MISUNDERSTANDING MODERN SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT

Kevin O'Connor

Recent economic developments in the suburbs have undermined the assumptions undergirding the planning policies which are facilitating higher density development in Melbourne. In particular, greater employment self-sufficiency in the suburbs means that the residents are not as isolated from work and other urban amenities as has been assumed by many planners.

The energy and impact of the organisation *Save our Suburbs* has shown that some of the standard responses to the development of the suburbs, and the role that they play within the context of metropolitan development and planning strategy, deserve to be rethought. This rethinking needs to confront the perspective that metropolitan suburban development is a problem, and that the best solution to that problem is a higher density inner city pattern.

The *suburb as problem* has been a strong theme in urban policy discussion in the past decade. This theme drew its strength from the negative connotations associated with the notion of 'urban sprawl'[1] and the high cost of accommodating new population in low density locations.[2] On the other hand the inner city was seen to exhibit a high level of urbanity and possess the capacity for further growth.[3] Such thinking underpinned a steady evolution in policy. This evolution began with dual occupancy provisions, followed by a design guide and a planning-approval process that encouraged greater site coverage and higher-density development. The perspective was crystallised by the interpretation by some researchers that inner-city population gains provided evidence of a new urban structure of economic and social life.[4]

These ideas were received enthusiastically by a small audience of young people working in inner-city service industry occupations, along with investors and builders. For the majority, the news was not received with much joy, as seen in the *Save our Suburbs* movement.

This paper suggests that suburban development emerges from a very different set of forces, and has a very different expression to that which accompanies the *suburb as problem* perspective. It is important to get more clarity into the link between the aggregate trends which shape suburban development and the policy agenda for Melbourne. The search for clarity is also emerging in the US.[5] Its emergence illustrates that some of the broad notions of *new urbanism* have begun to be questioned. Summarising a six part series on US cities, *The Economist* called sprawl a 'defensible idea' and remarked:

> Sprawl may have its flaws, but pushing these extra people into European cities, with their mesh of residential blocks, contiguous blocks and public transport, would probably be more wasteful and even (given Americans' preferences) socially explosive. Sprawl is not a threat. It is the process of beating the country out more thinly, like gold leaf.[6]

CHANGE IN SUBURBAN REGIONS

Suburban areas have changed as new types of activity have located within them. This is a well understood phenomenon in the US and Europe, where major physical infrastructure (largely in the form of ring road systems) has triggered the growth of suburban economies and produced the formation of major centres within the suburban part of most major metropolitan areas. For Europe,

Table 1: Population and dwellings within metropolitan regions 1986-1995: share (%) of national population and dwellings, and rates of population growth.

Part of Metro Area	Share of population	Rates of population change (%)		Share of population change in Australia		Share of dwelling approvals
	1995	1986-91	1991-95	1986-91	1991-95	1988-96
Inner	10.9	-0.1	-0.3	-0.1	-2.7	6.5
Middle	21.5	0.6	0.1	8.4	2.0	13.4
Outer	27.5	3.0	2.1	49.7	51.5	35.0
Total	59.9	1.5	1.1	58.0	50.8	54.9

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *Estimated Residential Population for Statistical Local Areas* (state publications for the years shown) and ABS, Building Approvals by Statistical Local Areas, unpublished.

Table 2: The location of Australian businesses in areas of metropolitan regions 1995: shares of national totals in areas, by type of industry

Area	Total Businesses	Manu-facturing	Wholesale	Finance and Insurance Services	Property and Business Services
Inner	17.4	16.0	22.7	33.9	32.0
Middle	16.8	27.9	25.8	20.2	21.1
Outer	17.8	24.8	19.9	15.1	20.4

Source: ABS, Integrated Regional Data Base (IRDB96), Business Register

Archibugi[7] has suggested that multi-centred frameworks are the only way for European cities to manage current trends in their growth and Dielman and Faludi[8] show that polynucleation is now common in North western Europe. In the US, Muller[9] observes that global forces are shaping the development of suburbs as corporations use suburban office parks, manufacturing plants or warehouses to meet global markets for their products. These forces have created a new national and global geography. An outcome for Melbourne can be seen in the location of firms such as Hewlett Packhard, Robert Bosch, Canon and NEC within middle suburban locations. Their location decisions have contributed to the suburban clusters of corporate wealth and activity in Melbourne, as shown in a study of business assets and turnover in O'Connor, Rapson and Clark.[10]

The impact of these forces can be seen in the Australian context in the data displayed in Tables 1 and 2 which indicate the shares of population, housing and businesses in the inner, middle and outer parts of Australia's metropolitan areas. The distribution of population and new housing approvals favours the outer areas, while total business activity is evenly spread between all three areas. Only the finance industry has a distribution that favours the inner area. Gordon, Richardson and Yu suggest that the dispersal represented in this information reflects the fact that the agglomeration economies of the metropolitan region, once only available in the inner city, can now be tapped across its whole area.[11]

An important outcome has been the growth of jobs in the middle suburbs. Table 3 shows the outcome of these influences on suburban regions in Melbourne. The middle suburbs accounted for almost half of the jobs in Melbourne in 1996, and more than half of the growth in total employment between 1976 and 1996. The inner area accounts for a much smaller share of total jobs than it did in the past. In fact, Ingram's review of cities shows the CBD now only accounts for 20 per cent, on average, of the jobs in a metropolitan area.[12] Gipps et al., finds similar results for Australian cities.[13] Those outcomes are a long way from the *suburb as problem*.

A further consequence of suburban employment growth has been the re-orientation in the geography of travel. As can be seen in Table 4, the majority of middle suburban residents now work in the middle suburbs, and most outer suburban residents find jobs in the outer suburbs. Travel between middle and outer zones is also important.

Research on population, employment and travel behaviour in US major metropolitan regions,[14] and on British cities by Spence et al.,[15] finds similar patterns. This research suggests that high density residential opportunities in the inner city

Table 3: Number of jobs in zones of the metropolitan area, 1976 and 1996.

Area	1976	1996	Change
Inner	366,054	356,199	-9855
Middle	330,916	524,156	193,240
Outer	299,510	416,656	117,146
Total	996,480	1,297,011	300,531

Source: ABS, Census Journey to Work, information for 1976 municipalities allocated to zones as best fit to 1996. Results not directly comparable.

Table 4: Share and location of workforce by the zone in which they live, 1996 (%)

Zone of Residence	Zone of Workplace			
	Inner	Middle	Outer	Melbourne
Inner	69	25	6	100
Middle	32	54	14	100
Outer	17	30	53	100
Total	27	40	32	100

Source: ABS, Census Journey to Work

have had little effect on the way people seek out employment opportunities in the middle and outer suburbs.

In the same way these new housing opportunities have had little impact upon the actual movement of people between houses in Melbourne. Table 5 reports on the pattern of moves between the three zones of the metropolitan area between 1991 and 1996.

It shows that moves to the inner region have been a small share of all moves within Melbourne. The most important moves for suburban residents are to another site within the same part of the metropolitan area: 35 per cent of middle-zone residents move within the middle zone, while 56 per cent of those who already live in the outer suburbs move to another outer suburban location. These patterns are consistent with those identified by the Victorian Department of Infrastructure in a study of the movements of people between municipalities in Melbourne. Most movements are outwards and focus on the middle and outer suburbs.[16] The dominance of intra-suburban movement for both work and housing reflects the decisions of people to maintain the significant social and community ties in the zone in which they live, and probably to keep jobs they have in the middle suburbs.

The suburbs offer individuals the opportunity to match housing and jobs in a way that has never been accepted in official policy, or in the anti-suburban rhetoric that has been so common. The strong connections between work, travel

Table 5: Residential moves between zones in Melbourne 1991-1996.

Residence 1991	Residence in 1996			
	Inner	Middle	Outer	Melbourne
Inner	9.8	69.5	20.7	100.0
Middle	11.1	43.5	45.4	100.0
Outer	5.0	38.6	56.4	100.0
Total	8.5	43.9	47.6	100.0

Source: Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University, 1996 Census customised matrix.

Table 6: Proportion of dwellings as separate houses, semi-detached/units and flats, by selected SLAs, 1996

	Houses	Semi-detached Units	Flats	Other dwellings	Total	Number of Dwellings
Boroondara						
Camberwell N	76.9	9.5	11.0	2.6	100.0	15,973
Camberwell S	74.2	7.6	15.3	2.9	100.0	18,424
Hawthorn	38.6	13.2	44.4	3.8	100.0	14,576
Kew	59.6	11.6	24	4.8	100.0	11,365
Glen Eira						
Caulfield	46.5	13.6	35.9	4.0	100.0	33,044
South	83.8	4	9.2	3.0	100.0	18,010
Port Phillip						
St Kilda	15.1	10.3	70	4.6	100.0	26,637
West	20.7	46.2	27.7	5.4	100.0	13,011
Stonnington						
Prahran	25.2	16.2	54.3	4.3	100.0	23,501
Malvern	54.1	12.3	29.3	4.3	100.0	18,474
Others						
Melbourne - Remainder	7	27.9	60.9	4.2	100.0	17,073
Yarra North	16.9	47.5	29.3	6.3	100.0	19,523
Manningham W	88.6	4.5	5.2	1.7	100.0	32,176
Monash - Waverley W	86.6	5.9	5.1	2.4	100.0	22,416

Source: ABS, 1996 Census

and residence show the majority of the population favour middle and outer suburban locations. This is an opinion confirmed by the McDonald and Moyle[17] survey of the outer suburbs of Melbourne and coincidentally by Brun and Fagnani[18] in outer-suburban Paris. Those opinions shape the interest of suburban residents in maintaining and enhancing the character of the local community and the built environment of their residential area. This interest in their local surroundings provides a strong foundation for the support that *Save our Suburbs* has attracted.

The scale of the challenge to the character of residential areas that the new policy of higher-density development has created can be seen in the extent to which flats and units have come to dominate some of the inner city municipalities. This domination is shown in the shares of housing classified as flats and units in the selected municipalities displayed in Table 6.

The research reported here shows that suburban areas are significant parts of the national economy and society. That significance justifies sophisticated analysis and management to ensure that the best outcomes are achieved. Providing opportunities for national and global businesses to prosper and enhancing access to services for those disadvantaged members of suburban communities will involve policy actions that enhance the expansion and growth of suburban job markets and local transport systems. A pre-occupation with the density of residential development will not be much more than a side show in this larger agenda.

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