

**Looking Backward:
Daceyville
and a time of idealism in public housing**



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As we walked home I commented on the great variety in the size and cost of the houses. 'How is it', I asked, 'that this difference is consistent with the fact that all citizens have the same income?' 'Because', Edith explained, '... The rents which the nation receives for these houses vary, according to size, elegance, and location, so that everybody can find something to suit.' (Edward Bellamy, Looking Backward from 2000 to 1887, 1888)

I would say build houses. Go and create an agency that buys land and builds houses very, very quickly and sells them very, very cheaply. I think we don't want to [do that] anymore. (Cameron Murray, 28 April, 2023).¹

In Edward Bellamy's utopian novel, *Looking Backward from 2000 to 1887*, a resident of Boston wakes from a deep sleep to discover he has time travelled from 1887 to the beginning of the 21st century. In the year 2000 income was no barrier to good housing for economic class had been levelled by the provision of a standard allowance that permitted the rental of any house one required. Through an ingenious communistic 'Nationalism', both individual choice and equality were satisfied.

Bellamy's vision had immediate appeal in the Anglophone world. Remarkably municipal socialism sprang up cities across the United States where ruthless capitalism had just reached its zenith in the so-called 'Gilded Age'. Edward Bellamy helped to usher in an alternative way of thinking about society.¹

¹ Cameron Murray, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of Sydney, 'PM', *ABC Radio National*, 28/4/2023

But in the 21st century, when the book is set, *Looking Backward* is an intellectual curiosity at best. Australian urban economists, such as Cameron Murray from the University of Sydney, desperately imagine solutions for an intractable housing crisis, possibly the worst in the country's history. Few believe in a single answer or the 'quick fix', however, Murray urged a massive publicly-funded building program. Build houses, he urged, 'very, very quickly'. Speaking on radio in April 2023 he was responding to the newly-elected Labor Government's incentives for 'build to rent' projects, announced in the lead-up to the Federal Budget. Such proposals to assist State-based housing schemes were, the economist contended, part of a 'pretend game' that never actually helped renters.

As Murray spoke there were more than 51,000 people waiting for social housing – once called public housing - in New South Wales alone.² The problem was just one of many major dilemmas confronting policy makers. Most directly there was rising inflation which drove up home loan interest rates. Looming ecological catastrophes, heightened defence concerns, a costly National Disability Insurance Scheme, underfunded education and health systems, and a precarious aged care sector in, all demanded attention. It is a difficult time for Australia's centre-left Labor Governments which hold to a traditional commitment to social justice but nonetheless are beholden to a political imperative to heed the neo-liberal economic orthodoxies of low taxation, balanced budgets and coercive 'incentivisation' of the disadvantaged which have remained entrenched since the 1980s. Government revenues have never been so inadequate for confronting the problems at hand.

Solutions for the housing problems are made harder still because real estate is treated as private investment rather than public good. This has long been the case but the global interest in Australia's residential property market has been encouraged since the 1980s and, in recent years, has been fuelled by investment capital from China and Hong Kong, the two top sources of interest in 2023 with \$1.6 billion

² <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/help/applying-assistance/expected-waiting-times>, accessed 30/4/2023

worth of approvals.² The original intent was to increase building supply but a side effect has been to drive prices up particularly for new apartments in Sydney and Melbourne. There are tax incentives which encourage the purchase of second, third or fourth investment properties for Australians too. That these were introduced by the Hawke Labor Government in 1985 is evidence of the dominance of neo-liberalism in Australian policy making. Ironically proposals to reform those incentives helped deprive Labor of government in the 2019 Federal election.

The Labor Party did win in 2022 having discarded those policies. But subsequent proposals to address the problem of housing affordability drew criticism from those, like Murray, who saw incentives for private investment in rental accommodation as inadequate tinkering. With homes never more unaffordable - to buy or rent - 'progressive' commentators called for government intervention on a grand scale.

The housing crisis of the 2020s is not Australia's first. The Depression of the 1930s badly affected the supply of housing while the world war which followed it diverted labour and material until the late 1940s. The result was a dearth of dwellings well into the 1960s.

Half a century earlier Sydney's ballooning population caused a squeeze in its older 'inner suburbs'. Home ownership in those years was the exception rather than a realisable dream, and the parlous position of renters was exacerbated by their relative powerlessness to negotiate adequate accommodation. Residential directories and local government records from the period indicate that mobility was very high in lower socio-economic areas. People moved frequently in search of affordable housing. Sometimes they did so secretively - to 'skip' unpaid rent.

That crisis, nonetheless, prompted an extraordinary level of optimism and action on the part of the first Labor Government in New South Wales. They established a Housing Board in 1912 expressly to build affordable rental dwellings – a practical measure that was also intended as a model for private enterprise. In 1913,

architects and social scientists banded together to launch the NSW Town Planning Association [TPANSW], the first of its kind in Australia. In 1914 the City of Sydney completed its first public housing project, the Strickland Building, constructed to provide rental accommodation for those displaced by ‘slum’ clearance in Chippendale. Countless reports, articles and conferences followed.

The ideals underpinning this period of reform were carried forward in starts and stops for more than 50 years. When Cameron Murray bemoaned the reluctance to build public housing - ‘we don’t want to anymore’ – he was implicitly recalling the work of the Housing Board and its successor, the Housing Commission of NSW, which addressed the crisis of the 1940s, ‘50s and ‘60s. In the context of the portfolio of problems confronting Australia’s Federal and State governments in 2023, Murray’s panacea appeared hopeful in the extreme. But in this he was echoing the idealism of the first urban reformers. Where Edward Bellamy’s future was rosy and ‘looking backward’ from the year 2000 provided a reassuring sense of utopia achieved, the reality of life in Sydney’s current housing crisis prompts wistful comparisons to decades past when housing was affordable and governments built homes to rent and sometimes buy. Looking backward from 2023 confirms that progress has stalled.

This essay focuses on the showcase project of the early 20th century; the government-funded ‘garden suburb’ called Daceyville planned and built by the NSW Housing Board on Sydney’s south eastern fringe over a decade from 1911 to serve as a model of well-planned and equitable urban development. Poignantly, Daceyville emerged out the idealistic ferment created by writers such as Edward Bellamy. The conceptualisation, realisation and subsequent history of that remarkable project provides insights into the thinking that made such an enterprise possible, and perhaps the attitudes that have led to the current housing impasse.

The birth of town planning in Sydney

The desire to build Daceyville did not, of course, simply spring from the pages of books written overseas. Neither was town planning the brainchild of that first Labor Government of 1910. In order to understand the motivation of Australian politicians and planners in first two decades of the 20th century, it is helpful to look at what had transpired in Sydney in the previous century.

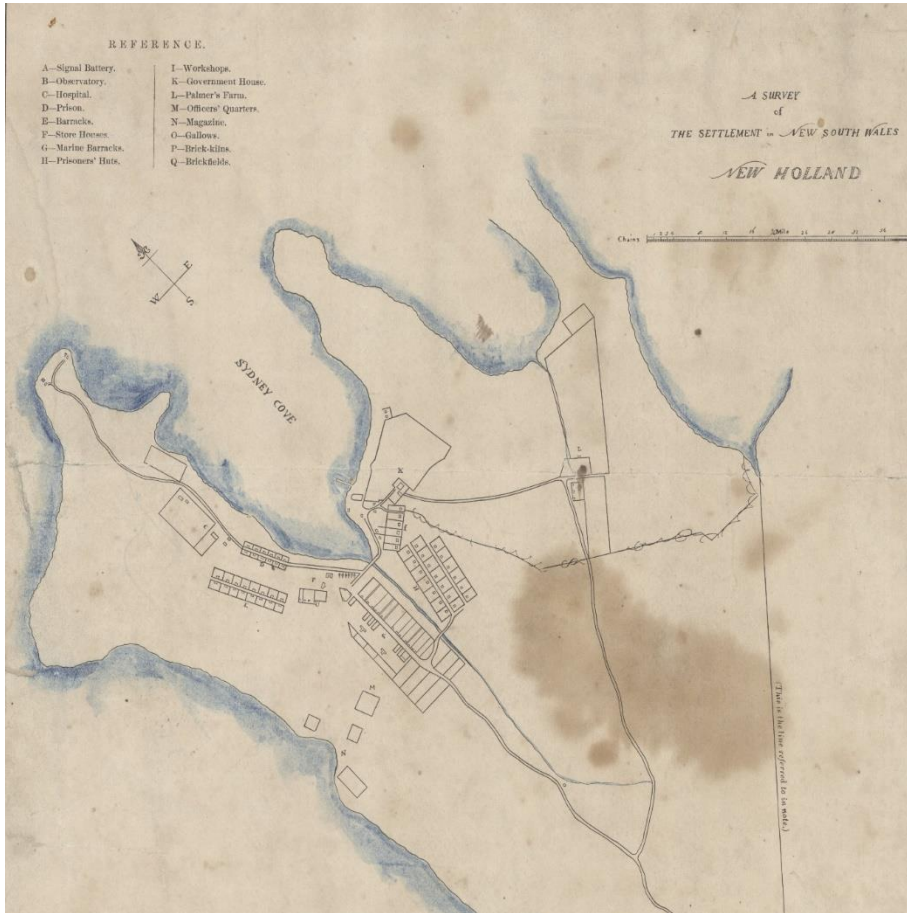
Upon disembarking in the bay he named Sydney Cove in January 1788, Governor Phillip was quick to arrange people and buildings depending upon their roles and their relationship to the each other; and to all-important harbour which connected the outpost to the world. Before he finally left with his temporary tent, the Governor had ensured his permanent abode sat high in a well-tended garden, symbolically and safely removed from all the rest. Phillip's reflections, at least as they come down to us through his editor John Stockdale, are telling:

There are few things more pleasing than the contemplation of order and useful arrangement arising gradually out of tumult and confusion; and perhaps this satisfaction cannot anywhere be more fully enjoyed than where a settlement of civilised people is fixing itself upon a newly discovered or savage coast.³

There was something peculiarly European, if not English, about that urge to create order. By contrast, the original inhabitants of the 'savage coast' had no need for formal layouts. Though not nomadic, they were mobile within their respective territories; moving from bay to bay and rock shelter to ridge as the climate and food supply required. Temporary dwellings were built quickly of wood and bark and abandoned when no longer needed. The Sydney clans were small in size – perhaps as few as 100 people each.⁴ There were not the complex social hierarchies that come with large populations; administrators, artisans, farmers, gaolers and prisoners, rich and poor.

These people were guided by a cosmology which compressed past, present and future so that they did not 'plan' in any way that made sense to the Europeans who encountered and ultimately dispossessed them. The first harbour people were

bewilderingly ‘irrational’ in the practical opinion of the boatbuilder Daniel Paine who arrived in 1795.⁵ They did not build permanent dwellings or grow crops in anticipation of tomorrow. This judgement notwithstanding, it is quite likely that the precolonial population of some 1,000 people had been sustained by their mobile mode of living for generations. With a conservatism borne of isolation and contentment, they saw little need to change what worked for them.



(This detail from the 1792 'Survey of the Settlement in New South Wales New Holland' 1792 shows the town Phillip arranged, SLNSW)

Unsurprisingly the British carried what worked for them too – in their minds and travel chests. Building methods were even more fundamental than the laying of out streets. Stone was used where it could be quarried close by for those who could afford it, and bricks were shaped by convict brickmaker James Bloodworth. In time they would become the main building material as clay pits were fortuitously discovered throughout the sandstone basin in the course of suburban spread. Initially builders and architects created dwellings in the neo-classical fashion well-established over the previous century. The easily-worked sandstone bedrock of the

harbour was ideally suited to this symmetrical aesthetic. In the course of the next 130 years Gothic and English Revival styles were introduced – the ripple effect from the imperial centre was apparently perpetual.

To the Frenchman Pierre Lesson, the newly consolidated town was imbued with Englishness. In 1824 he noted ‘each house consists of a ground floor only, and has a flower garden next to the street and a bigger garden at the back. They are indeed the genuine “cottages” which the English love so much and call their “sweet homes”’.⁶

By this time, however, Phillip’s vision for order had been long abandoned. The regular grid of streets that followed the valley of the Tank Stream southward belied an absence of building and planning regulation. For the departure of the first Governor in 1792 was followed by a spate of leases which alienated land that was to have remained Crown controlled. When the fourth Governor, William Bligh, attempted to reinstate that control in 1806 and 1807 he was ousted by a coalition of jobbing soldiers egged on by the landed entrepreneurial schemer, John Macarthur who spoke of the endangerment of ‘every man’s property, liberty and life’ under Bligh the tyrant.⁷ The colony’s first and only coup was motivated, in large part, by the rights of individual land holders.⁸ And remarkably enough, in a garrison town established to house convicts, the power of private property held fast against government. That power would grow with the development of democracy.

The commercial port city that emerged from the penal town was ‘chaotic’.⁹ No where more so than in the harbour front precinct called The Rocks. There, the combination of topography - a steep rise of sandstone outcrops – and the free-for-all bustle that typically characterised commercial maritime districts created a jumble of proud and humble buildings along streets and lanes that followed the lay of the land. Despite its sensationalism, the word picture painted by English journalist Frank Fowler conveys the nature of space and place in the poorer parts of The Rocks. Alleys converged, ‘one running into another’, and most houses were ‘single rooms

with earthen floorings ... utterly destitute of windows, chimneys and doors. Serpent-like gutters, choked with filth, trail before the tottering tenements ... indecent slime-bred flies dart and dazzle in the sun ...¹⁰ There were no English cottage gardens here.

Fowler's account was published in 1859, the same year that a Select Committee into the Condition of the Working Classes of the Metropolis was established and chaired by liberal reformer Henry Parkes. The Rocks featured heavily in that examination and there was alarm at the apparent duplication of the worst aspects of English metropolises in such a new and small city as Sydney.

But whereas Fowler characterised the denizens of The Rocks as 'hulking', 'awful', and 'brazen', Parkes' Committee was kinder. The 'general character of the working classes of Sydney' were of a 'high character, intelligence and sobriety' it concluded.¹¹ The exception were the Chinese residents who, since the discovery of gold in 1851, had established homes and businesses in The Rocks. In later years, as Premier, Parkes would distinguish himself with his punitive efforts to prevent further Chinese immigration. Celebrated in the national narrative as the 'father' of the movement to federate the Australian colonies and thereby create a nation, Parkes was also an early champion of the racial exclusivity that characterised the Commonwealth which emerged posthumously from his efforts. He might also be remembered as a father of 'White Australia'.

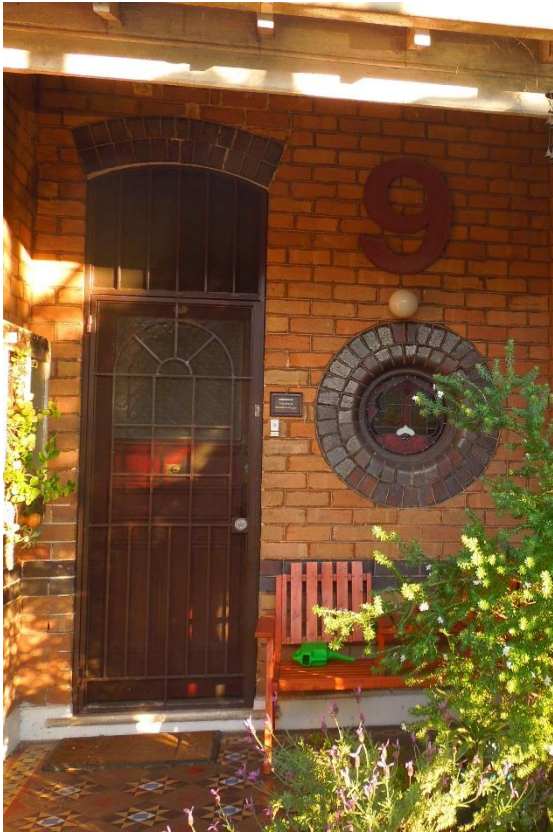
Parkes believed that colonists of British heritage would respond favourably to improvements to their physical circumstances. Indeed, the Committee recommended regulations to ensure better ventilation, sanitation and 'space for the exercise of children' be introduced. The report went further, suggesting that the colonial government employ artisans to build 'a model group of labourer's cottages' to serve as 'an example to private enterprise'. 'Dangers' which threatened 'the mental power and bodily vigour of the race' should be eradicated with a goal to producing 'Manly and contented citizens'.¹²

While Parkes' belief in the transformative power of well-planned space was given dramatic expression with the creation of a 'people's park' - Centennial Park - in 1888, nothing along the lines of publicly-funded housing eventuated. Market forces guided the expansion of the city for the next 40 years. Nonetheless, the Committee's proposal for model houses, and the justification for those along the lines of promoting vigour, race and citizenship, were remarkable anticipations of the aims of the first Labor State Government in the new century. Those recommendations are seldom discussed in histories of Australian planning, but it was almost as if Parkes and his fellow committee members were imagining Daceyville.

The change began in the 1880s. Three English architects arrived in the middle of that decade, quite independently of each other. All would have profound effects on the development of architecture and planning in their adopted city. Islington-born Edward Jeaffreson Jackson brought with him the ideas of the English Revival architects George Devey and Richard Norman Shaw and helped to shape what would become the city's characteristic Federation-era architecture.



(‘The Hastings’, c.1905, in Neutral Bay survives as one of the best examples of Jackson’s work and an embodiment of the Arts and Crafts aesthetic with its varied palette of materials and its many elements. Photo by the author, 2015)



The inspiration of the Arts and Crafts movement was particularly apparent in those ‘Federation’ buildings and, in keeping with the socialistic philosophy of William Morris, even the most modest speculatively-built dwellings included decorative elements such as coloured glass and floral tiles intended to bring beauty into the life of their inhabitants.

(The original polychromatic brick, tessellated tiles and circular coloured glass window survive in the porch of this modest cottage, c.1910, in Ivanhoe Street Marrickville. Photograph by the author 2015)

Walter Liberty Vernon had also embraced the rediscovery of English vernacular styles. In 1885 he built a Tudor villa for himself on the slopes above Neutral Bay and then proceeded to lay out a ‘model’ suburb around him – possibly the first so-named enterprise in Sydney. He followed that up in 1890 with plans for another at Kensington. Both were decidedly middle class. That year he became the New South Wales Government Architect with the power thereby to influence the look of the city.

John Sulman disembarked in 1885 and established an architectural practice the following year. His domestic commissions were decidedly English. But Sulman’s interest lay in town planning. In 1890 he delivered a lecture on the ‘laying out of towns’ which argued for both rational planning and more creative street patterns such as radial ‘spider-web’.

Sulman presented his address as an international economic depression began to affect New South Wales. The impact was of course more than economic. As

labour historian Eric Fry put it ‘old values were shaken ... old politics were discredited’.¹³ One outcome was the birth of the Australian Labor Party and its consolidated colonial branch, the New South Wales Political Labor League. Labor won 35 seats in the 1891 colonial election. Urban reform was an early concern, in particular extending democracy to municipal councils. The latest ideas in town planning were being discussed in earnest.

JD Fitzgerald was among those 35 who shook the old values. In 1900 having lost his parliamentary seat and failed to win another, he became an alderman on the City of Sydney Council and began promoting modern town planning in earnest. Fitzgerald remained a prominent member of the State’s Labor Party and likely did much to educate his colleagues in matters of urban reform.

His first year in Council coincided with the outbreak of bubonic plague. The spectre of medieval ‘black death’ in modern Sydney was catalysing.¹⁴ What followed was one the largest urban redevelopment programmes in the history of the State. Much of The Rocks and Millers Point was resumed by the State government. New wharfage was built and, from 1910, model terrace and tenement housing was erected by the State instrumentality, the Sydney Harbour Trust, for waterside workers in Millers Point.

It was an exception which did not alter the rule by then accepted by Sulman, Fitzgerald and others. Australian cities were blessed by apparently limitless hinterlands where fresh air, sunshine and space were abundant. These should be developed as suburbs of freestanding or semi-detached dwellings surround by parks and gardens. The Royal Commission for the Improvement of the City of Sydney and its Suburbs, which had reported the previous year, recommended that ‘on social and hygienic grounds, workmen should be encouraged to live in separate houses in the suburbs’.¹⁵



(Clarence Backhouse's watercolour 'The Cut, Sydney 1899' shows Argyle Street and the intensity of development at The Rocks and the terraces that JR Dacey characterised as 'dog boxes'. There is little sign of nature let alone gardens. SLNSW)

The Labor Party came to power in New South Wales as the first Millers Point tenements were being leased. Their Housing Bill was passed two years later in early April 1912. It was championed by the State Treasurer, John Rowland Dacey. The Act created the Housing Board which was to administer land acquired by the Government for the erection of

houses and other buildings, and the creation of parks and reserves. It did not specify the type of houses or the nature of the development, nor the ideal behind the policy, but Dacey made that clear in an impassioned speech in parliament in support of the legislation which, probably by coincidence, echoed Frank Fowler's portrayal of The Rocks 60 years earlier:

The day is past when free Australians were content to be herded together in terraces of mere dog-boxes. In some of the suburbs they are compelled to herd together like flies, and the time has come when we should create a garden city and provide houses of an up-to-date character at the lowest possible rental.¹⁶

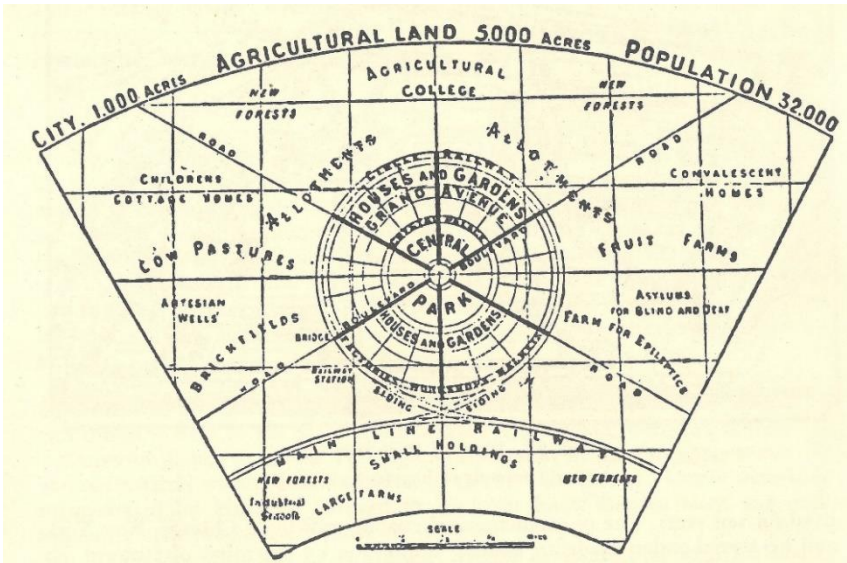
JR Dacey died just days after his Bill was passed. JD Fitzgerald consequently assumed the Chair of the Housing Board. He was joined by John Sulman and JF 'Jack' Hennessy, a prolific architect for the Catholic church and a devout Catholic himself. That connection may have influenced his selection by the Labor

Government with its strong Irish-Catholic base. Fitzgerald was of Irish-Catholic heritage. Work on the suburb that immortalised Dacey began in June 1912.

The design and idealism of Daceyville

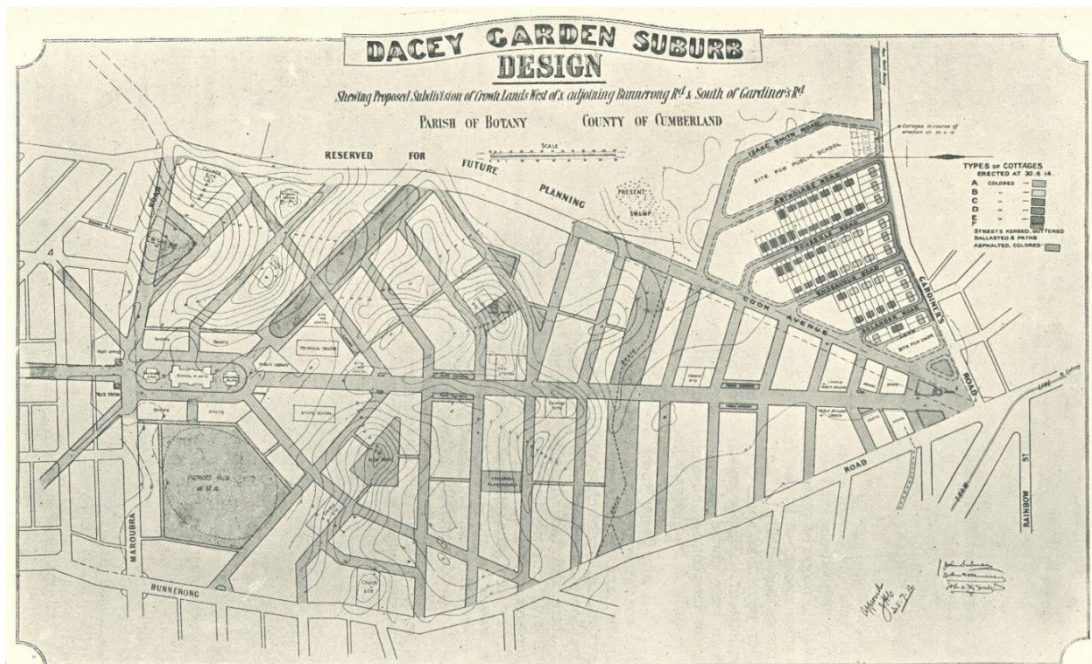
Dacey's reference to the 'garden city' obviously evinced a familiarity with the work of Ebenezer Howard, the most influential figure in planning at that time. Howard's proposal for marrying the benefits of both city and country was published first in 1898 as *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* and again in 1902 as *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. The titles are interesting. Both layout out a better future as one might expect from the work of a self-avowed reformer. But the conscious and repeated use of the word 'tomorrow' is perhaps a nod to Howard's great influence, Edward Bellamy. The one looks forward, the other looks back from that better future which had seeded optimism. Howard recalled the impact *Looking Backward* had upon him: 'This book graphically pictured the whole American nations organised on co-operative principles – this mighty change coming about with marvellous celerity ... I determined to take such a part as I could, however small it might be, in helping to bring about a new civilisation'.¹⁷

Town planning was not the focus of Bellamy's work but it would be for Howard. The civic co-operation he sought would best flourish in an ideal environment away from crowding, disease and filth. He wrote of the need to decentralise, to get the urban populations back to the countryside to reap the benefits of nature. Zoning was all important. Howard depicted this in diagrams that made the amalgamation of country and city seem easy. This was what would later be called 'greenfield planning', starting from scratch to create an ideal city rather than remodel an existing one. Such freedom to imagine was exhilarating. But for all the Romanticism inherent in embracing nature, Howard's diagrams evinced the same desire to replace chaos with order that had motivated Arthur Phillip and many other administrators, generals and emperors before him.



(From Ebenezer Howard, Garden Cities of Tomorrow, 1902)

Plans for Daceyville, or Dacey Garden Suburb as it was originally called, began appearing in the press well before the Housing Bill was passed. Indeed, the Public Works Department had drafted a layout for an as yet un-named suburb in 1911. A second plan by Fitzgerald, Sulman, Hennessy was adopted in July 1912.



(The Sulman, Hennessy and Fitzgerald plan of 1912, reprinted with progress to 1914 shown. SLNSW)

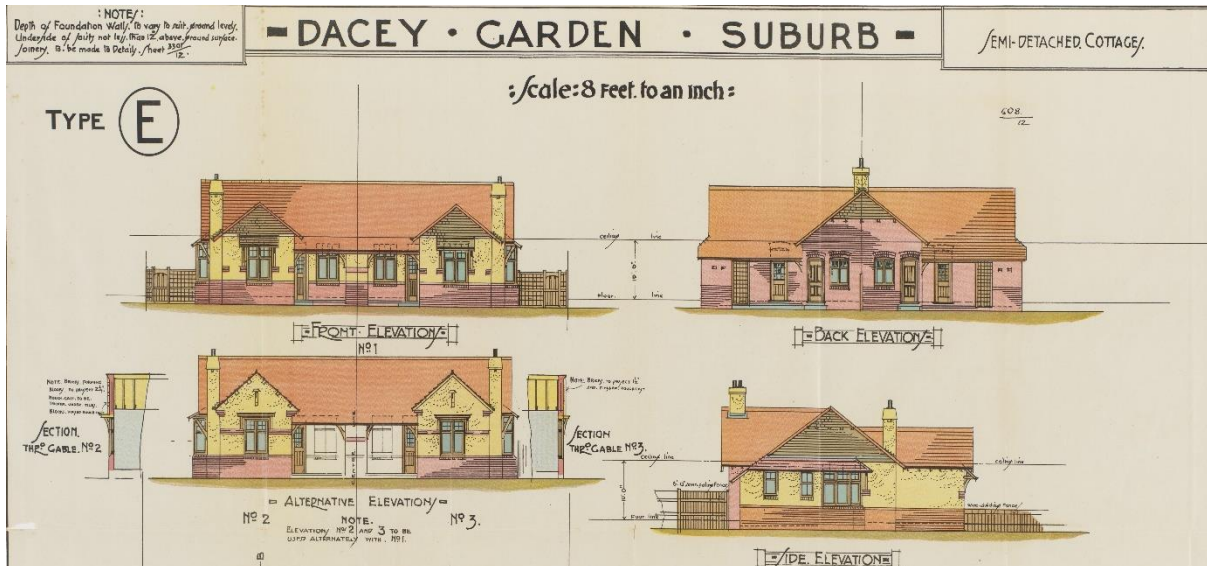
Where Howard's first garden city, Letchworth, was situated in a verdant and undulating English countryside. Daceyville was to be located on the sandy flat south eastern fringe of the city and north of Botany Bay. The coast was just two kilometres to the east. The land was cheap and undeveloped. This had probably been Gaymegal country though it is unlikely to have been a regular camping area given the lack of food resources and the distance from the Bay. A wetland nearby may have provided those first people waterbirds and eggs.

This area was still rolling dunes with some coastal heath where it survived in 1912. Hereabouts pigs and poultry were kept and slaughtered in small scale enterprises. There were dairies. The presence of Chinese-run piggeries added to the peripheral sense of the place. In White Australia, the Chinese were often fringe dwellers.

The adopted plan showed the radial spider web pattern that Sulman had long favoured. To make the most of the undramatic topography, 'viewpoints' were suggested the land peaked. Churches were also to be located on elevated sites in keeping with their status. The suburb would have its own School of Arts, a library, schools and a technical college, fire and police stations, a post office and shops. There as a large park for active recreation, a children's garden and numerous public gardens for beautification. Houses had deep back gardens. Significantly there was no space allocated for a pub.

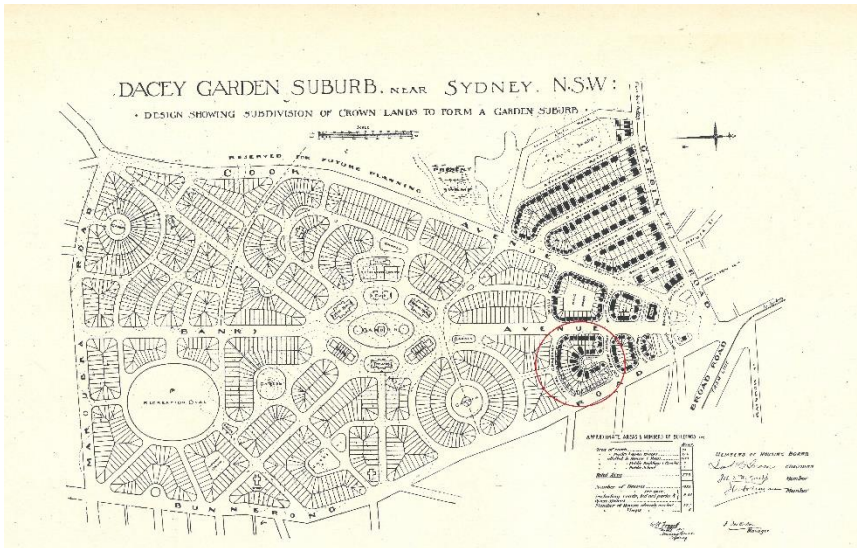
The house type varied considerably. In 1914 there were six designs of semi-detached and detached dwellings. Ultimately there would be as many as 20.¹⁸ Many were designed by William Foggitt working for the Housing Board. Those designed by the Government Architect's office showed the distinct influence of Walter Liberty Vernon who had just retired as Government Architect in 1911. He left a legacy of peculiarly English fire stations and post offices in Sydney's suburbs – a far cry from the Italianate style of his predecessor in the role James Barnet.

The Type E semi-detached dwelling of 1912 shows the roughcast walls and tall chimneys characteristic of Vernon's Arts and Crafts design. Foggitt's cottages have half-timbered gables redolent of Tudor England. Most featured the sweeping roof planes of the English Revival style.



GM Blair's Type E design of 1912 shows roughcast walls and chimneys in yellow. SLNSW

English Revival architecture embodied the aesthetic of the Picturesque, a way of seeing which emphasized the pleasure to be gained from variation and surprise. That translated into architectural design through the overt use of various materials – unrendered brick, roughcast brick, timber and tiles – and variation in shape, as Edward Jeffreson Jackson knew well. Grander dwellings might feature turrets, circular windows, expanses of wall hung shingles and unexpected balconies. With the modest houses at Daceyville this was expressed with interesting roof lines and the varied but clearly aesthetically related house types. Arts and Crafts was the dominant style of architecture used in the English progenitor, Ebenezer Howard's 1903 Letchworth. The Picturesque also influenced the laying out of streets. With the exception of the radiating avenues these curved to make up the 'spider's web'. To walk around these 'crescents' was to experience a view that was always unfolding rather than the 'monotony' of a straight thoroughfare.¹⁹ This became more evident



in William Foggitt's 1914 street design. That plan included Australia's first cul-de-sac.

(William Foggitt's 1914 plan of Daceyville shows a far more curvilinear street pattern. Australia's first cul-de-sac is shown in red. SLNSW)

(The aesthetic interest created by a curving street is evident even in this early photograph of Daceyville with its still immature street trees. SLNSW)



(Letchworth Garden City pictured a decade or two after its establishment in 1903. Note the curved street and Arts and Crafts architecture. Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation)

The significance of gardens in a garden city or suburb can hardly be overstated. The emphasis on access to nature in the new planning movement combined long established Romantic sentiments, and more recent Arts and Crafts aesthetic philosophies, with scientific theories which advocated the physical and mental benefits of fresh air, sunlight as well as the contemplation of natural beauty. Gardens provided all that whether they be public or private spaces. The thinking was taken up with alacrity in Australia.

George Taylor, one of the founding members of the TPANSW, expressed that idea succinctly in 1913: ‘A change to a better built house is not sufficient for uplifting the slum dweller. He must be set in a new environment ... [to encourage] the love of beauty that reposes in every man’s soul’. That new environment ‘might well be expressed in a garden’.²⁰ Fitzgerald agreed: “The eugenicist says “Place your potential criminal in a garden village and he will grow up a virtuous citizen.”²¹

That was, or course, a misunderstanding of the principle upon which eugenics was founded; that undesirable people beget undesirable children and therefore should be prevented from reproducing or, in later awful applications, eliminated altogether. Eugenics never gained the foothold in Australia it did in the United States, Germany or even Britain. The reason lies in the combination of space, temperate climate and ethnic homogeneity. Australian reformers and politicians embraced environmental reforms such as town planning in late 19th century and early 20th century because of an optimism in the citizenry. That is why Fitzgerald’s criminal could be reformed through exposure to gardens, fresh air and open space.

But environmentalism and eugenics had one thing in common; an obsession with racial health and purity. Those who promoted urban reforms such as garden suburbs believed in the need to preserve and strengthen the ‘White Australia’ enshrined in immigration policies passed as soon as the Commonwealth came into being. Whiteness was the basis on which the colonies came together and whiteness was the foundation of the reformists’ social contract between State and citizen.

Organised labour and Labor politicians were among the strongest supporters of race-based immigration restrictions because ‘cheap coloured labour’ threatened the value and dignity of the white working class.

Furthermore, Britishness was a central part of that race-based national identity. Australia was the perfect crucible for improving the accepted superiority of Anglo-Celtic people. Henry Parkes had spoken of the ‘crimson thread of kinship’ which linked the Australian colonies to Britain in the 1880s. That biological element in racial identity and superiority firmed in the following decades so that Billy Hughes, the man who rose through New South Wales Labor to become a wartime Prime Minister, could say in 1919: ‘We are more British than the people of Great Britain, we hold firmly to the great principle of the White Australia’.²²

As I have suggested, Britishness had been expressed in architecture since the first years of the colony. Then it was an unavoidable transplanting of methods and materials. That the affinity remained strong throughout the 19th century, to be amplified in the dominant styles of the Federation-era, is evidence of a powerful cultural link. At Daceyville this was expressed in Arts and Crafts style architecture. It might be also argued it was intrinsic to the promotion of gardening itself. It was inscribed in street names which celebrated the British discovery of the continent, most obviously Cook and Banks Avenues, Isaac Smith Street and Endeavour Road.

Britishness was definitely at the heart of the national response to the outbreak of World War One in 1914. The Australian Government backed Great Britain unequivocally from the outset and ultimately some 300,000 men and women volunteered for service. Several residents of Daceyville, such as Thomas Joseph Caples, were motivated to fight for King and Country. Others were commemorated in the suburb’s expanding streets: Captain Jacka Crescent in honour of the country’s first Victoria Cross recipient, Sergeant Larkin and Colonel Braund Crescents for two parliamentarians killed at Gallipoli in 1915, Major General Bridges Crescent in honour of their commander who was also killed. And then there were Haig Avenue

and Park named after the British Field Marshall. His French counterpart, General Joseph Joffre was honoured by the naming of yet another Crescent. He had distinguished himself in late 1914 by defeating the Germans at the First Battle of Marne in September 1914. Daceyville was spared statues to the great and mighty but it's very streetscape became a civics lesson.



(Hairdresser Thomas Joseph Caples lived in a house called 'Gara' in Solander Road, Daceyville, when he volunteered to fight in April 1918. He returned in 1919. SLNSW)

The effect of the war upon Daceyville extended far beyond the naming of its streets. The conflict drained resources and slowed progress. But more significantly it split the Labor Government which had initiated and championed the project. The issue was Prime Minister Hughes' proposal to introduce conscription. The State Labor executive threatened to expel anyone who voted in favour. Labor Premier William Holman, James McGowen (who had been Premier when Daceyville was conceived) and JD Fitzgerald consequently left together with 15 other ministers. Holman and Fitzgerald joined members of the opposition to form a Nationalist government. Both Holman and McGowen were, then, on the Housing Board. Nonetheless, the reformist idealism of the pre-war years faded as the prosecution of the war to 'save British civilisation' became all-consuming.

That transition was no better expressed than in Fitzgerald's ominous 'Presidential Address' to the Second Australian Town Planning Conference in 1918 as the slaughter continued on the western front for a fourth year and Australian

troops were being lauded for their role in pushing back the failed German offensive: 'If we hope to survive in the second great war, that struggle for commercial and industrial supremacy [between Teuton barbarians and civilised nations] which will begin on the day peace is declared', Australia must continue 'improving workmen's homes' and establishing 'garden villages'.²³

Daceyville and its critics

From 1916 Holman and Fitzgerald were allied with those who had criticised Daceyville from its inception. As Leader of the Opposition in 1912 Charles Wade railed against the Housing Board's monopolisation of building materials and labour. His deputy William Wood attacked the scheme for merely suggesting that 'Government can do things which syndicates or private individuals cannot do'.²⁴ The attacks continued. John Fitzpatrick, member for the rural seat of Orange, resorted to ridicule: it was a 'wild-cat scheme' situated in a snake-infested wasteland.²⁵ He became the Minister for Mines under Holman in the Nationalist Government.

Others called into the question the very civic purpose of the reform. That the social contract between renters and beneficent State did not produce ideal citizens was echoed from within the planning movement by George Augustus Taylor, one of the founding members of the TPANSW. Daceyville was well-planned he conceded but the Government should be encouraging home ownership not renting which served 'to weaken the tenants' self-reliance'.²⁶ The *Sydney Morning Herald* printed editorials condemning the Government's scheme as 'socialism naked and unashamed'.²⁷ The spectre of communism came to fore more dramatically after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

The ideology of home ownership ultimately triumphed within the Nationalist Government. JD Fitzgerald, the man who called Daceyville his 'own pet child', conceded that 'human nature is in favour of the freehold'.²⁸ With a new housing policy in place, projected extensions to Daceyville were sold as freehold. Those in

the subsequently named suburb of Pagewood bore no resemblance to the 1912 or 1914 plans. The Housing Board was dissolved in 1924 after findings of ‘gross carelessness’ and ‘incompetence’. Significantly that condemnation related to work done after 1919 rather than the 315 houses built as part of the original plans. The Public Trust Office administered the suburb.

The radical left was left to rail against home ownership as a form of class betrayal. Writing in the *Australian Worker* – the organ of the Australian Workers Union established in upheaval of the 1890s - one columnist condemned the ‘Judas in suburbia’. Put those traitors ‘back into a slum tenement with one backyard for a dozen families and at any rate they’d be human beings.’²⁹ Suburbia would be regarded with suspicion and condescension for many years.

There would be no direct State government intervention in housing reform for two decades.

Living in Daceyville

In 1919, John Sulman was still prepared to promote the suburb as a model for his peers: ‘visit Dacey Garden Suburb and contrast the trim bright appearance of its cottages and gardens with the ordinary street’.³⁰ The irony, or perhaps the tragedy, of the extinguishment of belief in the public provision of rental housing is borne out by considering the people who benefitted from the experiment. The demographic profile of those who moved to the suburb in 1912 was skilled labourers and the lower middle class. The sole stated criteria for applying to the Housing Board was ownership of real estate. Daceyville residents could not be landowners. In 1916 some 50 cottages were set aside to house disabled war veterans and war widows. By the time the last rental house was built in 1920, Daceyville had a line of shops, a police station, a picture theatre and a temporary school that sat on the outskirts of the development. That was upgraded to a handsome brick structure – again in the Arts and Crafts style - opened in 1922. A Catholic school joined it shortly after. The planned Technical College, Library and fire station were never built.



(The temporary Daceyville Public School was possibly the only timber structure in the suburb until it was replaced by a large brick building in 1922. The dune ecology of the area is obvious in this photograph c.1918. SLNSW)

(Daceyville Public School shortly before or after completion in 1922. The half-hipped roofline, half rendered walls and turret are all characteristic of Arts and Crafts architecture. SLNSW)



Residents were quick to start community groups and initiate activities. Annual sports days and picnic days were established in 1913. That year saw the creation of a branch of the Political Labor League, later the Australian Labor Party. A Progress Association followed in 1915. Interestingly, it was the League rather than the Association that petitioned Mascot Council, which had responsibility for the provision of services to the suburb, for improvements to lighting and complaints about straying stock.³¹

Gardening, which lay at the heart of the planning ideal, was taken up with relish. As was the convention in all but the most bohemian gardens, English and exotic plants and landscaping were popular. Daceyville was thereby defined against the endemic heathland beyond the perimeter, although that expanse was not shunned. Cousins Clarice Lewis and Nancy Coutts, both born in Daceyville in 1916, recalled their fathers taking them on Sunday wildflower gathering expeditions to the dunes, which they generically called ‘the bush’.³² A suburban gardening competition with prizes for creativity and the best examples of particular flowers was established in the first years. One man created a flower bed in the shape of a clock with hands. Roy Mann was an enthusiastic participant from as early as 1917 taking ‘great pride’ in his knowledge of the Latin names of the plants he grew, as his son recalled in the 1990s:

My father showed it [his garden] for 13 years ... and 12 of those years he won it. And he had lights up in the yard for people to come of an evening. And he had privets to topiary them into all shapes of birds and animals.³³

Architect and planning commentator George Sydney Jones would have approved. In 1919, as Roy Mann was taking out his gardening prizes, Jones wrote: ‘Taste is advanced when the labouring man, skilled or unskilled has his little home in the suburbs of the great city ... he has his garden, and he, his wife and children benefit by direct contact with nature’.³⁴ Jones’ paternalism notwithstanding, establishing English style cottage gardens on land that had been recently been sand dunes could not have been easy. For Nancy Coutts’ father gardening may well have been a new experience. She was born in Daceyville in 1916 after her parents moved from The Rocks – the antithesis of the garden suburb. He happily looked after the family’s flower and vegetable garden.³⁵ Nursery and gardening suppliers such as Searle’s were only too ready to provide assistance with seeds, fertiliser and advice, both practical and spiritual: ‘Gardening tends to refinement – it has an uplifting and inspiring effect’ noted their 1922 ‘Key to Australian Gardening’.³⁶



(*Searl's Key to Australian Gardening*, 1922, MAAS collection)

Domestic gardening was seen as an ideal occupation for the working man because it provided an alternative to gambling and drinking. Despite the paternalism with which that proposition was often presented, many women who bore the brunt of drunkenness and the loss of modest wages to the SP bookie would probably have agreed. The results of the Daceyville gardening competition showed that male pride in horticulture was indeed an impulse to be harnessed. Only two of the 13 prize winners in 1920 were women.

However, the division of labour of the time meant it was often women who tended the garden during the week when their husbands were at work. This probably included the vegetable patch in the back yard. These were typically single income families with men performing paid work for six and a half days a week and women occupying the role of fulltime home maker and mother. Those women whose husbands had been killed or injured in the war may have had to take on paid work to supplement pensions. In 1923 Mascot Council gave Elsie May Devine of 11 General Bridge Crescent a milk vendors license.³⁷ As a woman, she must have been an exception in the ranks of 'milkos' across the city.

Conditions for all worsened in the 1930s with the onset of Depression. The Daceyville Progress Association lobbied the local Council to provide relief work for men in the form of extra garbage pick-ups. They requested permission for signs advertising 'dress making' and 'music teaching' – presumably to be provided by women - to be placed on nature strips after the Trust Office refused forbad residents

to put such notices on their houses.³⁸ For its part Council petitioned the Trust to allow rent payment in arrears.

The memories of people who grew up in Daceyville in those years from inception to the 1930s were recorded by historian Ian Hoskins in the 1990s. Together they allow further understanding of the meaning of 'Looking Backward'. Like many recollections of Australian childhood, they are imbued with nostalgia and a fond sense of difference in old ways and old days. Space and freedom were evoked as is often the case with suburban or rural memories. But these memories were also site specific. There was a general sense that Daceyville's street layout and architecture were different because the former was not simply a grid and the latter had a uniformity. There were no front fences – an innovation aimed at fostering community trialled in the suburb.

The memorable homogeneity in the house style flowed to recollections of the community itself. For cousins Clarice and Nancy, Daceyville was classless. (Clarice) 'It was a working-class suburb ... there was no class consciousness at all...' (Nancy) '...simply because there was just one class ... (Clarice) '... and they were all working-class people.'³⁹

The good times seemed to end in the 1930s. The Depression is the most obvious reason for this. But it was also noted that some original 'good' families moved on either because of the economic climate or generational change. Interestingly Joy Anderson, born in the suburb in 1919 as the daughter of the suburb's first police officer, recalled the end of gardening and the erection of fences as a gauge of decline. Both spoke of an end to the original model community.

Daceyville from the 1940s

All places change generationally. Change can be emphasized by the vividness of fixed and fond memory. That may explain the 'then and now' images of Daceyville in the minds of those who grew up there from the start.

Anne Slattery's kin were among those original families, but they stayed on. Her great grandmother moved to suburb in 1915. Her great uncle Ernest Fraser had fought in the war and returned to live in Haig Avenue where he resided for decades. Anne learned of his wounds and his experiences as a Daceyville girl in the 1950s. Her's are memories, therefore, that span those generations. The place Anne grew up in was not altogether different demographically to the suburb in its first decades. There were still a noticeable number of widows. There was political activism. Sectarian dislike – at least between the Catholic and Public School children – was evident as it almost certainly had been in earlier years. Scores were settled in orchestrated fights held in middle of the suburb's cul-de-sac.⁴⁰ Anne recalled her neighbours being members of the Communist Party of Australia. There was a strong sense of working and lower middle-class respectability. Anne's father was a postal clerk but he also became the Mayor of Botany Council. So homogenous was the place that she described her childhood there as living in a 'bubble', one that only burst when she went to high school outside the area.⁴¹

But homogeneity was becoming less evident in the buildings and streets. Houses were altered to create more space. Having purchased his house in Colonel Braund Crescent Jim Slattery renovated it to accommodate an extended family so that Anne and others no longer had to sleep on a veranda. More fences were erected. Gardening, it seems, was less popular.

Jim Slattery bought his house from the New South Wales Housing Commission, created in 1943 by the McKell Labor Government and responsible for Daceyville from 1948. Federal Labor established the Commonwealth Housing Commission that same year. Both anticipated the post-war housing shortage. A Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement, ratified in 1945, formalised Commonwealth assistance to the States for construction. It delivered about 21,000 homes to 1949. Labor's Minister for Postwar Reconstruction John Dedman had imagined constructing rental accommodation under the 1945 Agreement, along ideological lines that recalled the exchanges in the New South Wales parliament 30

years earlier: Labor, he said, was not interested in ‘making the workers into little capitalists’ through the provision of owner-occupied dwellings.⁴²

Dedman’s remark was seized upon as evidence of the socialistic intent of the Labor Government, another echo of previous debates. Federal Labor lost office in 1949 and the long reign of Liberal Prime Minister Robert Menzies commenced. His government drafted a very different Housing Agreement in 1956, one that emphasized home ownership. Around Sydney the Housing Commission built vast estates. Town planning was now an accepted profession not an offshoot of architecture or the preoccupation of dilettantes. The terms Garden City or Garden Suburb were no longer in vogue. Rather the preferred model was that of the town of Radburn, New Jersey, laid out by Clarence Stein in 1928. But there was a similar emphasis on the need for green space with parks and parkways along and around the local traffic nodes which branched off main roads. In an echo of Daceyville, these were cul-de-sacs. The first major implementation of that planning was at Green Valley, a development on what was then Sydney’s western fringe, in 1963. Closer to the city at Waterloo, old precincts were razed and high-rise towers erected emulating the Modernist housing model of Britain and Scandinavia. The two starkly different models echoed the model developments at Millers Point and Daceyville years earlier although the new high rise provide notional access to green space with landscaped gardens made possible by placing people high in the air.

The Housing Commission built dwellings to rent and purchase. The 1956 Agreement also allowed tenants to buy existing houses as Jim Slattery had done. The trend towards home ownership was assisted by economic stability and growth and high employment. Mortgages could be afforded by families with a single income earner, typically the man of the house. The figures for Government subsidised housing from the 1950s to the 1970s are remarkable – more than 15,000 dwellings per year across the country.⁴³ Some of this was public housing, much was or became privately owned.

The Commonwealth government's interest in housing waned from the late 1970s, under both Liberal and Labor Governments. As the supply of public housing in New South Wales decreased, dwellings were increasingly made available to those on low incomes and welfare recipients. The demographic make-up of public housing properties changed further after the findings of the Richmond Report into mental health in 1983, which recommended the de-institutionalisation of people with mental health problems. Many sought refuge in the only accommodation available, public housing. The journalist Peter Mares put it bluntly in 2018, 'Public housing is now welfare housing ... [it] has become a moth-eaten safety net and the holes just keep getting bigger'.⁴⁴ Those changes have affected Daceyville's demographic profile too.

The model suburb very nearly did not survive to see 1970s. Plans were begun by the Housing Commission to demolish the place and replace it with high rise flats like those at Waterloo. The impetus was both the derelict state of the suburb and the possible extension of the eastern suburbs rail line to nearby Kingsford. The threat stimulated another wave of community sentiment – possibly to the surprise of the Commission. Protests ensued and a Daceyville Preservation Society was formed. The dispute erupted at the beginning of the rise of heritage consciousness in Sydney. Union-led 'green bans' were imposed on the redevelopment of The Rocks, still despised by many. That action became famous and the precinct was preserved to become a much-loved part of the city. Less well-known is the assistance Jack Mundy and his Builders Labourers Federation gave to the residents of Daceyville.

The passage of the New South Wales *Heritage Act* in 1977 was a confirmation of the turn-around in official and popular sentiment. The interest in urban heritage permeated local government and university departments. The *Sydney Morning Herald* ran regular columns on urban affairs and heritage and a privately-funded free newspaper called the *Sydney Review* operated for a decade or more featuring articles

on heritage and the built environment from eminent writers such as Max Kelly and Jim Colman.

Accordingly subsequent plans to redevelop Daceyville focussed on sympathetic in-fill development rather than demolition. These were implemented by Urban Renewal Group of the New South Wales Department of Housing (formerly the Commission). A detailed historical walking tour of the suburb was printed and, in 1994, the Department published a short history of its own achievements. Daceyville was featured at the beginning. The Minister for Urban Affairs and Planning, Craig Knowles, wrote in his foreword: ‘Much can be learned from the way in which public housing has developed. It is important for the planners and designers of today’s housing to reflect on that history’.⁴⁵

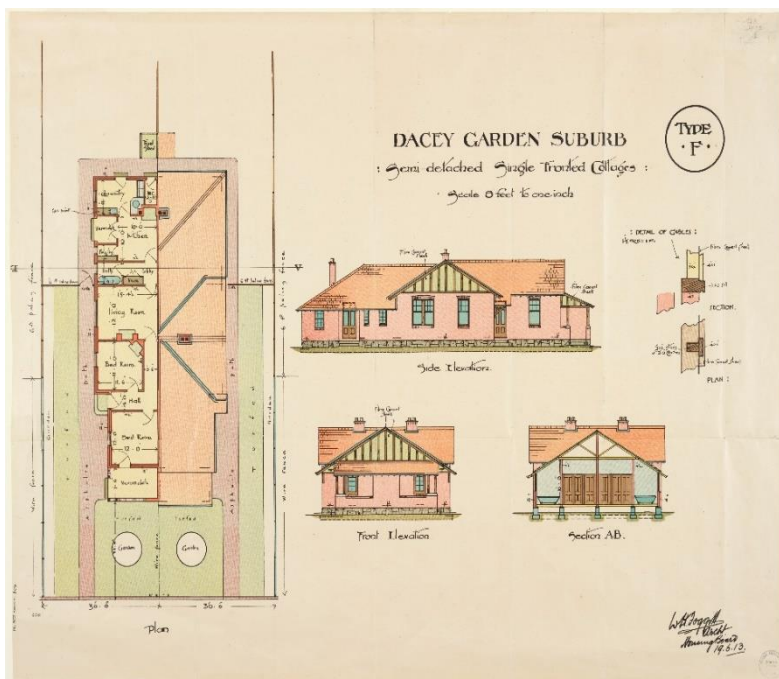
It was an exhortation to look backwards with appreciation. But poignantly, 20 years later, the Government would begin selling off its heritage public housing stock, ostensibly to generate revenue and free up resources for building and maintenance elsewhere. The model housing at Millers Point which began the State’s journey on the path to reform was the first to go between 2014 and 2018. Properties in Daceyville followed. In 2021 and 2022 seven houses were sold by the New South Wales Land and Housing Corporation for between 1.1 million and 4 million dollars, having been assessed as either ‘past their economic lifespan, heritage constrained, high value or are too costly to maintain’.⁴⁶

It is probable that Daceyville will be sold off entirely in the next two decades. With the price of real estate in such a prime location it is certain that this will shift the demographic dramatically. Daceyville will be gentrified as many other former working-class areas around Sydney have been since the 1970s. It may be that planning controls will preserve the feel of the suburb. Indeed, some among the new middle-class inhabitants might cherish what remains of the uniqueness of the suburb’s houses and the gardens – the Arts and Crafts exteriors and fenceless front gardens that welcome passers-by. Others may not.

In any case it is interesting to ponder what visitors to that model suburb will understand, 'Looking Backwards' from the year 2042 to 1912.



(A recently renovated privately-owned house in Banks Avenue, Daceyville. A box hedge and picket fence ensure privacy from the footpath where once there was no fence. The original terracotta tiles have been replaced with grey to match the inauthentic colour scheme. Georgian style windows have been installed at the front. Photograph by the author, 2023)



(The 1912 drawing of a Type F semi-detached dwelling showing original colour schemes and roof finish, SLNSW)

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