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DESIRE, DRYNESS, AND DECADENCE: LIVING BIG IN AUSTRALIA'S SUBURBS

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"House in the sky": a sculpture commissioned by Melbourne's western suburban councils on a major freeway interchange (2009). Designed by Brearley Middleton Architects and erected in 2002, it is "an accurate rendering of the surrounding mansions". Source: Murray McCrae
There are (at least!) two remarkable things about Australia: one is that it is the driest inhabited continent on the planet and the second that it has the largest houses in the world. The relationship between these two facts serves as one way of understanding its settlement patterns and the character of its suburbs, foregrounding the desires that underpin their cultural economies.

For a country where three-quarters of its landmass is either arid or semi-arid, it is no surprise that more than 80 percent of Australia’s population lives within fifty kilometers of the better watered coast and over 65 percent inhabit the major cities hugging the coastline. Such cities were the original entry points for the colonizing British. A key element of resulting conflict with the Indigenous population was access to water as stolen lands were carved into pastoral runs fronting the few permanent rivers and non-indigenous animals drank and fouled the limited surface water. Many an intrepid explorer subsequently ventured in search of the fabled inland sea, only to die of thirst alongside the Indigenes who could tap into plants or underground to the artesian oceans that lay below. But it was not to the bush that the immigrant masses would venture, but to the coastal strip encircling much of the continent. And it was in the coastal towns, created at a critical juncture in the shift from mercantilism to manufacturing, that the activities of traders, financiers, bureaucrats and then industrialists were to cluster. In these cities, expansive suburbs were envisaged from the earliest days of occupation.

Surveying the first European settlement, British Governor Arthur Phillip required that Sydney’s 1798 streets: “afford the free circulation of air, and when the houses are built … the land will be granted with a clause that will prevent more than one being built on the allotment, which will be sixty feet in front and one hundred and fifty in depth.” Australia’s white founders anticipated a city of free-standing houses with spacious gardens, rather than the replication of London’s terraces and alleys. It was to be a land of suburbs, where water was lavished on expansive gardens and supplied as needed to the homes of the wealthy and the temperate.

This walking city, until the spread of tram and railways in the 1880s, was distinguished by the rich living close to the city center, a middle class living in purely residential suburbs on the elevated edges of the city, and office and factory workers living near their work, either in the city center, around the port or in industrial working class suburbs with their dense mixture of factories, warehouses, pubs and shops. As trade and industry grew and the urban land markets boomed, these city centers became increasingly cluttered places of disorder, dirt, disease, and the less desirable. As the harbors and rivers fouled with the detritus of the urban and industrial population, movement beyond the city by the well to do to places of elevation, cleanliness, safety, and morality accelerated. It was to be the pestilence and disease emanating from the inner-city dwellings and activities that also forced the provision by colonial governments of reticulated water supplies and the building of elaborate sewerage systems within Australian cities. Such systems, along with the large households — averaging
4.5 people — and lavish gardens of the suburban middle classes, meant that per capita water consumption doubled from the mid-century level of 100 liters per person, per day, to 200 liters in 1890. The march towards massive urban water consumption and its technologically mediated provision had begun, replacing moderation and self-provision. The backyard water tank, along with the vegetable patch and home-based food production, remained for the working classes. But for the middle and upper classes, these were now things of the past. The humble water tank, was soon rendered illegal, supposedly to ensure water quality but mainly to prop up the economics of large, centralized systems.

If Australia was born urban and quickly became suburban over the nineteenth century, it was the proliferation of private car ownership, provision of finance and the long economic boom after World War II that triggered the spatial explosion of its cities and the democratization of suburbanization. Along with its sprawling suburbs went a huge expansion in per capita water consumption — to 400 liters per person per day in the 1950s — as the detached house on its large quarter-acre block reached its zenith. However, though water consumption was vast, house sizes were not. Australia's suburban house was modeled on the British cottager and while it moved from being a two-room to a four- or six-roomed dwelling across the nineteenth century, for the majority it had never been a particularly large dwelling. Such modest dimensions continued with the 1920s Californian bungalow and they in turn were curtailed by the 1930s Depression and by postwar scarcity and austerity. While home ownership rates peaked at 71 percent in 1961, it was to be the size of houses rather than their ownership that became the remarkable element of Australian suburbs thereafter. For as affluence rose and spread across the social spectrum, so did the size of houses. Thus in 1984, the average Australian home had 150 square meters of floor space, while in 2008–09 it had grown to 253 square meters; the largest in the world! At the same time, the average block of land decreased in size (from the much lauded half acre or 1,012 square meters in the 1970s, to 800 square meters in 1993–94, and to 735 square meters in 2003–04). The number of people actually living in each dwelling also fell, from close to four people in the middle of the twentieth century to 2.6 in 2011. The vast and much maligned McMansion captured so well by the House in the Sky, a sculpture perched alongside a Melbourne highway, became all too typical in twenty-first century Australian suburbs.

As houses got bigger, so did water consumption; peaking in Melbourne at 500 liters per person per day and in Brisbane at a staggering 700 liters per person per day in the mid-1990s. Households consume 60 percent of Melbourne's water. While the laundry and bathroom use 70 percent, another 25 percent is used outdoors, primarily to water the gardens of suburban houses. Such figures vary by state and city, relating both to climate and to historical regulatory regimes, but overall the pattern is of massive water consumption by fewer people in larger houses. The image of a dripping tap at one of the newer outer suburban developments in Melbourne's west is indicative of such a pattern.
To explain such a divergence in this parched continent, it is necessary to acknowledge the changing structural regime since the 1990s, which has seen the privatization and corporatization of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century state water authorities, but also to engage with the role of desire in the valuing and use of water. For as Graeme Davison points out in his historical examination of Australia’s water use, the structural and technical elements of supply are but one part of the story, what is also critical are notions of health, purity, dirt, and morality. Changing notions of personal hygiene and the deployment of swimming pools have been vital in the growth of water consumption. It is not just the suburban house form that is implicated in this story, but the particular suburban life style that has emerged in Australia in the last thirty years.

Davison tracks the importance of abundant hot water as a key technical development that allowed more regular bathing, but the introduction of water guzzling washing machines and dishwashers drove growing per capita water consumption over the late twentieth century. Thus in 1943, only 2 percent of Melbourne’s houses had hot water service; a problem that had disappeared by the 1960s when all urban Australian families had access to unlimited amounts of hot water with which to bathe, cook, and clean. The movement of the bath from an infrequently used copper dish located outside, to something present in at least two if not three bathrooms within the home, has been a major contributor to the rise in water usage. Such a change has been associated with very different conceptions of personal hygiene and the beautification of the body. From preoccupations with health and safety in the nineteenth century, the bathroom it is now associated with sexualized notions of pampering within the McMansions of Australian suburbia.

But if desire, not only for groomed bodies but for lots of clean clothes and outdoor swimming pools and spas has led to an explosion in water usage, the realities of ongoing urban population growth, intense droughts, and a long-term decline in rainfall over south eastern Australia, has led to a radical rethink of such patterns. From a high of 500 liters per person per day, Melbournians now consume 250 liters per person per day (in 2009). Governments had responded to a nationwide, decade-long drought to impose increasingly tough water usage restrictions, and funded educational campaigns to lower consumption levels. These demand-management strategies were accompanied by a host of technological fixes to increase the supply of urban water. In Melbourne the push was on to get individuals to consume no more than 155 liters per day, but also to line irrigation channels, create a state wide water grid, recommission old dams, and build a huge desalination plant. While desalination was embraced by anxious state governments across Australia, the largest — at a costs of A$3.2 billion — will produce 17 percent of Melbourne’s supply. Built as a public-private partnership with a French multinational at the height of the drought, its costly waters are now superfluous, but have to be taken and also paid for by massive increases in costs to users.
While Big Water has been enhanced, individuals and households have embraced the challenge of consuming less water, accepting subsidies to install dual flush toilets and low flow shower heads, recycled gray water, reintroduced water tanks and so on; while suburban developers also installed third pipe water reticulation systems, pondage and other runoff minimization and reuse systems as both marketing ploys and conservation measures. The dripping tap is therefore ironically representative of the issues such measures addressed, a new appreciation of the value of water, and the problems of its wastage. So indeed, per capita water consumption has declined dramatically as desire has been recalibrated, while the investment in water supplies has increased equally dramatically.

What does all of this mean now for a suburban landscape that was produced at a time of water abundance? At least three contradictory things are occurring: ongoing household water conservation via the techno fixes in appliances as well as in major changes in garden forms, sizes, and uses; along with a genuine commitment by many to use less, be more self-sufficient and decentralize water, energy and food provision; expensive over-investment in technologically provided solutions in desalination plants and improved irrigation schemes; and an ongoing demand for suburban space as house sizes continue to grow along with the demand for water via bathrooms, spas, pools, showers ... such that Australia’s water footprint remains the world’s largest, along with the size of its suburban houses.

Endnotes
1 Australian Government State of Australian Cities Report, Major Cities Unit, Infrastructure Australia, Canberra Australian Government 2010
4 McCarty, J. “Australian Capital Cities in the 19th Century” In Australian Feminist History Review 1977 10 p 107–137