

AUSTRALIA'S TOXIC CITIES: MODERNITY'S PARADOX?

A Submission to NSW Parliamentary Inquiry - Children, Young People and the
Built Environment

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Not Seen, Not Heard

There is much contemporary hand wringing over the implications of population ageing. Not a week passes it seems without a new report urging attention on the issues arising from an ageing Australia. But what about children? They seem to have disappeared from public focus, only to return in bouts of wild panic concerning abuse and various other calamities that occasionally touch young lives.

Governments and business lobbies may want to prepare us for a greyer population. The prospect must frighten neo-liberal ideologues: legions of baby boomers downshifting and escaping the treadmill. But are we planning for a future Australia that will nurture children and youth? Australia's population demography debates have led us to obsess about a very partial view of the future: one fixed on ageing baby boomer legions flocking to new coastal lifestyle regions. However, the future will contain a far greater range of human needs and interests than this simple picture would suggest.

For a start, Australia is, and will remain, a thoroughly urban society, with most of its citizens living in the suburbs of the principal metropolitan regions.¹ Australians overwhelmingly continue to prefer living in the subregions of the main cities. Australia's future will not be decided by the fortunes of new coastal 'seachange' regions, with their flourishing retirement communities, but by the ability of its suburbs to provide inclusive and sustainable living environments for the bulk of our population. And in many places this population will include more children, not less, than is presently the case. It is strange that this reality is so absent from public and popular debates.

The emergent will to brush children aside may reflect in part the cults of individualism and materialism that have flourished during the era of neo-liberal reform. Children necessarily restrain the lure of individualism – they are by nature dependent. They remind us that we are *of Nature*. Their upkeep dilutes the material flow and their care reduces the time for self. Every social prohibition has its geography and thus we will surely witness the surfacing of new islands of *demographic* exclusion, such as Aurora, the child free 'community' proposed for Queensland's Gold Coast region by developer Craig Gore. Aurora was scuttled in 2003, after raising the ire of the state's Children's Commissioner, but its proposal raised a semaphore warning of the new archipelago of exclusion lying on the horizon of selfishness that we are steadily approaching.

Walls may keep the kids out but population ageing will not free us from their claims. An increasing weight of evidence tells us that a growing number of older Australians, typically grandparents, are assuming the role of primary carer for children. Nearly 28,000 children aged under 15 are presently being raised solely by grandparents (Passmore 2004). Many have had to step into the social breaches created by the storms of political economic change as parents succumb to mental and physical breakdown, drug dependency and criminality. Others are providing the care that working parents cannot access or afford. A mixture of love and necessity drives these older Australians back to parenting, often in stressful circumstances. An overwhelmingly urban nation must look to its cities to provide healthy living environments for our young and for the increasingly diverse range of people who care for them. There is reason to be gravely concerned about the steadily accumulating health and social commentary that is reporting deterioration in the lifeworlds of young Australians.

In contemporary Australia, great shifts are underway within children's home worlds and within the policy areas that structure their lives, especially education, health, and childcare. Decades of neo-liberal reform by successive national and state governments have deepened social and geographic polarization and caused the contraction and deterioration of urban public domains (Forster 2004). These urban shifts threaten to reduce the life chances of the poor and their young, and to deepen their entrapment in degraded urban realms. The drift to segregated cities and the loss of civic realm also undermines the well-being of children from

wealthier households and communities. In the new islands of suburban privilege, the relative absence of a public domain impoverishes the young in a different way, excluding them from the principal civic resources and social experiences that nourish the development of strong citizenship values.

This chapter explores some of the implications of urban structural change in Australia for children at both ends of the wealth scale. It charts the emergence of 'Toxic Cities': urban areas that fail to nurture the young, and which increasingly threaten them with physical and mental harm. The portrayal is a grim indictment of neo-liberal reform, which has taken us progressively further from the idea of child friendly cities. It begins by reviewing 'toxic' changes to the urban public realm, including transformations to childhood services that have exposed children to the vicissitudes of profit driven 'care'. The next section reviews evidence which testifies to the ways in which the culture of neo-liberal productivism and individualism has failed children, whose physical and mental health seem to be in decline. Many of these indicators of childhood morbidity have been evident in other Western, especially Anglophone, countries, and point to a deeply harmful paradox that afflicts the pursuit of wealth. The lustre of materialism is inevitably dimmed by its toxic consequences for children. The last two parts of the chapter point to the different, yet inevitably harmful, legacy of toxic cities for children at both ends of the wealth scale.

Malign Care

Early childhood services have been a key theatre in the war on the public realm perpetrated through two decades of neo-liberal reform in Australia. In the past decade, this cottage, community-based industry has been transformed by corporatization, rising public subsidies and the rapid growth and scale of for-profit provision. In 1990, for example, about 80 per cent of Queensland's childcare centres were managed by the community sector – by 2005 the ratio was reversed, with corporate entities such as the ABC Learning Group, providing the bulk of care (Elvish 2005). Just over 70 per cent of Australia's 4,300 childcare centres are now run for profit (Murdoch 2004). During this transformation, quality community-based centres have struggled to compete with corporate providers, which emphasize lower wage costs and mass service provision. Brian Elvish, chief executive officer of one key community-based provider, C & K, remarks,

...the prime culprit in the rise of the corporate sector and the demise of the community sector is the Federal Government. Its free-for-all development policies have encouraged entrepreneurs by significantly increasing the number of childcare places available. However, the simultaneous removal of operational subsidies to the community sector has *virtually eradicated the right of choice* for...families.

(2005: 17, emphasis added)

He points to a fundamental difference in the quality of service provided by community-based centres, which emphasize parental accountability and individual child welfare, to that offered by the corporates. These 'like the fast food industry', are dominated by the logic shareholder accountability and thus cost minimization (ibid.). For Elvish, the 'politics of choice' are fraught with paradox: 'In our consumer orientated society we are bombarded with choice and variety. Yet ironically, at one of the most important periods in a child's life, families are increasingly given a "one size fits all" option to early childhood' (ibid.).

The market driven approach is also causing a significant spatial mismatch between the location of commercial centres and the geography of parental need. Thompson reports '...a chronic shortage of childcare places in many urban neighbourhoods where land is more expensive' (2005: 1). Consequently, '[p]arents are being forced to make direct choices: leaving their children unattended or in "backyard care" minded by untrained strangers or aged relatives' (ibid: 2). Windfall profits, driven by relentless cost minimization and by record federal subsidies, are not leading to pay improvements in a notoriously low pay industry, or to better services in high need communities. Flood's study demonstrates that low and middle income parents struggle to access formal care. He concludes, '...poorer parents are priced out of the care they need for their children, and parents in disadvantaged communities are more likely to find that no childcare places are available' (Flood 2004: 7).

The issue is hardly a social sideshow. The relentless parental enslavement to work, driven by decades of neo-liberal productivism, and the consequent loss of family time (especially weekends) (Pocock & Clarke 2005), have rendered childcare one of the most important domains for socialization and a key determinant of child - later adult - well-being. There are now over 730,000 Australian children in formal childcare (up from approximately 570,000 in 1999) and an unknown number negotiating the vagaries of informal care. The shift in logic from a focus on children as individuals with specific care needs to 'units of subsidy' whose service costs must be minimized, marks a transition to a heartless, and ultimately self defeating, mode of childcare.

For children, the problems arising from human service changes have been compounded by the public liability crisis that represents yet another solvent force eating away at the urban public realm. The early years of the new millennium witnessed an outpouring of concern from local government and community organizations, who pointed to a rapid collapse in the quality and volume of community cultural and sporting activities. The public liability pandemic is not, however, a 'natural' outcome reflecting the inherent vulnerability of children in urban contexts, but arises simply from the unwillingness of governments, especially the federal government, to secure the health and safety of citizens in civic spaces. The storm of liability claims has broken most severely across the municipal public realm – most of Queensland's local governments, for example,

now regularly have major (i.e. over \$5,000) liability claims made against them relating to incidents occurring in public places (King 2005).

The crisis might well reflect what Greg Hallam, Executive Director of the Queensland Local Government Association, describes as a growth in the 'absurdity and the avarice of people' (in King 2005: 5). He blames the long reign of the 'nanny state' for a culture of public dependency, but neglects that Nanny, if ever she existed, has long departed the scene, ushered off to oblivion by the Prophets. Perhaps more accurately, the explosive growth of public liability litigation reflects the melding of three social forces that have been deliberately conjured during the neo-liberal reform phases: heightened individualism, fading respect for the public realm, and the relentless growth of economic insecurity. The latter anxiety manifests in public liability claims when individuals frightened by the perceived or real decline of public support for health and human care, attempt to find other ways of registering their potentially reasonable claims for social assistance after the experience of some injury.

The net result is a rapid contraction in the size and quality of the public sphere that services children. The journalist Lawrence (2005a: 42) reports, '[p]ublic spaces are becoming boring because of public liability fears'. She cites the urban designer and scholar, Danny O'Hare, who observes that a culture of obsessive risk aversion, especially amongst local governments, has caused a widespread decline in the quality of public play environments for children. The guardians of these

public sphere playgrounds cannot afford the hefty insurance levies which a more sanguine approach would attract. Lawrence's report details the outright removal of play equipment in many Queensland municipalities, and a shift away from adventurous and stimulating designs in other contexts. In 2002, a people's panel, convened by the Victorian Government, linked the public liability crisis to children's declining health, especially citing evidence of growing childhood obesity. The panel lamented the culture of risk that had blanketed the public realm, especially the reduction of the ability of public schools to act as centre points of child focused community activity (Victorian Government 2002).

Modernity's Paradox: Fatter, Sicker and Sadder

The growing endangerment represented by these and other shifts is surely reflected in accumulating scientific evidence, which reports that our children are getting fatter, sicker and sadder. Australia has become a much wealthier country over the past three decades, but this material enrichment has been accompanied by a startling decline in the health and well-being of children. A similar pattern of simultaneously rising rates of wealth and morbidity has been registered in other developed countries – the Canadians Keating & Hertzman (1999) have described this as 'Modernity's Paradox'. In the US, the psychologist Myers believe that compared to the 1950s, contemporary Americans, '...are twice as rich and no happier. Meanwhile the divorce rate doubled. Teen suicide tripled...Depression rates have soared, especially among teens and young adults. I call this conjunction

of material prosperity and social recession *the American paradox*' (in Luthar 2003: 1584, original emphasis).

Fiona Stanley, epidemiologist and 2003 Australian of the Year, reports an exhaustive review of physical and mental health indicators which shows that 'whilst death rates are low and life expectancy is terrific, *trends in almost all other outcomes [for children] have got worse*' (2003a: 2, emphasis added).

Consider just some of the indicators that have registered declines for children during the era of neo-liberal structural reform: decreased birth weight and increased post neonatal mortality (Aboriginal children), asthma and diabetes, obesity, intellectual disability, depression, anxiety, behavioural problems, drug use and child abuse.

The dismal picture was recently confirmed by an Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2005) study which reported rising obesity and mental health problems for Australian children, and indications of worsening dental health. It was not all bad news: Stanley's observation about improving infant mortality rates was confirmed, though for indigenous children, the rate was still 2.5 times higher than that of others. This surely reflects the power of *public* health to improve individual life chances. One worrying indicator of child safety showed the number of children on care and protection orders to have risen almost 50 per cent in the past six years (AIHW 2005).

For youth, accumulating evidence points to a sadder, more fragile outlook than was previously the case. Again, not all trends are in decline. Eckersley points to 'fractured views' of youth well-being, including positive assessments based on self-reported life satisfaction studies against countervailing research on mental health which show many youth to be struggling. He concludes that these seemingly contradictory trends (also evident in other Western nations) are not necessarily irreconcilable, and point to new complexities in the human condition.

Most young people are, and have always been, optimistic about their own futures, but most are pessimistic about the state and prospects of society or the world. Most do not believe quality of life in Australia is improving. They are more likely to think that globally, this century will be a time of crisis and trouble than it will be an age of peace and prosperity (2004: 38).

The fractured reality of youth well-being may reflect in a specific way, the Great Uncertainty (Kelly 1994) that has come to afflict the Australian popular outlook after the prolonged structural reform and cultural pluralization that has taken place since the 1960s. Youths, perhaps more than any other social (certainly demographic) group, are best placed to positively embrace new opportunities and experiences. These have arisen through cultural pluralization and the new fluidity of employment structures and of life courses. And at the same time, they may be most vulnerable to the heavy mantle of uncertainty that has settled over life in general, coupled with the greatly increased social expectations that they

relentlessly engage in - 'reflection, reinvention, and flexibility' (Eckersley 2004: 38). The transience and impermanence of liquid neo-liberal modernity pose heavy psychic costs for the children of Freedom. Eckersley enlists Bauman (2003) who insists that for every head in the currency of change, there exists a tail: the 'exhilarating adventure, turns into an exhausting chore' (in Eckersley 2004: 38).

Again, what is lost to youth, as to many, is Time; a humane temporality that allows for studied, socially supported growth and adjustment that contrasts with the constant, instant reaction to chronic change demanded of contemporary young people. The endless acts of instant gratification (or disappointment) that choreograph the life of *Homo Consumens*, the ideal subject of neo-liberalism (Bauman 2003), are an existence marked by the absence of Time. If Time has been stolen, little wonder that youth report to surveyors little enthusiasm for the Future – an unfolding of Time over which they will have little mastery. The yearning for Time stolen, for Time never experienced, resonates in the social surveys which register children's loss. A recent study by The Australia Institute recorded the laments of children who desired more time from their parents, not more family wealth (Pocock & Clarke 2004). One youth, 'Smithy', aged 17, told researchers, 'I wouldn't mind seeing them [parents] make less money if it meant they don't have to work so damn hard' (in Horin 2004: 6). 'Kelsey', aged 12, grieves for parental time, '[d]ad earns money...but he hardly spends any time with you' (ibid.).

Whilst poor youth, as with children, are most exposed to the brutish contemporary risks to well-being – notably, homelessness and violence – social evidence suggests that liquid neo-liberal modernity presents much more general threats to young Australians, especially to their psychic health. The growth in materialism and individualism which has accompanied both phases of the neo-liberal reform project – and most acutely the last – seems, as Eckersely observes, to ‘...breed not happiness but dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, anger, isolation and alienation’ (2004: 40). Young people with little historical experience of the many layers of social solidarity that have been peeled away during the reform project, are most vulnerable to the chill winds of alienation.

The much-discussed growth of urban tribalism amongst Western youth (see Watters 2003) may be a positive self-correcting response to the gales of individualism and materialism, but their long term socializing potential is unknown. It may well be counter-balanced by anti-social forms of tribalism, such as the occasional outbreaks of disorder amongst middle class youth which produced moral panics in the media, parents and governments in recent years. A case in point is the ‘gatecrashing epidemic’ that has surfaced in cities across the continent, from Perth to the Gold Coast, with the popular media raising the spectre of swarms of ‘...drunken often drugged-up gatecrashers’ descending like youthful Visigoths without warning on homely family celebrations’ (Dibben 2005: 14). The anger and ennui unleashed in these events are hardly reflective of content, socially adjusted youth.

What happened to the great historical promise of Modernity? Why has escalating wealth not also lifted the prospects for our young? How can it be that in the first years of the new millennium, two centuries after the Industrial Revolution, Australia's leading scholar of the young could declare, '...childhood is rapidly vanishing' (Stanley, 2003a: 8)? Fiona Stanley writes:

Clearly, our nation's economic prosperity has failed to deliver the social dividend that was promised. While Australia prospers economically, *alarm bells have been sounding in the suburbs* – witness increases in divorce, family violence, child abuse, homelessness, working hours and social isolation.

(2003b: emphasis added)

Could it be that the centuries long *Growth Fetish* (Hamilton 2003) has produced cities and communities that are environmentally and socially injurious to their most vulnerable human inhabitants, the children and the poor? In explanation, Stanley speaks of the shattering consequences of the growth machine economy and the social changes engendered by this: unprecedented levels of family breakdown and discord, ever longer working hours, cultural alienation, and rising wealth inequality. The weakening and withdrawal of the public domain from many urban communities has surely left children vulnerable:

What's been decreasing are some of the protective factors for these things [morbidity levels]: community cohesion and participation, neighbourhood trust, and I think, children's services and facilities in many communities...have you talked to any child health nurses lately to see how angry and worried they are about support?...there has been a decrease in facilities at a time when parents actually need them more than ever...

(Stanley, 2003a:11)

Macro indicators mask how vulnerability affects young Australians in different ways. As noted above, wealth polarization – what Fiona Stanley terms the 'toxic social divide' – produces distinct forms of endangerment for the young. In our new urban poverty spaces, the endangerment is real, even life threatening.

The Jaded and Foul

One Saturday in early November 2003, the lifeless body of five-year-old Chloe Hoson was found discarded amidst refuse in the reserve opposite her home, Lansdowne Caravan Park, in south-western Sydney. Chloe had been raped, strangled and cast aside like rubbish by her killer. A young man resident in Lansdowne Park was later charged with her murder. In a moving and insightful piece of journalism, Christine Jackman, of *The Australian* newspaper, took readers beyond the monstrous crime that ended Chloe's life into the lifeworld that she had inhabited all too briefly (Jackman 2003). Her essay recalls the higher

forms of Victorian era slum journalism, which explored the realms of urban abjection and recorded them with humanity and empathy.

Jackman enters the Lansdowne netherworld to find and interview Chloe's playmates; just some of the many children that live with their parents in the tightly packed, poorly ventilated trailers and cabins that crowd the caravan park. The children knew well the tawdry reserve where Chloe had been found because their parents had declared it off limits: a magnet for prostitution and drug dealing where local Council workers would regularly find up to 150 syringes a week buried in the sand beneath the playground's swings.

Jackman speaks to 'Dave', a father of three children under the age of three. He fumes with helpless rage about the impossibility of keeping kids safe in a sinkhole of drugs, pollution and quietly smouldering rage. Jackman observes: '...beneath this father's fury is a deeper, brooding resentment at the powerlessness of life on the fringes of Australia's wealthiest city'. Dave speaks of entrapment, of not being able to access even the scruffier private rental market that thrives in parts of Sydney's middle west. He and his family have been told that they will wait at least six years for public housing in the area. The heartless contradictions of contemporary post-welfare Australia are revealed when his partner, 'Cara', informs Jackman that the family could move almost immediately to a public dwelling in the city of Dubbo (in rural New South Wales), but the move would send them even further backwards: '...Centrelink [the national government's

welfare coordination agency] will cut our [unemployment] payments because you can't move to an area with less jobs'. The long shadows of Victorian poor laws and their brutish prosecution of the 'undeserving' continue to darken the lives of Australia's urban poor.

Lansdowne, like many other similar urban welfare camps, is the last stop before outright homelessness. It provides none of the conditions for a healthy and happy life. In Dave's words: '[t]here's nothing here, mate'. The politics of choice seem to have side-stepped Lansdowne's 1000 residents: '...we've got no choice', laments Dave. Jackman writes: '[t]he only shopping centre within walking distance boasts a liquor store, a Chinese takeaway and a McDonald's – but the fruit and vegetable shop has closed down'. The problem of transport poverty is highlighted: '[t]hose without cars must rely on the local service stations for ready supplies – but often must dodge another sort of trade on their way to pick up milk'. Jackman inscribes her sad portrait of Chloe's life and death with this epitaph: '[s]he was an innocent battling to thrive in a world where the fresh and the natural are constantly under siege from the jaded and foul'.

Australia's cities are peppered with 'jaded and foul' places that are home to countless numbers of children and youth. More than one fifth of the nation's children live in low-income households, and nearly as many live in families with no employed parent (AIHW 2005). Studies by Lloyd et al. (2001) and Randolph & Holloway (2004) separately confirm that many of the poorest urban localities in

Australia contain high concentrations of children (i.e. over 25 per cent of their population). These places include the new and lingering concentrations of poverty that have emerged in Australia's cities during decades of neo-liberal reform. These include welfare camps like Landsdowne, sinkhole public housing estates, places of urban indigenous disadvantage, and emerging pockets of exclusion mouldering in the middle suburbs of the major cities.

Glenn Draper and colleagues have studied the relationships between health inequalities and mortality, examining the influence of socio-economic disadvantage on life expectancy. Their national study of socio-economically disadvantaged communities confirms the argument that poverty is literally life threatening. They come to the chilling conclusion that, '[i]f all [poor communities] in Australia experienced the same death rate as the least socio-economically disadvantaged areas, more than 23,000 deaths could have been avoided in 1998–2000' (Draper et al. 2004: 22). *This figure includes nearly 2,700 children.*²

Caravan parks like Landsdowne are among the worst and least known communities of disadvantage. The little we do know about these new urban poverty spaces was powerfully summarized in a study by researchers at the Urban Frontiers Program at the University of Western Sydney (Wensing et al. 2003). In 2001, 62 per cent of households in caravan parks earned less than \$500 a week, compared with an Australian average of 29 per cent. More than four in ten park

residents were in rental stress, paying more than 30 per cent of their income on rent. Some 80 per cent of residents had no post-school qualifications. We do not properly know yet the extent or precise character of these new urban netherworlds. Our social scientific understanding of them is poor. Such knowledge seems to attract little political or policy interest.

Epilogue? The problem of Lansdowne at least, might soon be dealt with. The owner of the caravan park, urban development behemoth Meriton, recently lodged an application to rezone the park from 'private recreation' to 'residential', potentially paving the way for a lucrative redevelopment. Meriton has announced that it is 'considering options for the best use of the land occupied by the park. At this time, it is considered that a traditional, low density, residential subdivision is the most appropriate use'.³ A master planned enclave estate might be just what is needed to sanctify the haunted grounds of Lansdowne caravan park. But who will calm its ghosts?

Poor (Not so) Little Rich Kids

What about the other end of the social scale? Imagine the situation of the children and youth who might live in the master planned estate that could eventually replace Lansdowne caravan park. It is also likely to look very crowded in a middle class way; lots of large houses, packed into small lots, separated by narrow streets and pocket parks. It may or may not have footpaths.

Some Australian commentators have derisively called such estates 'McMansion Land'; perhaps because their supersized contents seem steroid 'enhanced' (see Figure 3.1). In truth, the observation is condescending and rather unfair: the large structures reflect a growth in the national appetite for more housing space that has been a feature of Australian life for much of the twentieth century and now continues beyond.⁴ At the same time, the plots on which master planned housing estates are set have been dramatically compacted, and decades of 'urban consolidation' policies been applied to new subdivisions by state and local governments. These endless little compactations, and the general speeding up of life under neo-liberalism, are features of what Kearns and Collins in New Zealand (chapter 7) term the 'intensifying city'.

FIGURE 3.1 NEAR HERE

Hawley, resorting to mild hyperbole, describes contemporary project homes on the newer Sydney master planned estates as '...four bedroom, spiral staircase, open-plan, kitchen-family-dining-lounge, multiple bathroom, rumpus room, big-screen media room, barbecue, spa, multi-garage bigger-is-beautiful-is-better houses' (2003: 25).

Whilst condescension is unwise, there are growing reasons for disquiet about McMansion Land. The growth in housing girth is an environmental concern – the suburban palazzos are energy guzzlers – and also, perhaps, a health concern.

Evidence on the national epidemic in childhood obesity points to a relationship between the expanding girth of dwellings and the growing waistlines of their inhabitants.

The contemporary suburban mega house internalizes activity, allocating large amounts of space to passive recreation: home theatres, lounges, rumpus and computer rooms, courtyards, and monster garages for the storage of adults' toys. Gwyther explains: 'They love cocooning inside their McMansions, which are like castles, fun factories and mini resorts in one' (in Hawley 2003: 25). These relatively sedentary residential landscapes contrast with older suburban forms that were premised on far greater levels of outdoor activity, especially for children.

The traditional backyard has gone, along with its trees, garden veggie patch, often pool, washing line and shed, where children could let their bodies and imaginations run free and build tree houses, cubbyhouses, billycars, dig in the dirt and invent games. Now, it's indoor computer games, and, given there's no room for a decent run-up in most McMansion courtyards, children are driven to sport and formally organised activities most days of the week.

(Hawley 2003: 25)

Recent survey evidence confirms the picture of sedentary children. A national study reported in early 2005 found that Australian children were spending only

about one tenth of their time in outdoor play (Allen & Hammond 2005). Further, one in twenty admitted that they never left their homes to play. In response, the parenting educator, Michael Grose, linked rising childhood obesity to the fact that '...houses are getting bigger and backyards smaller' (Allen & Hammond 2005: 1). He also decried the programming of children by parents and educators, observing, '[e]verything we know about child development says that children need to spend more time outside in unstructured activities, giving them a chance to explore their environment' (ibid.).

Those 'McKids' who actually do participate in organized sport – a chore for parents working long hours on the mortgage treadmill – will experience at least some level of physical activity. But missing from these new suburban landscapes are the opportunities for spontaneous, constant free play that was available to children of previous generations, and is available to those lucky enough to have backyards still. As Hawley observes, many parents cite space as the principal reason for rejecting 'inner city shoe boxes' in favour of the new master planned estates. And yet free, permeable space seems to be almost absent from the new residential landscapes.

The freedom and permeability of activity space is further reduced by the highly routinized and supervised lives imposed on contemporary middle class urban children. The geographer, Paul Tranter, believes that Australian children are subjected to unprecedented levels of surveillance and control, driven by an

epidemic of parental and institutional concern about environmental risk and crime (see chapter 8 in this volume). Many now live highly scripted lives, marked by pervasive anxiety and the absence of free and independent play. Cadzow writes of the 'Bubble Wrap Generation':

So reluctant are we to let our offspring out of our sight that we drive them to the playground and everywhere else rather than allow them to walk or ride their bikes. Strapped into the backseat of the family sedan, chauffeured to and from school, soccer practice and piano lessons, middle-class Australian boys and girls are like pampered prisoners – cosseted, constrained and constantly nagged.

(2004: 18)

Children need autonomy from adults for their psychic and social development: little wonder then that the 'pampered prisoners' flee the bounds of their suburban cells for the horizonless expanses of computer generated worlds, where freeplay is always possible. They may not be permitted to climb trees, ride their bikes to the shops or go unaccompanied to parks, but here they can wage global or intergalactic wars, build cities and even design the perfect family.

The problem with simulated worlds, however, is that they are pretty poor training grounds for life. A tour of duty in SimCity can never emulate the sensuous complexity of urban life. Life with the Sims is unlikely to help a child to cope

with any family dysfunctionality or prepare them for the joys and strains of adult life. The 'ordinary maladies' of life come as insurmountable shocks to bubble wrap kids. Melbourne clinical psychologist, Andrew Fuller, tells Cadzow, 'when bad things do happen, they're just thrown for six. They end up in my bloody therapy room and I'm sick of it' (in Cadzow 2004: 19).

By the time they reach their teenage years, many children will be quaking from prolonged exposure to the chill winds of materialism and individualism. For many, drugs – illegal and prescribed – will help to stop the shakes. Health Insurance Commission data show that Australia has joined the ranks of Prozac nations, reflecting rapid growth in prescriptions for happy pills during the early years of the new millennium. In 2004, over a quarter of a million prescriptions were issued to adolescents to treat various forms of sadness (Lawrence 2005b). Professor Ian Hickie, mental health expert, warns of '...the future burden of youth mental illness' arising from a rapid growth in conduct and mood disorders amongst young people (ibid: 39).

Many of the saddest children are from affluent homes. Australian and international evidence confirms that children frequently bear what the US psychologist, Suniya Luthar, calls the 'psychological costs of material wealth' (Luthar 2003 – in Australia, Eckersley 2004). Empirically based research links disorders which appear to be growing amongst wealthier youth – notably, substance abuse, depression and anxiety – to a combination of pressure to achieve

and isolation from parents. She crafts the image of the remote, yet overbearing parent. Luthar reports a variety of US studies which suggest that the costs of wealth are especially acute in upwardly mobile suburban communities. In Australia these costs are apparent in the aspirational belt, where pressures to excel in academic and extra curricula activities combine with isolation from parents working long hours in the contemporary treadmill economy (Luthar 2004: 1582).

Despite evidence which shows Australia to be a much safer place for children than it was three decades ago,⁵ an obdurate culture of fear drives the ever increasing parental colonization of children's lifeworlds. The colonization project seems strangely disconnected to real social evidence. It includes, for example, a recent and largely unreported reported Australian Bureau of Statistics survey that shows a significant drop in crime in New South Wales between 2001-3, and an increase in the number of people who reported that their neighbourhoods were crime free.⁶ Parental anxiety about child abduction, driven by relentless high pitched media reportage, means that many more children are driven to school than previously. One result is growing traffic chaos around schools, which perversely poses new dangers for children. The president of a parents' association at a Gold Coast school recently remarked,

It's absolutely hideous. There's (sic.) cars everywhere. It's dangerous around schools and it's all because of the child abduction issue...It's a bit sad. Kids don't have much freedom...They can't be kids any more. We feel

like we are part time security guards. It's the way society has made us these days.

(in Robson et al. 2005: 4)

Fear, the potent flag bearer for Despair, is a difficult wraith to banish, especially when popular media and contemporary 'law and order' politics give it the free pedestal that it so desperately craves. The rising numbers of kids in therapy and the epidemic of child obesity are two potent markers of the extent to which fear rules our cities and communities.

Postscript: A Battle Quietly Rages

Like most advanced capitalist nations, Australia has long craved greater wealth, more freedom to use it, and more stimulating ways to expend it. Before the neo-liberal revolution three decades ago, the lust for gold was restrained by a diverse set of moderating influences with deep cultural roots: conservatism, religion, socialism, conservationism. The manipulated panic about the 'state fiscal crisis' that brought neo-liberalism to power throughout the English speaking world in the late 1970s saw the suspension of these moderating orders. The 'growth machine' economy unleashed by neo-liberals promised to drive whole nations to heaven through the eye of the materialist needle.

The assessment presented in this chapter suggests that the Growth Fetish is a morbid desire, and its indulgence has generated material enrichment at the cost of

great civic and human impoverishment. From the perspective of children, it has produced toxic not healthy cities. A nation that denies the chance for health and happiness to many of its young is not a rich society, because it is brutish by nature and because it steals from its own future. The attack on young people suggests that we have, as a society, lost the (re)generative impulse that is a precondition for a national future worth having.

Further, the open disregard of successive national and state governments and business elites for the highly apparent, blatant, polarization of cities reeks of doom. The steady, nihilistic progress towards an Australia divided is surely a death march. A splintered nation will not weather history's storms. Finally, the attack on the public domain represents another way in which Australia has campaigned against its own future. It has produced urban communities and cities that cannot undertake the task of nurturing and constantly modernizing the civic values that underscore nationhood.

Amidst this ruckus, ordinary things are happening that will shape the future. Children and youth are trying to live and grow in the shadows of great events. The glowing structures erected around them, and the riches piled up in their sight, provide no shelter from human perfidy. Our misshapen young will pay the debts that we accumulate. Fatter, sicker and sadder, they face the miserable future we are shaping for them.

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¹ Capital cities presently contain almost two-thirds (64%) of Australia's population and their growth accounted for almost three-quarters of Australia's population increase in the 2000–2001 period. Between 1996 and 2001, the capital cities collectively grew by 1.3% while the balance of the States and Territories grew by 0.9% (ABS 2003).

² Aged 14 years or less

³ Letter cited by Paul Lynch, M.P., state member for Liverpool, NSW Legislative Assembly
Hansard Article No.32 of 01/05/2003

⁴ The average floor area of new houses in Australia grew by over 40 per cent between 1984/5 and 2002/3. In NSW and Qld, growth for the same period was over 50 percent (Perinotto & Murphy 2004).

⁵ Cadzow (2004) presents Australian Bureau of Statistics data which demonstrate a marked decline in the amount of deaths of children aged five to 14 between 1972 and 2002.

⁶ The Sydney Morning Herald, 6 December 2003, p.3.

