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# Reading the production of suburbia in post-war Australia

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## Reading the production of suburbia in post-war Australia

### **Abstract**

Suburbia is one of the dominant descriptive motifs in Australian cultural analysis. The cultural attachments of suburbia have occupied an important place in Australian cultural studies throughout the 20th century and continue to be the subject of enthusiastic parody and reappropriation within popular culture.

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## 1 The space of suburban life

Suburbia is one of the dominant descriptive motifs in Australian cultural analysis. With a concentration of its population in large metropolitan areas that is matched by few developed countries, Australia's cities also have a reputation as some of the most dispersed urban regions in the world. (Maher 1986: 13, Berry 1984: 64, Johnson 1994: 1, McGregor 1966: 121). The cultural attachments of suburbia have occupied an important place in Australian cultural studies throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continue to be the subject of enthusiastic parody and reappropriation within popular culture. Early obsessions with colonial trappings and myths of the rural settler in defining national identity have now largely been displaced by an interest in a deconcentrated form of settlement space, which is often assumed to be a characteristically 'Australian' mode of urban life.

Representations of suburbia are now commonplace in Australian fiction (Malouf 1975, Lucashenko 1997, Lohrey 1995, Gerster 1992) and in the visual arts they have played an increasingly important role — from the art of Keith Looby (McQueen 1988) to the hyper-coloured and lovingly ambiguous portrayals of the aesthetics of post-war suburban housing in the work of Howard Arkley (Arkley 1999, Crawford & Edgar 2001, Preston 2002). Strikingly, much of the resurgence of the country's

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cinema industry during the last three decades has been marked by narratives based around a suburban setting. Close attention to the aesthetics of suburban life appears to have become almost essential for any film-maker wishing to produce 'realist' visual representations of Australian culture.<sup>2</sup>

Over the same period, the dominance of this spatial form has prompted the orientation of a significant stream of academic urban analysis towards the study of suburbia as the site of the reproduction of social life in Australia. This heightened appreciation amongst the social sciences of the particular spatial forms which structure everyday life in Australia is indicative of a general realisation of the limitations of simplistic identifications between the urban and high culture, and the association of the suburban with baseness, and a cultural void. Accordingly, the various forms of aversion to the suburban ideal throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been largely overtaken in contemporary Australian cultural studies by an acceptance of the 'reality', and indeed popularity of deconcentrated urban development. Attention has now turned to the micro-practices of everyday life, such as consumption, housing design and the cultural pluralism of Australian cities, in an apparent abandonment of abstract critiques of suburbia (McQueen 1988: 36–9).<sup>3</sup>

Much of the recent work recognising the importance of suburbia as an object of critical inquiry is driven by an awareness of the 'spatial turn' in the social sciences more generally. Drawing on many of the influences in critical geography during the past three decades, these writings narrate stories which have hitherto been hidden behind closed doors and opaque fly screens. They self-consciously identify suburbia as the key to understanding the spatial dimensions of contemporary Australian social life (Fincher & Jacobs 1998, Grace et al 1997, Watson & Gibson 1995, Davison et al 1995, Ferber et al 1994, Gibson & Watson 1994, Johnson 1994). In this article I will delve deeper into the theoretical resources of critical geography, in order to explain the emergence of suburbia in the post-war era in terms of its spatial production. Drawing on the work of the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre,

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I will argue that urban planning laws in the post-war decades played a crucial role in the production of suburbia, through both the imposition of a dominant set of ideological representations of space and their physical realisation in the urban environment. The ubiquity of the detached bungalow and the quarter-acre block instantiates a particular ideological mode of personal living, but suburbia also generates a template for urban planning in the form of the sprawling, car dependent conurbation.

Lefebvre's writings on the produced nature of social space and his long standing interest in the spatial practices of everyday life provide excellent theoretical resources for a materialist account of planning's role in the emergence of this particular form of settlement space. Using Lefebvre's theoretical depiction of the complexity of social space, I will argue that Australian suburbia embodies both an ensemble of *representations of space*, imposed through the planning, administration and legal regulation of the city, and a collection of constitutive, everyday *spatial practices*. In turn, it will be suggested that Lefebvre's work opens up a number of possibilities for thinking about the spatial politics of Australia's contemporary suburbanised cities.

## 2 Henri Lefebvre: philosophy and the production of space

At an early point of *The Production of Space* Lefebvre forcefully asserts the limits of a semiotic project which is content to read space as pure text. He argues that when codes derived from literary texts are uncritically applied to spaces as they present themselves to the naked eye, there is a danger that analysis will remain at a purely descriptive level and fail to provide an adequate explanation of the hidden social struggles and structural forces that have been crucial to the production of that space. In his words, attempts

to use such codes as a means of deciphering social space must surely reduce that space itself to the status of a *message*, and the inhabiting of it to the status of a *reading*. This is to evade both history and practice (1991: 7).

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Accordingly, for Lefebvre any act of reading space should acknowledge the processes through which it has been produced and draw attention to the importance of the connections between space and practice, or more specifically, between space and its production (Lefebvre 1991: 142–3, Buchanan 1994). Here I will provide an outline of Lefebvre's theory of space and put it to work in a reading of the production of Australian suburbia in the decades following the second world war.

A central claim in *The Production of Space* is that a particular 'common-sense' philosophy has guided the understanding of space and spatial relations in the various scientific disciplines since the Enlightenment. The intellectual roots of this philosophy lie in what Lefebvre terms the 'absolute' conception of space which initially emerged from the Cartesian distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. On this view, space was conceived in geometric terms as extension rather than thought, and therefore it could be reduced to sets of coordinates, lines and planes, capable of quantitative measurement. Kant's understanding of space and time as *a priori* categories further complicated this account by identifying space within the realm of consciousness (Lefebvre 1991: 1–2, Elden 2004: 186–7). These two influences mark the parameters of a philosophy which is simultaneously committed to an ontology of space as an empty vessel existing prior to the matter which fills it, and an epistemological reduction of space to abstract, mental formulations. The influence of this philosophy of space is clear in the natural sciences and particularly in positivist geography where the abstraction and quantification of space reigns supreme. However, Lefebvre identifies a number of 'critical' approaches to social inquiry which have also adopted ways of speaking about space that rely on an implicit identification of 'mental spaces' with social and physical space. Culprits here include Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan, all of whom, he argues, subsume the social analysis of spatial relations within the description of mental codifications of space (Lefebvre 1991: 3–6).

At one level, it is possible to read Lefebvre's discussion in this part of *The Production of Space* as simply a critique of both positivist science and the idealist currents of post-structuralist French social

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theory. But the points he makes are linked to the more substantial argument that our understanding of space needs to move beyond the unhelpful dichotomy between the physical dimensions of space and abstract conceptions of it. What is needed is a means of connecting the physical and the mental with the social or lived character of space, in an account of how space — including, not least, our abstractions and conceptions of it — is produced through human agency. By fetishising space as a purely epistemological category and collapsing social relations into the mental realm, social theory has oscillated between imposing a systematic logic on social analysis and (more often) accepting ‘a chasm between the logical, mathematical, and epistemological realms ... and practice’ (Lefebvre 1991: 300). As a result, most social scientific disciplines have tended to reinforce a fragmentation of the mental, physical and social fields which has, in turn, led to an impoverished understanding of space. Lefebvre is interested in reducing this fragmentation and explaining the spatial relationships and connections between these three fields (Lefebvre 1991: 11). In *The Production of Space* he establishes a typology aimed at restoring a dialectical unity between these three spatial ‘moments’. He explains their complex inter-relationships in terms of a conceptual triad consisting of the following elements.

*Representations of space* are forms of abstract knowledge connected to formal and institutional apparatuses of power involved in the organisation of space. Obvious examples include the work of planners, bureaucrats, social engineers, cartographers and the variety of scientific disciplines holding socially recognised ‘expertise’ in the management of spatial form. Such practitioners tend to ‘identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived’ (Lefebvre 1991: 38). Lefebvre sees in these forms of knowledge the dominant ideological approach to space in any society, which brings with it a body of intellectual codes and signs. The currently hegemonic representations of space are linked to the technocratic rationality of positivist science and embody tendencies towards abstraction, mathematical modelling and the quantification of social phenomena. Lefebvre warns that any approach to social theory which dwells on such representations to the exclusion

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of other components of social space will inevitably fall prey to the limitations of structuralism, or will be seduced by other forms of reductionism.

*Spatial practice* constitutes the physical practices, everyday routines, networks and pathways through which the totality of social life is reproduced. Spatial practice is a commonsense, practical engagement with the external world. It includes both the individually embodied social rhythms of daily life and the social networks and transport patterns produced by modern forms of urbanisation. Within any society, these practices retain a certain cohesion and continuity and facilitate communication and social exchange (Lefebvre 1991: 33) but they remain relatively undetermined by the logic of scientific thought. They correspond to the realm of the perceived — in the sense that they arise out of the perception of empirical reality rather than as the product of a process of rigorous intellectual reflection.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the links between the different elements of spatial practice, such as the individual habits and rituals of everyday life and collectively consumed transport and communication networks, often remain obscured (Lefebvre 1991: 38).

*Representational spaces*<sup>5</sup> are the component of Lefebvre's triad most closely associated with the social and bodily functions of lived experience. They form part of the social imaginary of 'inhabitants and users' of space, in which complex symbolisms are linked to non-hegemonic forms of creative practice and social resistance. Unlike the mundane interaction with the everyday through spatial practices and the abstract scientism of representations of space, representational spaces provide the means for engagement in struggles for alternative forms of spatial organisation. They are the sites of resistance and counter-discourses which have either escaped the purview of bureaucratic power or manifest a refusal to acknowledge its authority. Lefebvre provides some concrete examples, drawing on the popular restructuring of space by excluded urban communities in Latin America. Shanty towns (*barrios* and *favelas*) have developed forms of social ordering, architecture and planning which demonstrate the possibility of reappropriating space and undermining institutionalised forms of



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spatial organisation (Lefebvre 1991: 373–4, Santos 1992, 1977). Other examples might include artistic and politically confrontational uses of space, such as demonstrations, street festivals and creative means of avoiding legal prohibitions of spatial uses.

The elements of this conceptual triad attempt to describe the totality of social space and provide the starting point for Lefebvre's description of its multiple dimensions. In his account, the dialectical unity of these three dimensions of space — the mental, the physical and the lived — is crucial to any explanation of space's production and social use. In addition, he describes space as a social matrix that operates as a 'presupposition, medium and product of the social relations of capitalism' (Brenner 1997: 140, Lefebvre 1991: 73). It is an ensemble of social relations and networks that make social action possible. It is part of productive processes, a mechanism of state regulation and the site of political struggle. This depiction provides a counter-move to tendencies that treat social space as a mere object or a receptacle, or that reduce the social and physical aspects of space to simplified mental codes.

Lefebvre threads through his theory of social space a reworking of Marx's chronology of historical stages of social development as a history of modes of production of space. He notes Marx's procedural move to depict history by working back from the fruits of production to productive activity itself, and provides his own twist by arguing that 'any activity developed over (historical) time engenders (produces) a space, and can only attain practical "reality" or concrete existence within that space' (Lefebvre 1991: 115). To present a portrait of the historical evolution of space is therefore to explain the spatial prerequisites for the genesis of modern capitalism. Just as the rise of mercantilism in Europe during the middle ages brought with it a transformation of the relationship between town and country (Lefebvre 1991: 77–9), so too contemporary capitalism has produced a new spatial form in the sprawling, suburbanised city.

The space of contemporary life is denoted as *abstract space* — the fragmentary but pulverised space created by the imperatives of capital and the state's involvement in the management and domination of space.

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It serves as a primer for and nurtures the survival and reproduction of capitalist social relations. This is so, particularly in the priority it gives to the nuclear family as a private consumption unit. As Lefebvre notes:

a characteristic contradiction of abstract space consists in the fact that, although it denies the sensual and the sexual, its only immediate point of reference is genitility: the family unit, the type of dwelling ..., fatherhood and motherhood, and the assumption that fertility and fulfilment are identical. The reproduction of social relations is thus crudely conflated with biological reproduction, which is itself conceived of in the crudest and most simplistic way imaginable.

In addition to this, Lefebvre outlines three characteristic tendencies that simultaneously attach to abstract space. These are orientations towards fragmentation, homogeneity, and hierarchy (Lefebvre 2003: 210, Martins 1982: 177–8, Gottdiener 1994: 126). It will be argued here that the post-war planning of suburbia can be understood as a crucial contributor to the reproduction of the contradictory social relations of abstract space. Suburbia is simultaneously premised on tendencies towards fragmentation — seen most obviously in large-scale road development, land-use zoning and sub-division; homogeneity — imposed by the categories of zoning uses and the repetitive application of similar models of housing construction; and hierarchy — exacerbated by the private ownership of land, state control over land uses and the differentiation between suburbs on the basis of income and status.

Much of the writing in Australian urban studies has explained the rise of suburbia as the hegemonic form of urban development with reference to numerous interacting social and economic forces. These include the development of technology and infrastructure, ideological attachments to individualistic forms of social organisation and fears of moral or sanitary danger within urban centres. The state's role in urban regulation and governance has provided a site where these technological and functional requirements, and ideological representations of space have overlapped and intersected. In the next three sections, I will explore the key role played by regimes of urban planning in the production of the deconcentrated urban settlement patterns of Australian suburbia,

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through the imposition of abstract representations of space and the engendering of a particular form of spatial practice.

### 3 Urban planning and representations of space

From the late 19th century, 'progressive' planning movements asserted the values of home ownership and suburban estates as moralising forces, which incorporated the working population into a hierarchy outside the world of production. This has inevitably meant that the historical production of suburbia has been connected to the development of the various dimensions of everyday life, and industrialised societies are now increasingly oriented 'ideologically and practically' away from narrow forms of production and towards everyday practices of consumption (Lefebvre 1996: 77). To fully understand the ideological associations surrounding suburbia, it is necessary to acknowledge their historical prerequisites. In particular Lefebvre situates the rise of suburbia as a way of life in the context of a discursive shift in the late 19th century from the concept of inhabitation to that of habitat.

Inhabitation involves an active and meaningful participation in community life which flows from the right to use urban space. Habitat is, by contrast, a passive concept, embodying the domination of inhabitants, rendered powerless by the functional isolation of housing from the complex totality of the city (Lefebvre 1996: 76–7). The suburbs developed partially in response to the growth of industrialisation but also increasingly under the sway of an anti-urban ideology that was prominent amongst the early planning reform movement. At the end of the second world war, the concept of a 'housing crisis' crystallised the concept of habitat into a purer and more strategic form. The bureaucratic state played a central role in promoting this form of living through both public housing programs and planning for large scale suburban housing estates. Another discursive casualty of the movement from inhabitation to habitat, was the notion of residence. It was replaced by the functional abstraction — *housing*, which even entered the vocabulary of the

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reformist left as a dimension of the social wage (Lefebvre 1991: 314, 1996: 78). At the ascendant point of the classical phase of capitalism (the *belle époque*), housing began to take on a meaning,

along with its corollaries — minimal living space, as quantified in terms of modular units and speed of access; likewise minimal facilities and a programmed environment. What was actually being defined here ... was the lowest possible *threshold of tolerability* (Lefebvre 1991: 316).

By the middle of the 20th century, this process had produced suburban housing estates and in some cities ‘new towns’, which marked a shift to a new bare minimum defined in terms of the ‘lowest possible *threshold of sociability* — the point beyond which survival would be impossible because all social life would have disappeared’ (Lefebvre 1991: 316). The housing sector and the logic of habitat were the generators of a ‘(partial) system of significations’ associated with an increasingly influential ideology of ‘the plot’ (Lefebvre 1996: 116). Known colloquially in Australia as the ‘quarter-acre block’, this ideological construction played an important part in the extension of private home ownership in the post-war decades and in the creation of a spatial form maximising private space and minimising public space.<sup>6</sup>

The state’s administration of space through the operational practice of spatial planners intensified and strengthened this ideological formation. Throughout the 20th century, zoning was the archetypal model of land-use control in the traditional armoury of statutory planning. Although ubiquitous as ‘the principal instrument of spatial regulation’ in Australian cities during the post-war decades (Gleeson 2000: 127), it has generally been neglected as the subject of theoretical investigation for its own sake. This has been the case within both traditional and ‘radical’ planning scholarship<sup>77</sup> (Huxley 1994a: 148).

Zoning is an essentially negative means of control, which operates by proscribing certain uses within zones designated in a pre-existing master plan (Neutze 1977: 222–4, 1978: 26–33). It relies on a notional commitment to physical determinism — the prioritising of physical and technical solutions to urban problems (Sandercock 1983: 35, 1990: 57–69). In Australia this approach has tended to derive from a distorted

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version of Ebenezer Howard's 'garden city' model — notably without its collectivist aspirations. This physicalist focus has been combined with a formalist reduction of planning to the development control process and purely reactive responses to applications for development approval.

As well as providing a technical means for regulating land uses and the built environment, zoning has been a classic example of urban planning's bureaucratic rationality in practice. The practice of zoning depends on a body of representations which derive from the intellectual strategy of dividing space into fragments. In turn these fragments are assigned internally homogeneous uses and are imposed by a zoning scheme on the land. Hence zoning both codifies dominant representations of space and helps to reproduce their dominance by inscribing them in the physical uses of land. By dividing space into zones, imposing a certain homogeneity within them, and hierarchically arranging these fragments of space, it displays the classic hallmarks of state power engaged in the production of abstract space. The effects of this may be seen 'on the ground' where

the state-bureaucratic order ... simultaneously achieves self-actualization and self-concealment, fuzzing its image in the crystal-clear air of functional and structural readability (Lefebvre 1991: 317).

So entrenched and unquestioned is the rationality which underpins such 'spatial distinctions and divisions' that

(z)oning, ... which is responsible — precisely — for fragmentation, break-up and separation under the umbrella of a bureaucratically decreed unity, is conflated with the rational capacity to discriminate (Lefebvre 1991: 317).

It is thus possible to distinguish Lefebvre's critique of land-use zoning from both the economic reductionism and functionalism that have dominated much orthodox Marxist literature on planning (Harvey 1985, Roweis 1981, Scott & Roweis 1977) and the Foucauldian analysis employed by writers such as Margo Huxley (1997a, 1997b, 1994a, 1994b, 1989). In Lefebvre's account, such land-use planning techniques can neither be reduced to an instrument of economic regulation for capital nor to an exercise of power and social control. They are part of a specifically anti-urban strategy, driven by the state's imperatives

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towards the reproduction of abstract space. Zoning consists of a complex set of operations on social space, with both formal and functional dimensions. It relies on the inherently formalist representations of space generated by the sciences of cartography, surveying and physical geography. These representations reduce the complexity of lived space into a flattened surface, capable of being strategically fragmented, quantified and commodified according to functionalist criteria. Consequently, zoning represents the degeneration and debasement of Cartesian reason into a simplistic technocratic rationality, the contours of which will be explored next.

## **4 Planning and the ‘rationality of habitat’**

A key component of the construction of suburbia in post-war Australia by forms of regulatory control such as land-use planning, is what Lefebvre refers to as the ‘rationality of habitat’. This rationality embodies three essential elements: an ideological formalism, a functionalist commitment to the segmentation of space into various zones, and a structural imposition of this functionalist logic on space through ‘expert’ scientific and technocratic solutions to planning problems. I will discuss each of these elements in turn.

First, the rationality of habitat is associated with an ideological formalism, which depends upon a ‘logic of visualisation’ (Lefebvre 1991: 285). This logic takes the readability of space for granted and conceals the condensation of power relations hidden in space (Lefebvre 1991: 142–7). It is most clearly exemplified by the reliance on the ‘bird’s-eye view’ and perspectival models of cartography. These allow the adoption of aesthetic criteria which reduce knowledge of the city as a totality. As an example, Lesley Johnson draws attention to the role of the aerial view in the master planner’s repertoire. By deciphering space from above, planners flatten out the structural depth of social reality, leaving only a surface (Johnson 1997: 60, Harvey 1989: 245–59). This has contributed to the adoption of spatially determinist solutions for a range of urban problems in the post-war decades, such as the ‘cleansing’ of inner city slums to reduce vice, disease and visible squalor. More recently, Gleeson

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and Low see the continued operation of this logic in policy documents which fetishise urban 'design' and attempt to reduce 'planning to a politics of surfaces ... to nothing more than representations, images and "visions"' (Gleeson & Low 2000: 190–1, ALGA 1997, PMUDTF 1994).

Another component of the rationality of post-war planning has been a commitment to a technocratic functionalism, arising as a response to the growth of industrialisation and the perceived need to control and administer the city along the lines of an ordered hierarchy. By reducing the city to a series of isolated functions and detaching it from a social totality, this functionalist approach has allowed for the segmentation of planning into areas such as housing, transport, industry and culture (Lefebvre 1996: 76–7). With the adoption of a model of deconcentrated home-ownership as the norm, land-use planning, has contributed to a suppression of the city. But this devaluation of urban society under the guise of suburbanisation is not solely attributable to the assertion of public power. It is also pursued in tandem with the private sector's imposition of functional housing forms, controlled consumption and the leisure industry on everyday life. Planning is thereby subordinated to priorities associated with the 'general organization of industry'.

Attacked both from above and below, the city is associated to industrial enterprise: it figures in planning as a cog: it becomes the material device to organise production, control the daily life of the producers and the consumption of products (Lefebvre 1996: 126).

Lastly, for Lefebvre the rationality of habitat is structurally premised on the authoritarian imposition of technical and scientific expertise over more democratic methods of determining spatial uses. This is partly attributable to the privileged position accorded to the notion of the master planner and the visualised conception of reality accompanying modernist planning practice. But it is also generated by the state's suspicion of the 'urban' as a social form with tendencies towards autonomy. The increasingly dominant planning strategy of post-war modernism swallowed up these characteristics of municipal life and led to 'a city-wide institutional crisis of urban jurisdiction and administration' (Lefebvre 1996: 141).

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It is true that under Australia's federal system, urban governance has never been identical to that of the centralised, post-war French state that is the primary target of Lefebvre's critique. Nevertheless it is possible to use his analysis of planning rationality to understand the practice of Australian post-war planning as a local manifestation of a state form which emerged during the decades following the second world war. At the local authority level, planning was collapsed into a narrowly conceived body of zoning techniques, which display the classic characteristics associated with the rationality of habitat. This reduction of planning's jurisdiction to a technical exercise is blamed by Sandercock on the failure of the early planning movement in Australia to pursue the reformist implications of its theoretical roots. This movement adopted a deradicalised version of Howard's 'garden city' and embraced physical determinism, thereby failing to pursue the political dimensions of its practice (Sandercock 1990: 67–9, 1983: 35). Consequently it was easily incorporated within an alternative political project — that of the state management of social space.

## **5 Suburbia: the spatial practice of everyday life**

The crucial ideological and material role played by the rationality of habitat in Australia's great post-war suburban expansion can be observed in the spatial practices that it has generated. The spatial practice of contemporary suburbia requires both a certain ordering of living arrangements (for example, the detached house or the housing estate), and the resources and infrastructure necessary for the social functions of residential dispersal (water, sewerage and waste disposal, electricity, gas, transport, communications and other exchange networks). This practice contains tendencies that are directed towards the decentring and dissolution of the city. As inhabitants become detached from territory,

people (the 'inhabitants') move about in a space which tends towards a geometric isotopy, full of instructions and signals, where qualitative differences of places and moments no longer matter (Lefebvre 1996: 128).



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Transport requirements and the constraints of traffic congestion are particularly important in this subsumption of urban social relations into a fragmented and abstract suburban 'fabric'. Road development programs by state governments have had a significant impact on the growth of an urban form which has become utterly dependent on and structured around the private automobile. Transport planning can therefore be seen as part of an historical process of commodification of social life. In Lefebvre's words, one of the last barriers to commodification — the city — has been subjected to a strategic assault by 'the car — the current pilot-object in the world of commodities' (1996: 167).

He argues that despite the obvious differences between different forms of housing, particularly that between the quarter-acre block and social housing estates, in both cases a moral and political dominance has been achieved by significations that attach to 'the plot' (Lefebvre 1996: 79–80, 116–7). The values associated with the social form of the detached suburban house have thus become embedded in popular consciousness as the 'reference point' by which all other forms of housing can be measured (Lefebvre 1996: 113). There is also a theoretical association, between the suburban home and the development of the 'bureaucratic society of controlled consumption' (Lefebvre 1984: 68–110). It is here that the middle class finds what it seeks, by 'tak(ing) up residence' in an abstract space which is 'the locus of all the agitations and disputations of mimesis: of fashion, sport, art, advertising, and sexuality transformed into ideology' (Lefebvre 1991: 309, 1984: 68–110). Such an ideology and its attendant representations of space have not only helped to discursively structure suburbia, their significations are grounded in the materiality of everyday spatial practices. Rather than explaining suburbanisation as a consequence of an organic process of urban growth or as purely the product of technological innovation, Lefebvre's theory of space allows us to see it as part of a larger social process: one which not only generates tendencies towards deconcentration, but produces social space itself. Accordingly, it allows us to connect our understandings of the physical, ideological and lived dimensions of the development of suburbia.

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## 6 Suburbia and the politics of space

Despite the overwhelming dominance of the rationality of habitat and the representations of space that accompany it, generalised suburbanisation has not completely extinguished the urban as a space of encounter, which allows differences to flourish and generates the possibility of collective civic action (Lefebvre 1996: 120). The most common form in which the state has attempted to reassert the importance of the urban centre in Australia has been through policies aimed at urban consolidation. Emerging from recent technical and bureaucratic rejections of 'urban sprawl' and environmental concerns about more efficient forms of energy consumption in large cities, urban consolidation has been widely proclaimed as the answer to the endless expansion of existing cities. Yet there are strong arguments that such policies may only provide partial and technical solutions to complex urban problems (Troy 1996, Orchard 1995, Peel 1995, McLoughlin 1991).

A more thoroughgoing resistance to the strategic goals of abstract space would attempt to reappropriate space in ways which escape the prescriptive logic of the planning scheme. Within everyday life lie the possibilities for the reassertion of differences and the re-inscription of alternative schemes of uses which undermine the utilitarian projects of state planners. In post-war Australia, there have been numerous examples of popular struggles over planning issues that have demanded the defence of uses values over the value of exchange, and have resisted the authoritarianism of state and local planning bureaucracies. Classic examples include the resistance to high-rise developments by working class communities in the Rocks and Woolloomooloo areas of Sydney, the 'Green Bans' imposed on development projects by the Builders Labourers Federation in the early 1970s, and intense struggles in Brisbane to resist freeway construction through Bowen Hills in the mid-1970s and along Hale Street during the 1980s (Sandercock 1990: 248–52, Burgmann & Burgmann 1998, Gray & Lane 1982, Mullins 1977, 1979, Mullins & West 1998).

These conflicts raise an issue which is at the very heart of Lefebvre's social theory —the importance of the concept of the urban. More than

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simply a physical site of spatial struggles, the urban is ‘a model, a perpetual prototype of use value resisting the generalizations of exchange value in a capitalist economy under the authority of a homogenizing state’ (Lefebvre 1979: 291). It has the potential to restore the creative production of the city as *oeuvre*, in opposition to tendencies towards the commodification of space. Lefebvre depicts this struggle as the passage from the domination of abstract space to the appropriation of space by the bodies of its users (Lefebvre 1991: 164–8). This marks a conflict between representations of abstract space — propounded by the state and the market — and contradictory representational spaces, established through creative ‘moments’ within everyday life and struggles for the development of counter-spaces. This presupposes the generation of a spatial practice of the whole body — a concrete actualisation of representational spaces.

Such a potential renewal of spatial practice returns us to our suburbanised cities as the arena in which the potential production of ‘counter-spaces’ must take place. A recent, if ultimately unsuccessful attempt in this regard occurred during the community struggle in 2001 and 2002 to preserve one of the last remaining pockets of bushland in the inner Brisbane suburb of Highgate Hill. Commonly known as the ‘Gully’, this 5 acre area in a gorge running into the Brisbane River was home to wide range of native flora and fauna, and since the 1970s was periodically the subject of planning disputes over proposals to develop the site. The last of these skirmishes involved local opposition to a high density townhouse development which necessitated a massive earthmoving exercise to fill the Gully, and radically transformed the aesthetic and ecological status of the area.

The campaign to save the Gully brought together a wide network of community activists, environmentalists, property owners, unionists and radical planners who collaborated in regenerating the bushland, and created plans for an eco-centre and community farm. When the bulldozers finally moved in, they were met with well-organised tree-sitters, who physically occupied the largest rainforest trees for several weeks. The campaign was ultimately lost over the inability of the local community to convince the planners and scientific advisers within local

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government that the area was of sufficient 'ecological value' to be protected from development. The dominance of this abstract concept overrode the identifiable values and uses of the Gully for the community concerned, and reinforced the limited recognition that planning bureaucracies have for the lived experiences of spatial users. But the struggle demonstrated some of the ways in which a neighbourhood can generate a counter-space, by spontaneously adopting alternative spatial uses, even if such a space only exists in that form for a short time.

In the opinions of both its detractors and its supporters, Australian suburbia is generally regarded as an unlikely site of social struggle. As Tim Rowse describes, for most commentators suburbia 'is a society without history or politics' (Rowse 1978: 12). It remains largely dominated by exchange values in the form of an acquisitive consumerism and high levels of private homeownership. In Lefebvrian terms, it continues to express the fragmented, homogeneous and hierarchical social relations of abstract space. But it is precisely in the midst of abstract space that its contradictions occasionally provoke resistance to the dominant representations of space. The contours of a political reassertion of the values of lived urban experience can be observed in struggles for the control of space by its users and inhabitants, both within the planning system and in challenges to the bureaucratic power of the administrative state more generally. It is of great importance to those seeking to develop such a politics that they understand space as not simply a physical container or a set of representations, but as a lived creation, occupied by bodies and produced by their struggles. Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space is therefore a vital tool in any attempt to read Australian suburbia politically.

## **Notes**

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- 2 There are of course differences between films which employ a deliberately 'quirky' suburbanism as a comic device and those which utilise suburbia as a visual means to generate a social realist aesthetic. A cross-section of Australian films which consciously deal with suburban themes includes: *2000 Weeks* (1969) Burstall T (dir); *Don's Party* (1976) Beresford B (dir); *The FJ Holden* (1977) Thornhill M (dir); *Newsfront* (1977) Noyce P (dir); *Silver City* (1984) Turkiewicz S (dir); *Fran* (1985) Hambly G (dir); *Sweetie* (1989) Campion J (dir); *Return Home* (1990) Argall R (dir); *Death in Brunswick* (1991) Ruane J (dir); *Muriel's Wedding* (1994) Hogan P (dir); *Idiot Box* (1996) Caesar D (dir); *The Boys* (1997) Woods R (dir); *Praise* (1998) Curran J (dir); *The Castle* (1997) Sitch R (dir); *Erskineville Kings* (1999) White A (dir); *Two Hands* (1999) Jordon G (dir); *Little Fish* (2005) Woods R (dir).
- 3 Humphrey McQueen has suggested the embrace of suburbia has also had an effect on the targets of political activism, which have become redirected 'away from the forces of production and onto systems of marketing and consumption. After the proletariat had failed to perform its historic task ... radicals switched to liberating the consumer from the oppressions of everyday life.' .... 'Alienation became an account of personal loneliness, no longer the outcome of capitalist exploitation. Reformers filled their programmes with items such as reduced class sizes, abortion on demand, craft centres and bicycle paths; the unifying element of such demands was the need to deal with life as most people experienced it.' (1988: 39)
- 4 Lefebvre also associates the realm of the perceived (and hence spatial practice) with form, and therefore the abstract prioritising of spatial practice constitutes a type of intellectual formalism (Lefebvre 1991: 369).
- 5 This is the translation of *les espaces de representation* given by Nicholson-Smith in *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre 1991). A number of other writers prefer the phrase 'spaces of representation' (Elden 2004, Shields 1999, Stewart 1995).
- 6 I am grateful to Desmond Manderson for this point.
- 7 However Mariana Valverde's study of zoning and land-use in this issue is a notable and welcome exception.

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