

The Problem of McMansions?



**CULTURAL UNDERPINNINGS OF LARGE
HOUSING IN SYDNEY**

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Housing: a key challenge



- Growing population
- Trend to smaller household size
- Policy shift toward smaller, denser housing
- Cultural preference for larger, detached housing
- The issue of large houses

Media and the 'bloated McMansion'



- “flood gates” opened on McMansions
- “too big for their blocks”
- Bloated, obese, energy guzzlers
- People motivated to get the “biggest house they want”; focus on resale
- Residents: selfish, greedy, materialistic

Beyond McMansions & Green Homes

- Project about ideals and practices of homemaking re-worked to draw out themes related to sustainability
- Northwest/ southwest Sydney
- Small-scale, qualitative study in new suburbs (2/3rds < 5 years old)
- Middle-class, nuclear families living in large houses; 2-3 children.



The theoretical approach



- **Critical cultural geography of home, family and sustainability.**
- **Homemaking is a multi-directional relation that is shaped by practices of family and home, including house design, structures and furnishings.**

Why large housing?



- New relations of family: togetherness and separation
 - Managing busy lives: strangers, mess and respectability
 - Seeds of more sustainable practices
 - What does this mean for planning for sustainability?
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- Dowling, R. and Power, E. R. (2011) "Beyond McMansions and Green Homes: Thinking household sustainability through materialities of homeyness" in Lane, R. and Gorman-Murray, A. (eds), *Material Geographies of Household Sustainability*, Ashgate.
 - Dowling, R. and Power, E. R. (accepted with minor revisions March 2011) "Sizing home, doing family in Sydney, Australia", *Housing Studies*.

1. New relations of family



- **The ideal home?**
 - “enough space for us to lose ourselves and there’s enough room for us to come together as a family basically.” (Paula)
- **A way of achieving privacy in family**
 - “We had the needs of a growing family I guess, we wanted enough yard space to build a pool and we wanted to have enough rooms within the house where the children can come and go and spend time on their own, and we’ve got some privacy by spending some time on our own as well.” (Paula)

1. New relations of family



- **Practice 1. Containing children and their ‘mess’**
 - “They make their mess and noise upstairs; they just muck around up there whereas my husband and I have time out downstairs to talk about the day.” (Sam)
- **Practice 2. Excluding children**
 - “This is the room that’s tidy, most of the time [...] this is a toy free zone. Toys, and they’ve been told that if they bring toys in here daddy will throw them out [laughs] so, well it’s the only way to have a clean area.” (Brenda)

Converting a dining room into a play area



1. New relations of family



- Practice 3. Togetherness and separateness

Games Room



TV room



Interview 12.



Lounge Room ↑

Games Room ↓



TV room ↑

Upstairs Room ↓



2. Managing busy lives: mess, strangers and respectability

- “I love the bedrooms separate because you can keep your mess up there [...] It’s just a matter of ‘don’t go upstairs.’”
(Cathy)

- “I have nowhere in this house to sit and do my ironing unless I do it in the rumpus room, and if I get visitors well the ironing’s everywhere and I don’t like that at all.”
(Joan)

3. Seeds of more sustainable practice?



- **Furniture provisioning as an example of second hand economies**
 - “this was second hand, we didn’t go looking for sofas, this came up at work and I went thank you.”
 - “This is the games room. The kids play here, and with their friends. And if I’ve got extra things, furniture, I keep them here instead of putting them in the rubbish. The couches are very old, from the old old house. But I just keep it from the kids ..”

And Household Sustainability?



- **A challenge to media and policy focus on ‘McMansions’ as the epitome of unsustainable practice**
 - Economies of second hand furniture
 - Understanding broader cultures and practices that support this housing form: family not just greed!
- **From cultures to policy**
 - Designing liveable spaces
 - Shift emphasis from technology to culture

Thankyou.



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