the handy-person sphere is at the heart of what makes *The Block* so appealing.

*The Block* is the brainchild of two channel nine executive producers David Barbour and Julian Cress, who wondered what would happen "if you mixed *Changing Rooms* with *Sylvania Waters*, *Melrose Place*, *Survivor* and *Big Brother* - and came up with the perfect blend of the two highest-rating trends of television: reality and renovation."<sup>3</sup> The concept is simple but effective: four carefully chosen couples are given \$40 000 each to renovate a flat in the beachside suburb of Bondi, as iconically Australian a place as one could

hope to find.<sup>4</sup> Why they should have to be 'couples' isn't clear - perhaps it is because they are one bedroom flats. But certainly it was a crucial element in the chemistry of the show in the way it seemingly guaranteed a reliable flow of schadenfreude and resentment. The celebrated birthplace of surf life saving, topless sunbathing and the site of the beach volleyball at the 2000 Olympics, Bondi as anyone in Australia would know is a highly desirable 'location', which of course means expensive. The original block of four rather dilapidated flats was purchased for \$1.95 million, more than any of the actual contestants could afford. The contestants have to live in the flat for 3 months and allow cameras to capture their tears, triumphs and temper tantrums as they attempt the modern day form of alchemy: the transformation of home decorating ideas into gold. Along the way, there are prizes to be won for the best individual room, but the end point is to sell the flats at auction. A reserve price of \$595 000 was set and anything above that the contestants got to keep. The couple whose flat achieves the best price at auction wins the grand prize of \$100 000. In the end, the flats sold at auction for between \$655 000 and \$751 000, netting the couples between \$60 000 and \$250 000.

*The Block* taps into two contradictory currents that for the time being at least seem to define Australia's *zeitgeist*: rising housing costs and an associated fall in housing affordability on the one hand, and declining civic engagement on the other. Separating these currents is not straightforward because a change in civil society is at least partly responsible for the boom itself. James Button of *The Age* attributes the housing boom to a widespread view that the government will not provide welfare for retirees. "The old Australian contract is dying - that the state will support you in hard times, that people hang together or hang separately - is dying. It's a new country, of landlords and losers."<sup>5</sup> Baby boomers facing an under-funded retirement are stacking up the equity for themselves and in the process ensuring their grandchildren will not be able to afford their own homes. By the same token, the bidding wars pushing up the prices of property are the product of individual-focused thinking, not social or collective thinking. If there is any collective thinking involved, it is usually attributed to the gen-Xers who, being in real danger of becoming the first generation of Australians not to be able to dream of owning a home, could perhaps be forgiven for hating the baby-boomers. The property boom is concentrating wealth and home-ownership in the over-45 bracket and in the major cities this means first home buyers are waiting longer and longer before entering the market.<sup>6</sup>

Property price indexes in virtually every capital city and more than a few regional centres as well (from Wollongong to Warrigal) have gone vertical at one time or another in the past three years. Melbourne property prices have risen by 141% from March 1996 to March 2003. Sydney, meanwhile, showed a stunning 23% rise in its median house price in the past year, in spite of the fact that everyone is now saying the market there is beginning to show signs of cooling. Under these conditions it is not surprising investors are turning away from other types of equities, such as shares, which have been in negative growth territory for the past three years. This only worsens an already problematic situation because it means there is a greater than usual amount of investor money available for investment in the property sector. In turn, it means investment portfolios on the whole are becoming less diversified, which puts them more at risk if a correction should ever occur. It also means other forms of speculative investment, such as the R&D sector, are being starved for funds.

From a social perspective more telling than the property price index is the widening gap between the number of people borrowing for homes and those who have never - and perhaps will never - own their own home - in Sydney the figure is 30.4% (borrowing for first homes) versus 36.2% (never owned a home).<sup>7</sup> In other words, the number of people who 'hope' to own their own home is declining. This has the paradoxical effect, however, of distorting the picture of the typical first home buyer, because only the comparatively well to do are venturing into the market. People are saving longer and harder before putting down a deposit on their first home, often staying with their parents in the interim. But they are also buying further and further out of

the city to keep mortgages within range - so the typical first home buyer isn't someone trying to buy a \$595 000 inner city flat, but rather someone buying a \$300 000 land and home package in the outer suburbs. It is with nonstratified figures of this nature that conservative critics like *The Age*'s Ross Gittins defend the boom, but that doesn't mean there aren't plenty who are not 'typical' and who are suffering the burden soaring property prices are placing on new entrants into the market.<sup>8</sup> Gittins suggests that the only people who need worry about a property crash are the mug punters who bought apartments off the plan, whereas the average mum and dad owner-occupier will be OK. He bases this prognosis on the Reserve Bank's estimate that the average mortgage accounts for less than 43% of the property's value. This amateurish fudging of figures cannot hide the fact that household wealth is rapidly becoming a matter of when you entered the property market and not simply family earnings. How this will alter the Australian cultural landscape can only be guessed at, but it is not unlikely it will lead to the emergence of a neo-feudal division between landlords and tenants.

Because of the boom real estate affordability has gone into steep decline right around the country. Households owning their own homes has slipped below 70% for the first time since the halcyon days of home ownership in the 1950s. And the percentage of income dedicated to mortgage repayments is edging past the 18% mark. Soothsayers are beginning to say that for the next generation (generation Z?) home ownership is an all but impossible dream. Now that perfectly ordinary suburban homes in Sydney and Melbourne sell for in excess of \$500 000, the required 5% deposit plus costs needed to start the process of owning a home is simply asking too much of twenty-somethings whose incomes have not kept pace with the property market. A stark example of this is the fact that Hobart, long Australia's most affordable city, has slipped off that benchmark because its property values have skyrocketed while its salaries have remained stagnant. It is in danger of becoming an Australian Santa Barbara, a beautiful city the people who actually work there can't afford to live. When you factor in the rising cost of university education, young professionals are often not better off in this respect than their blue-collar peers. HECS means that young professional couples might have a combined debt of \$80 000 to work off before they can begin saving for a deposit, which obviously disadvantages them in the marketplace.

But it is not just the houses themselves that are unaffordable, the aspiration to own all the must have accoutrements of postmodern existence from lava lamps to wine humidifiers is similarly draining. Australians are now drawing down on their equity to purchase these goods boosting national indebtedness to record levels - more than \$47 billion of housing equity has been withdrawn since 2000.<sup>9</sup> TV it seems is to blame for this resetting of commodity lust.<sup>10</sup> One commentator, albeit with her tongue firmly in cheek, has gone so far say that "our television diet is to blame for this extended property boom and the \$17.6 billion renovation boom generated by the 300 000 bathrooms and 411 00 kitchens that are expected to be given the Durie treatment this year."<sup>11</sup> According to John Buchanan we used "to look over our back fence to see what we needed to keep up with the Jones', but now the back fence has gone, along with our neighbours, and we're looking at television to try to work out what enough means today."<sup>12</sup> As any student of Babbitty knows, decorating the family home is a potent and conspicuous means of displaying affluence. As Rachel Buchanan says, "Our homes are like our bodies. We are not supposed to be satisfied with them just the way they are."<sup>13</sup> But now with the rising costs of labour and materials if you want your exterior walls bagged and your interior walls sponged you have to do the work yourself. Fortunately, fashions have changed and thanks to TV there is a definite cachet to DIY which did not exist a generation ago when doing it yourself was a sign that you didn't earn enough not to have to DIY. Then it was known as 'making do' or 'bricolage' whereas now it is a statement of one's 'resilience'.

What this claim that TV is to blame for creating unrealistic aspirations misses is the way these aspirations are

actually being downsized, or perhaps we should say rightsized since they are being trimmed to suit a budget. The unaffordability of suburban houses has made inner city apartments attractive in a way they have never been in the past. It is even rumoured in Melbourne that there are plans afoot to convert the 'stack-a-prole' flats in Richmond, Fitzroy, Carlton, Prahan and other newly fashionable inner-city suburbs, into yuppie apartments; one hopes this is only so much wishful thinking on the part of government bodies excited by the prospect of capitalising on the twin windfalls of the property boom and the changing demographic profile of the inner-city, but it does raise a rather curious question about the changed spatial expectations of the middleclass, because at least part of the thinking behind this idea is the fact that these 'social housing' flats are basically the same size as the yuppie apartments on sale in the Docklands. Today the difference between a flat and an apartment is a matter of fittings and neighbours not space or location, which effectively means there is no intrinsic 'taste' barrier to stand in the way of the redevelopment of these aging bastions of the welfare state. This scenario puts so-called gentrification into its proper perspective as a two-way street: even as the poor are moved out the middleclass are resetting their expectations in order to move in. But I am anxious that this not be interpreted as a panegyric for the middleclass because the implication I want to draw is the rather more sinister one that if the middleclass can now find it within themselves to live in such confined spaces and pronounce them *gemütlich* then the mind cannot but shudder at the prospect of what they will in turn decide is fit and proper for the poor.

This rightsizing of aspirations takes different forms. In the outer suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne the houses are actually getting bigger, but the blocks are shrinking, as are the customary trimmings of the suburban bungalow such as eaves, driveways, pools and style, as the McMansion's detractors are quick to point out. The houses take up most of the block so there is literally no gap between them with the result that visual and acoustic privacy is just as scarce as if you lived in an inner city flat. Big as they are, their footprint is even greater because their designs compromise energy efficiency for the sake of maximising space and minimising the cost of materials. The resulting draughty barn style houses place a huge burden on the environment by consuming disproportionate amounts of electricity and gas to stabilise their internal temperature. The average size of a new house has swollen from 169m<sup>2</sup> in 1990 to 270m<sup>2</sup> in 2001, while the average number of occupants has actually slipped from 3.7 to 2.7.<sup>14</sup> The so-called McMansion phenomenon is what Freud would call a 'reversal into its opposite' of the trigger cause driving inner city residents into smaller and smaller apartments, namely the fact that the great Australian dream, a house in the suburbs, is out of reach not only for the benighted first home buyer, but also the upwardly mobile aspirational purchaser as well. Its logic is clearly, if I can't own an authentic Federation home in an established, leafy suburb, then I can at least have a facsimile in a dustbowl near the airport suitably photo-enlarged to compensate its lack of authenticity. Size offsets the frustrated ambition to live in the rustic abode torn from the pages of a designer catalogue we've been taught to admire.<sup>15</sup> But the suspicion remains that these houses as big and airy as they are, are not really homes - we wonder, along with Heidegger, "do the houses in themselves hold any guarantee that *dwelling* occurs in them?"<sup>16</sup> And find ourselves incapable of answering in the affirmative without at least some hint of self-doubt doubling as nostalgia.

McMansion's are changing the face and indeed the nature of the suburb as we think we know it - if we follow the trend as established by American homebuyers, then the advent of gated communities or 'privatopias' cannot be far off because if the inner-city social housing is emptied out to make way for yuppies then there is only one place left for them to go and that is the McMansionland of the outer suburbs. The fact is we are only just now beginning to see the effects of this transformation, but it is obvious that as housing density increases in the major capital cities as a result of the boom of the past few years, new types of social configurations will emerge. In the inner city teething problems to do with the 'mixed-use' of buildings and indeed entire zones, have begun to make themselves felt as Australians come to grips with what inner-city

'buzz' really means.<sup>17</sup> Because of the sag in the apartment market, risk-conscious developers now favour projects that combine commercial and residential use, which basically amounts to having an each way bet on tenanting. However people who live in such dwellings often find that it isn't necessarily as 'convenient' to be so handy to shops and restaurants as they initially thought. With proximity comes noise, pollution and a premium on parking. In Melbourne this is starting to have an impact on the inner-city music scene (the birthplace of many great acts), which is finding itself under attack from residents who object to late night noise. Why people of such butterfly temperaments thought they could live in the thumping heart of the music scene and not be affected by the noise is a mystery to me, but clearly there is an expectation that like the plasmascreen TV in the corner, the city's buzz should be able to be switched-off when the hardworking executive has an early start.

These two trends - rising costs and falling affordability - converge in the fantasy obviously fuelling *The Block*, namely the age-old capitalist dream of buying low and selling high - but when you look at the figures, it isn't clear that is what actually happened. Each flat cost approximately \$500 000, if you include stamp duty it would be over that figure. They were bought outright by Kerry Packer, but none of the contestants could afford to do that, indeed, most of them could barely afford a loan of that amount, and there's the rub. The Kerry Packers of this world can make money on property deals like this, but without the magic of TV the Adam's and Fiona's of this world cannot because they have loan costs, interest payments, rates and land tax to deal with as well, all of which puts the purchase of so modest a piece of the great Australian dream as a single bedroom flat beyond them. The \$40 000 cash they had to spend renovating the flats would most likely have to be borrowed by the average couple, at a personal loan rate of around 10%. That's assuming they could get the loan in the first place, which is by no means certain. When you add together the outgoings for the mortgage of \$500 000 and the personal loan of \$40 000 you are starting to talk about real money - at least \$3000 per month. Watching a relationship survive that kind of pressure would be genuine Reality TV, but my guess is it would be too gritty to bear. For real sadism (or masochism, depending on which side of the camera you were sitting) try adding a couple of young children into the mix - anyone who has tried renovating with a two year old at their feet can tell you it ramps up the degree of difficulty exponentially.

By concentrating on the inherent drama of 'the decision' (in social theory 'the decision' functions as a kind of code word for politics), *The Block* dialectically brings into focus a disturbing national trend. The property boom has hijacked politics in this country. No government, aspiring or incumbent, can afford to propose a policy that would dampen this boom or curtail the free-spending ways Australians have learned to enjoy in the past decade. The nation stands ready to vote to defend its mortgages and any initiative jeopardising property values can expect short shrift at the polls. Consequently, it seems almost any other policy will be tolerated so long as the housing sector is left alone. The shameful handling of the so-called 'Children Overboard' affair and the distinct lack of a response from the electorate is but one case in point.<sup>18</sup> It is almost as if we are so highly geared as a nation - meaning, so deeply in debt and vulnerable to the most marginal shifts in interest rates and property values - we have become politically paralysed, or perhaps even anaesthetised in the process: we cannot act for fear of the effect it will have on our own private domestic front. But it is not just party politics that has been hijacked by the boom. Witness the Reserve Bank's hesitancy in the face of the decision to alter the prime lending rate. It knows the housing market is overheated and it has issued several warnings to that effect, but it cannot use the one instrument that would surely bring the boom to a halt, namely an increase in the rate, for fear of creating a catastrophic 'correction' that would dump middle Australia into a spiralling world of 'bad debt' and 'negative equity'. In effect, fiscal policy in Australia is hostage to the nation's real estate aspirations.

In a remark that is at once an astute insight into the appeal of this new format and a symptom of the pervasive

neo-liberal viewpoint dominating policy making in most sections and levels of government today, *The Age*'s TV critic Rachel Buchanan argues that "the real reason for *The Block*'s popularity is that it captures a sort of meanness in Australian culture right now. The show provides an illusion of community, these eight people living together in a block of flats and having to make joint decisions about garden beds and fences in harrowing body corporate meetings, but really they are all just out for themselves."<sup>19</sup> As I have argued elsewhere concerning the genre of 'Reality TV' as a whole, its deepest subject is invariably civil society itself, and *The Block* is no exception, but to go from there to a claim about a generalised meanness is both utterly unwarranted and completely typical of the kind of bad press civil society has been getting lately. *The Block* is an easy target in this regard because its connection to civil society is much nearer to the surface than is true of either *Survivor* or *Big Brother*, no doubt because as Mark Lyons has pointed out, "[b]odies corporate provide for many Australians the most immediate experience of pure democracy at work."<sup>20</sup> The irony in this instance is that the object of critique - a representation of civil society - is generally thought to be the cause of the very malaise we are pointing to, namely civic disengagement and the related problem of declining 'social capital' (the policy maker's code phrase for 'working together'). Even the Federal Treasurer Peter Costello has expressed an opinion on the subject - in his July 16, 2003 lecture to the Sydney Institute he rather pithily said:

Although television could well be one of the main causes of disengagement, it is replete with shows that depict people living together in close neighbourhoods. *Neighbours* is one such show. *Friends* is another. The American TV show *Cheers* was about a bar 'where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came'. People laughed and joked and took an interest in each other. There are not too many shows about people who sit at home and just watch TV shows. Even if people don't actually engage that much with their neighbours, they apparently like watching others who do.<sup>21</sup>

Today, 'social capital' is one of those topics that is - as Deleuze once said about 'difference' - "manifestly in the air".<sup>22</sup> Social capital is linked to research into health outcomes, safety and security, civic engagement, blood donation, and personal success in professional careers.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Putnam goes so far as to proclaim that social capital is the bedrock of civil society. Essentially, though, the concept of social capital is an attempt to render measurable the nonfinancial resources a community has at its disposal. Its operative presupposition is the notion that social relations, that is, one's friends, family, work colleagues, constitute a kind of capital (there is considerable debate whether it has to be fungible or not), which can be capitalised in a number of different ways - help with finding a job, neighbourhood watch, car-pooling, and so forth. The nature of this wealth can be articulated in two ways: (1) affirmatively, research shows that someone with rich and varied social connections is more likely to 'get on' in society than someone without those contacts; and (2) negatively, a society poor in social capital will have to spend more money on welfare, policing, and health, than a society rich in social capital because the community is failing to care for itself. In an era dominated by the neo-liberalist doctrine of reducing 'government', the comparative stock of social capital is critical because as 'government' shrinks so 'community' must expand to fill the gaps. The welfare state, like everything these days it seems, is going DIY, whether it wants to or not.

But, as social capital researchers never tire of pointing out, although government ears seem deaf to the warning, the 'community' is not keeping pace, it isn't expanding the way it should; rather, it is going in the opposite direction, declining alarmingly. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given this apparently dire state of affairs, social capital research is 'crisis' driven: it recognises that the current situation is unsustainable and tries to figure out why this crucial resource is drying up. Accordingly, there is a great deal of urgency to social

capital research. While much of that urgency is good-spirited, if not altogether legitimate, inasmuch as it wants to directly address social problems that stand in clear need of redress (for instance, the World Bank's social capital initiative is keen to find ways of helping developing nations to help themselves become independent of foreign financial aid - closer to home, government policy analysts speak about aiding remote indigenous communities in terms of capacity building), that doesn't mean the 'crisis' mode is appropriate. It is one thing to want to help people build a stronger community but quite another to think about why that community now seems to need external assistance to keep its collective body and soul together. This distinction tends to be overlooked in the critical literature on social capital, which for the most part acts as if social capital is somehow an autonomous social problem that can be dealt with in isolation. All other social factors, from changed labouring practices to the rise of the new media, are simply treated as so many intangible variables.

The guru of social capital, Robert Putnam, hazards that television is playing a big part in the generalised decline in social capital he records, but since he cannot establish a clear link he won't commit to it as an explanation. Indeed, he isn't willing to commit to any explanation for the phenomena he feels it necessary to report on and glosses over this gaping hole in his research with somewhat indecent haste. As such, the most Putnam and anyone who follows in his footsteps can do is describe the symptoms of a crisis and offer a batch of homeopathic remedies to 'try at home'. But without interrogating the 'origins of the present crisis', to borrow Perry Anderson's fine phrase, all the elucidation of symptoms does is create a situation of 'moral panic' which, as has been shown by several commentators, serves the interests of the ruling power because fear is its principle mechanism of control.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, by narrating the decline in social capital as a 'crisis' in need of urgent remedial action, any attempt to stop and think about it is de-legitimated in advance because the 'crisis' trope itself has such commanding immediacy it cannot be argued with using the normal rules of philosophical engagement.<sup>25</sup> Although social scientists are supposed to be suspicious of 'narrative', in the case of Putnam's work they have not been suspicious enough for no-one has questioned his choice of trope. Critics of the 'bowling alone' story have concentrated on his methods and data, and while that kind of detailed work obviously needs to be done there is an even more critical line of inquiry to be pursued at the level of narrative. Narrative is anything but incidental to research: it helps define the organising problematic and in this way literally drives it.

The key problem I have with Putnam's narrative is that he highlights numerous ways in which social capital has declined at a local level only to draw a generalised conclusion. Maybe, though, the problem isn't accumulative as he seems to think, but generalised to begin with. By that I mean to say, maybe giving itself has become generalised - or, abstracted - and so the local declines because it has been generalised in the minds of the givers. Here the rise in donations to lobbyists and the decline of union as well as civic club (eg Rotary, The Lions, etc) membership is telling. So perhaps there is another explanation for the decline - as Hardt and Negri point out, the changes wrought to the labour process by the so-called information society have generally involved a kind of universalisation of labour: the same process is involved in almost every kind of work. Whether it is financial services or manufacturing, all work is conducted via the same technology, namely the computer and, one might add, the mobile phone (the latter device, especially, has been incredibly effective in extending the domain and range of work, such that now people speak about switching their phone off to escape work rather than getting away from the office). What we're seeing is a similar model being extended to civic engagement - our relation to civil society is channelled through the twin mechanisms of the credit card and the internet. As Žižek says, the trouble with the internet isn't the fantasy relations we entertain with cyberspace, but the fact that it transforms our day to day subjective relations until we start to treat other people like computers.<sup>26</sup> Hence the new buzz of management books is 'communication', as though people need to be reminded or retrained how to conduct themselves in that now



old-fashioned practice of the face to face social encounter.

What I mean to argue is that social capital isn't drying up, if by that one means it is declining; rather, it is giving out because demand has vastly outstripped supply. Social capital hasn't been eviscerated as Putnam seems to think, rather its exploitation has been intensified to the point of exhaustion. *The Block* folds these kinds of tensions inwards and stages them as negotiations over bathroom fittings, garden ornaments and so forth. In the overheated property market of today, these items have become hypostatized - far too much seems to hinge on whether one buys Miele, Smeg or Ilve. Income has to be used wisely to leverage symbolic capital out of every consumer choice. People are quick to blame TV for destroying social capital - yet the real cause of the demise, namely the historical processes of social change, is left out of consideration. No one wants to admit that depressed wages for instance might have anything to do with it.

In the end, what the DIY rescue crew actually attempts to salvage is the twofold bourgeois fantasy of owning an attractive and capacious home and belonging to a society that cares. It props up the ideological lure of 'community' with its telegenic bonhomie of many helping hands and in the process we come to realise it isn't the finished product, that is the repainted walls and retiled floors, that commands the deepest fantasy-engagement, so much as the pitching-in of complete strangers who by the miracle of their labour solve our equity woes. It is obvious in this respect that the TV love-affair with DIY is driven at least as much by the real estate boom as the ongoing transformation of civil society. A team of strangers helping us out in a moment of need is in practical terms what most of us would like to think the welfare state actually means. The fact that they are helping us to help ourselves chimes perfectly with neo-liberal thinking which, as the Treasurer himself has informed us, is of the view that "welfare can damage communities" by denying them the side-benefits of work.<sup>27</sup>

I think we have to take seriously the jibe cited above suggesting the appeal of *The Block* has more to do with its depiction of civil society than renovation, but be careful about buying into its glib conclusion that Australia is getting meaner. On one level, it is clearly true that Australia is getting meaner, but it is the government that is getting meaner - in the miserly sense of the word - not Australians per se in their day to day encounters with each other. It isn't the bickering between the flatmates that we should focus on but the root cause of that animosity, namely money: as a finite resource being asked to perform miracles, it is the ultimate determining factor in all the fights. In other words, it is the very matrix of the situation which induces the anxiety that from time to time flares into heated words and slammed doors, yet it is only the character of the individuals involved that draws comment. What is worrying about this is that this is precisely how so-called middle Australia responds to poverty induced violence or unrest in general: they see only the character of the people responsible or involved, not the structural situation they are helplessly enmeshed in. And while they are moved by the plight of the individual - just as we empathised with the frustrations of *The Block*'s eight renovators - they do not respond to idea that it is the situation that produces individuals who behave like that. Maybe it is true that this kind of old-fashioned Marxist thinking is too blunt an instrument for dealing with the complexities of contemporary life, but to set aside the concept of situation as a result is to lose the baby with the bathwater. It is only by ignoring the structural conditions in which the contestants are forced to make their way that we could say it is a matter of character.

I also think we have to take seriously the idea that the renovation boom is driven by TV, but we have to be dialectical in working it through because our response to TV is not purely or simply imitative. It has never been the case that we en masse simply do as TV instructs us to do, although there have been countless attempts to persuade us otherwise. Rather what seems to happen is TV provides a symbolic solution to real problems - that is to say, it draws on the day to day to struggles we all face and, as all art forms do, it

elaborates a dramatic form that enables us to make a complex reality tractable to thought.<sup>28</sup> In other words, contrary to the common opinion that TV encourages us not to think, that it dulls thought, I would argue that it enables us to think in precisely the same manner as literature and easel painting does because it performs the same function as those art forms: it creates concepts and narratives which are the conduits through which thought passes. This is not to praise TV by any means, because its concepts and narratives are by no means automatically 'good' or 'well-founded' - of course the same must be said of literature and easel painting. My point is that TV's role in the housing boom is a complex one: I would argue it doesn't so much create unrealistic desires, as the commentator cited above implies, as help us cope with diminishing expectations. On this last point I would stress that I mean TV as an institution, not a particular show, because the prevalence of Reality TV/game shows literally means TV intrudes into daily life and alters it. As the success of *The Block*'s spin-off (or, run-off, as I would prefer to call it to signal its effluent status - to borrow a line from its satiric counterpart, *Kath and Kim*) *Reno Rumble* has given us to think, we have to come accept that government won't offer a helping hand, but if we're lucky enough the *Backyard Blitz* team just might.<sup>29</sup>

*Ian Buchanan holds the foundation Chair of Communication and Cultural Studies at Charles Darwin University.*

1. Castran & Mackay cited in Suzanne Carbonne 2003 "TV Absorbs Culture Shock" *The Age* , September 6, p6 (Insight section).
2. Maurice Dunlevy 2003 "Don't be a building blockhead" *The Weekend Australian*, August 23-4, p 33.
3. Sophie Tedmanson, "How Kerry's cheque put heads on The Block", *The Weekend Australian* , August 16-17, 2003, p 3.
4. The 4 couples were chosen from over 2000 applicants. All of them are exceptionally photogenic as various cross-promotional magazine features have attested.
5. James Button 2003 "Unreal Estate" *The Age* , August 16 (Insight Section) p1.
6. George Megalogenis 2003 "Home for all money" *The Weekend Australian* , November 22-23, (Inquirer section), p 23.
7. George Megalogenis 2003 "Safe as Houses?" *The Weekend Australian* , August 16-17, (Inquirer section), p 23.
8. Ross Gittins 2003 "Most will survive the borrowing binge" *The Age* April 16, p 15.
9. David Bassanese 2003 "Consumers are betting the house on low rates" *The Weekend Australian Financial Review* , September 6-7, p 7.
10. For instance, to live as the characters on *Friends* appear to do you'd need to earn in excess of \$US100 000 and yet clearly none of the characters have the kind of jobs that would pull in that kind of money. By the same token, even those who by any standards are comfortable still seem to think they're doing it tough - a Newspoll survey in 2002 found that 62% of Australians believe they do not earn enough to buy everything they need. Cited in Julie Macken & David Bassanese 2003 "If we're all getting richer, why do we feel so poor", *The Weekend Australian Financial Review* , August 23-4, pp 24-5.
11. Deirdre Macken 2003 "Housing Renovation ideas for the RBA" *The Weekend Australian Financial Review* , August 23-4, pp 28.
12. Cited in Julie Macken & David Bassanese 2003 "If we're all getting richer, why do we feel so poor", *The Weekend Australian Financial Review* , August 23-4, pp 24-5.
13. Rachel Buchanan "View From the Couch" *The Good Weekend* , August 16, 2003, p54,
14. Janet Hawley 2003 "Be it ever so humungous", *The Good Weekend* , August 23, p 27.

15. The humour of *Kath and Kim* , one of the few Australian dramas to succeed in 2003, derives from imagining what life would really be like if everything in it was precisely 'torn from the pages of a magazine'. The trouble is, while it pokes fun at the aspirants, it says nothing at all about the source of those aspirations - it offers no critique of the system.
16. Martin Heidegger 1971 [1952] "Building Dwelling Thinking" in *Poetry, Language, Thought* , trans Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper, pp 143-61.
17. Interestingly, this model is central to Jane Jacobs 1961 vision of an ideal city; what this suggests perhaps is that her model relies much more on the prior existence of social capital (a term she is credited with coining) than even she realised. See Jane Jacobs 1961 *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* , Harmondsworth: Penguin.
18. See my 2003 "August 26 2001: Two or Three Things Australians Don't Seem to Want to Know About Asylum Seekers" *Australian Humanities Review* .
19. Rachel Buchanan "View From the Couch" *The Good Weekend* , August 16, 2003, p54.
20. In 1996, there were over 180 000 bodies corporate in Australia; given the surge in building since then, that figure must have grown since then, making it one of the most common forms of civic association in Australia. Mark Lyons 2001 *Third Sector: The Contribution of Nonprofit and Cooperative Enterprises in Australia* , Sydney: Allen and Unwin, p 90.
21. Peter Costello 2003 "Let's revive a sense of civil society", *The Age* July 17, p11.
22. Gilles Deleuze 1994 *Difference and Repetition* , trans Paul Patton, London: Athlone, p xix.
23. See Robert D. Putnam 2000 *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* . New York: Simon & Schuster.
24. For the most explicit delineation of this thesis, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri 2000 *Empire* , Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p 323.
25. See Jürgen Habermas 1975 *Legitimation Crisis* , trans Thomas McCarthy, Boston: Beacon Press, pp 1-8.
26. See Zizek, S 2003 "Against the Digital Heresy" in *On Belief* , London: Routledge, pp 6-55.
27. Peter Costello 2003 "Let's revive a sense of civil society", *The Age* July 17, p11.
28. The phrase 'symbolic solution to real problems' belongs to Jameson; what follows is my own Deleuzian re-reading of it.
29. A few weeks after I wrote this, TV provided an 'answer of the real' confirming this point. On the first anniversary of the Bali Bombing, the *Backyard Blitz* team did in fact provide quite significant help to survivor, Therese Fox, who suffered burns to more than 85% of her body. They paid her rent for a year, gave her a new car from Holden fully insured, and fixed her garden. Obviously I am very far from thinking this kind of generosity is a bad thing, my argument, though, is that we shouldn't have to look to TV to find it.

In *Australian Humanities Review*, see also

- Ian Buchanan's previous essays in AHR:  
*Deleuze and Pop Music*,  
*Enjoying 'Reality TV'*,  
*Misrecognition in Titanic* and  
*Two or Three Things Australians Don't Seem to Want to Know About 'Asylum Seekers' ...*

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