THE POLITICS OF STATE RENTAL HOUSING
IN NEW SOUTH WALES, 1900-1939
THREE CASE STUDIES

Harvey Volke
M. Phil.

Faculty of Architecture
University of Sydney
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ACADEMIC SUPERVISORS’ INTRODUCTION

Harvey Volke (1939-2005) enrolled as a part time PhD student in Architecture in 1999. At the time of his death on January 5, 2005, he had completed 2.75 years of a four-year PhD candidacy. Despite the work demands at Shelter NSW, he had made good progress on his PhD. Some of his process and thinking becomes clear through material in Appendix II that includes his Ph.D. proposal and 2003 thesis outline.

At the time of his passing, he was a Policy and Liaison Officer for Shelter NSW and was a Director of the Tenant’s Union. The many obituaries were testament to his commitment to housing as a right. He was a ‘hero of the tenancy and housing rights movement.’

The working title of Harvey’s PhD was ‘History of Low-Income Housing Reform in Sydney, 1900-1939,’ and his aim was to provide a definitive account of the theory and practice of public housing. While his interest was in the historical record, he was passionately interested in how that history might instruct us today.

The work presented here is an edited compilation of chapter drafts and other work, and covers three case studies of a core theme in the early history of low-income housing reform. The introduction, first and second case studies (The Rocks, Millers Point and Daceyville) are chapter drafts. The Rocks and Millers Point case study were presented in part to the 17th Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians (Wellington 2000) under the title ‘Taking the Man out of the Slum: An Early Experiment in Slum Clearance.’ The third case study (Erskineville) comes from research for a 1982 Master of Arts (Honours) at Macquarie University. Harvey was about to commence new research on Erskineville and to build on the earlier work. This has been included here to provide a more complete rendering of his topic for future scholars.

On his death, and in collaboration with other academic colleagues, we proposed that the completed PhD research and writing be considered for the degree of M.Phil. Some editing was required, as well as the checking of references and the insertion of illustrations. Without the efforts of Chris Martin (Shelter NSW) and Dr Jennifer Gamble (Faculty of Architecture),
this work could not have been completed, and we sincerely thank them both for helping bring the work of the late Harvey Volke into the public domain, and for assisting in bringing Harvey the posthumous academic recognition he deserves. Two external examiners recommended that the thesis chapters merit the award of the degree of M.Phil. In their opinion, Harvey Volke has made a substantially original contribution to knowledge about public housing. As required, the thesis also amply demonstrates the discovery of new facts, and the exercise of independent critical ability.

We salute Harvey Volke’s unfinished achievement, and hope that future scholars will build on his meticulous research on the politics of state rental housing in New South Wales 1900 - 1939. We thank Dr Peter Phibbs for his assistance in establishing a scholarship in Harvey’s name, and Sydney City Historian, Dr Shirley Fitzgerald, for her advice and comment on this thesis.

Dr. Anna Rubbo
Associate Professor
Supervisor

Col James
Senior Lecturer
Associate Supervisor
Abbreviations

ATPHCE Australian Town Planning and Housing Conference and Exhibition

DT Daily Telegraph

HCNSW Housing Commission of NSW

HIB Housing Improvement Board

NSWLAV&P New South Wales Legislative Assembly Votes and Proceedings

NSWPD New South Wales Parliamentary Debates

NSWPP New South Wales Parliamentary Papers

RCICS Royal Commission for the Improvement of the City of Sydney

SHTC Sydney Harbour Trust Commissioners

SMH Sydney Morning Herald
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INTRODUCTION

The history of housing policy in New South Wales has been one of consistent disengagement of government from issues of low-income housing provision. Characteristically, until the 1940s, government responses were dictated from within a laissez-faire liberal framework in which housing provision was best left to the operations of market forces. This impacted severely on the availability of appropriate and affordable housing for low-income people. Insofar as low-income housing policy was addressed at all, it was usually in terms of encouraging people into home ownership. Nevertheless, the period from around 1900 to 1940 saw the beginnings of deliberate government intervention in the housing market in piecemeal attempts to address the issue. A range of factors combined to produce this outcome, including outbreaks of contagious disease in badly drained and unsewered slum precincts, and increasing pressure from a range of disparate groups. These included the nascent town planning lobby, church and charity bodies, and not least, working class organisations and working class people themselves. Business interest in redeveloping prime commercial sites also played a role in the moves for slum clearance.

The period was characterised by a series of attempts to resolve low-income housing problems in Sydney, or at least, the problems of slum clearance. These ranged from State resumption of The Rocks area, to attempts by both city governments and State governments to provide minimal amounts of public housing for some of those displaced by resumptions, and included attempts at encouraging self-help and self-reliance by church and charitable agencies, as well as State bodies. They also included attempts to address the problems of low-income tenants in the private rental market by legislative means: for example, by introducing rent control and some limited efforts to control the rate of evictions during the Depression era. The fact remains, that the period is characterised by a marked failure to undertake any substantive initiatives that would make a serious contribution to resolving the manifest problems. The reasons for this failure are complex, but include a policy commitment to home ownership (and to separate homes on separate sites at that), a prevailing ideology of laissez faire liberalism, and a shifting of responsibility for dealing with the problems between local and State authorities. It was only at the end of the period that the State Government accepted the responsibility for ensuring some attempt at meeting the needs of low-income people.
THE PERIOD 1900-1939 IN CONTEXT

The period 1900-1939 is, in some ways, a prehistory of the development of low-income housing policy by Australian governments. The directions that policy discussion took in that era combined with a range of historical factors to produce the broad thrust of low-income housing policy and practice as we know them today. Depressingly, the policy failures of that era continue to resonate at the end of the century.

Before the period under review, the issue of low-income housing only infrequently rose to public consciousness in New South Wales. When it did so, it was almost solely in terms of concerns about slums and slum denizens, and of the dangers of contagion from overcrowded and rundown inner urban enclaves like The Rocks and Darling Harbour and inner suburbs like Chippendale and Redfern. The political appeal of defining the issue in this way was that it could combine moral fervour with the drive to redevelop metropolitan Sydney as a gleaming new commercial entrepôt of the southern seas. After this period, however, we begin to see a more concerted attempt to develop low-income housing policy although, regrettably, never to a degree where it has made a serious impression on the need for adequate housing provision for low-income earners.

The 1900-1939 period is essentially a time when stumbling and partial attempts were made to deal with the issue through the prism of the perceived problem of the slums, and it was only slowly that the underlying policy issue of ensuring adequate and affordable housing for low-income people generally began to be grasped.

A confluence of interests developed that led to this concentration on one aspect of the problem. Business interests were hungry to redevelop inner urban slum areas for commercial purposes. Health authorities were concerned about the apparent spread of disease from slum areas, most particularly after the outbreak of bubonic plague in The Rocks in 1900. The nascent town planning movement was interested in model projects that would demonstrate the value of town planning in schemes such as garden cities and suburbs. Church and charitable agencies were aware of the hardships and often appalling housing conditions of their clients, even if it was sometimes difficult to disentangle this awareness from moralistic middle-class judgements about the social effects of ‘slumdom’ and the ‘slum mentality.’ Trades unions were concerned both by the living conditions of their members, and no less by the possibilities of increased jobs and memberships through the expansion of the building industry. And working-class people themselves wanted cheap and adequate housing close to
their workplaces as a first priority; they were less concerned about the moral judgements of
their betters than about where and how they would live if their homes were torn down.

All of these factors and interests combined to exert pressure on governments to do
something about the slums. Ideological factors, however, led to significant further pressures.
Above all else, private home ownership was considered the natural and desirable preferred
option; working class people should be encouraged into it. Not only was home ownership
the preferred option, but separate cottages on their own blocks of land were also to be
couraged.

This was a tradition present to greater or lesser degree throughout the history of European
occupation of Sydney. It was also reinforced by the development of urban conglomerations
in England as a result of the Industrial Revolution, and the hitherto unknown experience of
large masses of people concentrated in urban ‘rookeries.’ Poverty and inadequate housing
had always been present in England, but never before on this scale: This led in the mid- and
late-nineteenth century to a mixture of fear and fascination as the middle class contemplated
the unknown and incomprehensible world of the slums. In the age of empire, fascination
with darkest Africa slid over into a like fascination with life in darkest England. And from
thence to the colonies. The colonial bourgeoisie prided themselves on being the pioneers of
a young country without all the evils and inequities of the old world. Yet, on the other hand,
they believed they had found – to their horror – the same diseases of filth, degradation and
overcrowding in rotting slum areas.

Their world was one dominated by a laissez-faire liberal philosophy in which social good was
best secured by minimal interference in the marketplace, and in which government should
stand aside from the market so the latter would not be obstructed in its delicate task of
reconciling competing interests and managing competition and the economy. Since the
market operated ultimately to the benefit of all, interference was ill-avoided and would create
only havoc. The corollary was that if large numbers of people were reduced to poverty, it
must somehow be their own fault, which could be remedied only by self-help, frugality and
discipline.

Further theories fitted under this umbrella. For example, that of physical determinism, by
which people’s character was determined by their physical surroundings – you could take the
man out of the slum, but you could not take the slum out of the man. Slum reformers used
slogans such as this as partial justification for their aim of tearing down the slums, in the
hope of rearing a new generation in the sunshine and space of the suburbs (blissfully ignoring
the fact that low-income housing in the suburbs – or, for that matter, in the wide, open
spaces of the country – could be just as rundown and poverty stricken as any metropolitan
rookery). In addition, at the turn of the century, the germ theory of disease causation
pioneered by Louis Pasteur was becoming known, but many were still influenced by the older
miasma theory, in which diseases were carried by noxious effluvia rising from swamps,
cesspits and rotting garbage. This distinction became crucial during the outbreak of bubonic
plague in Sydney in 1900. The older theory dictated quarantine, cleansing operations and
lime washing of buildings, but these strategies would not have stopped the spread of the
disease had not the City Health Officer indicated that the disease was being spread by
infected rats, and insisted on a campaign of eradication.

Finally, the evolution of co-ordinated policy was at the mercy of changing political trends,
and of conflict between political groupings, and between levels of government. Neither
could politics be relied on to provide one side that would be more socially progressive on
housing issues than the other. While it was the Labor Party that initiated the Daceyville
housing project in 1912, it was a conservative Nationalist Government that undertook the
Erskineville housing project in 1938 and that over the protests of the Labor Party.

One of the consistent threads of political argument throughout the period between 1900 and
1939 was the question of which level of government could be held liable for doing
something, anything, about the housing plight of low-income earners. In general, the State
Government was reluctant to get involved: housing, overall, was something to be regulated
by local government (if any regulation at all was required), though State governments were no
less reluctant to hand over real powers or resources to local government to tackle the issue in
any meaningful way. For its part, local government – and especially in the earlier part of the
era, the Sydney City Council – defined its role in much more narrow terms, and was much
more interested in tearing down the slums for commercial redevelopment than in social
experiments with low-income housing.

All of these pressures – sometimes combining, sometimes in conflict both led to a range of
small-scale experiments in alternative housing provision for low-income earners, and at the
same time stultified any co-ordinated and large-scale assault on the problem. Three of these
experiments in housing – The Rocks and Millers Point, Daceyville and Erskineville – are
considered here.
1. THE ROCKS AND MILLERS POINT

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Like so much else, colonial governments in Sydney stumbled into public housing for working-class people in the dockside area of The Rocks and Millers Point almost by accident.¹ The governments of New South Wales at the turn of the twentieth century were really much more interested in cleaning up and improving the wharves around nearby Darling Harbour for a shipping industry expanding rapidly since the depression of the 1890s than they were in the question of working-class housing (S. Fitzgerald & Keating, 1991: 70; Mitchell, 1977: 87). Not only that, but with the advent and increasing sophistication of steam, shipping tonnages were also rising markedly.² Concern about the state of the wharves – many of which were privately owned – and their capacity for international operations, coincided with both international and intercolonial developments in wharf management. In line with the other colonies of Australia, New South Wales had been contemplating for some time the development of a harbour trust to take control of overall management of harbour operations. In an era of laissez-faire dominance, an unusual conjuncture saw the interests of primary producers, of shipping companies, of government and of the labour movement combine in the public resumption of the privately owned wharves at Darling Harbour, and the adjacent residential and commercial precinct in The Rocks and Millers Point.

¹ (Ashton, 1993: 9-12). J.D. Fitzgerald was saying much the same in 1907 (J.D. Fitzgerald, 1907b: 56-60).
² In 1860, 852 ships docked in Sydney; in 1901, 1,884 ships with a total tonnage of 2,953,511 tons docked (SHTC, 1901: 2). See also editorial comment about the importance of extending the wharves to take account of these changes: SMH, 23 June 1900: 4.
The precipitating factor was an outbreak of bubonic plague in Sydney in 1900, with the infection of a van driver, Arthur Payne, who lived next to the wharves, in 10 Ferry Lane, Millers Point, on January 20. Payne was fortunate, in that his attack was only a mild one, but this did not prevent him and his family from being incarcerated at the quarantine station at North Head for some time, along with later arrivals. Indeed, when his sister arrived at the house soon after Payne had been taken off to the quarantine station, to choruses of ‘what’s up here’ she quickly found herself directed to the same destination. The next day some family friends were carted off the same way (SMH, 25 January 1900: 5; SMH, 26 January 1900: 3). In all, of a total of 303 victims, 103 people died in the outbreak, but there were also later deaths in other smaller outbreaks in the succeeding months and even years. For all the fear and loathing of the plague, other diseases were, in fact, much more disastrous, such as the regular outbreaks of typhoid fever in a poorly sewered city.

It is not as if city and colonial authorities were taken by surprise by the outbreak; they had been expecting it. For weeks beforehand there had been regular press accounts of plague in Hong Kong and New Caledonia (on the regular trade route to Sydney) and even (though somewhat uncertainly) from Adelaide.3 In addition, the City Health Officer, Dr D. Gwynne Hughes, and the Chief Medical Officer and President of the Board of Health Dr J. Ashburton Thompson, had warned of its likely arrival and proposed methods for dealing with it. The only argument was about how to deal with it most effectively: by cleansing, disinfection and whitewashing, or by eradication.

To show the extent to which the Port is polluted, and the result of this scavenging, it may be stated that between 28 November 1901 and 22 August 1902, there were removed to Goat Island, to be burnt there, no less than 2,524 rats, 1,068 cats, 1,260 dogs, 283 bags of meat, 305 bags of fish, 1,467 fowls, 25 parrots, 23 sheep, 14 pigs, 1 bullock, 9 goats, 5 hares, 3 kangaroos, 162 rabbits, 48 bags of chaff, 8 bales of straw, 3 flying foxes and two sharks.

(Sydney Ports Corporation, 2003a)

Figures 1.2 & 1.3 Eradication of rats in The Rocks saw collection and public burning of the creatures. (Sydney Ports Corporation, 2003a)

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3 See the literally daily reports in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph* from the beginning of 1900. Ashburton Thompson details reports of the Board of Health of outbreaks of plague in Hong Kong with consequent risk to Sydney as far back as 1894 (Ashburton Thompson, 1900: 13). For the two dubious cases from Adelaide, see SMH, 15 January 1900: 6. Ashburton Thompson was sceptical that these were genuine cases of bubonic plague.
of plague-infected rats. In the event, both methods were tried, although, as Thompson pointed out in his comprehensive and groundbreaking study of the outbreak (Ashburton Thompson, 1900), its cause was clearly the fleas from plague-infected rats from shipping via the badly maintained and poorly secured wharves. Indeed, by a careful analysis of the location and timing of all the plague cases, Ashburton Thompson was able to pinpoint the wharf of Huddart, Parker & Co., on the eastern side of Darling Harbour as a likely prime entry-point for the plague (Ashburton Thompson, 1900: 23f).

It should also be noted that despite popular beliefs that ‘slum’ rookeries were breeding grounds for the plague, in fact incidences of the disease were spread across the city.

This was not all. The plague outbreak also united two fears held by many people: fear of the slums, and fear of ‘Asiatics.’ In many ways, Sydney in 1900 was an immigrant society (albeit principally from the British Isles), and nowhere more so than in the Millers Point area. Not only was there the ebb and flow of a constant stream of sailors from a variety of nationalities, but here there was a substantial number of Chinese residents, as well as at the other end of the city in the Wexford Street area in Surry Hills. At Redfern, local aldermen spoke of ‘a good deal of uneasiness’ at the risk of plague with ‘many Syrians and Indians living together.’ Alderman Jackson, for example, claimed to live in their midst, and had ‘no hesitation in saying that it [presence of these groups] was a menace to public health,’ and spoke of ‘as many as 20 to 40 sleeping ranged around the walls of one room’ (SMH, 5 January 1900: 12). A few days later the Council sent a deputation – along with their local Member, and Labor leader, J.S.T. McGowen – to express their concerns to Ashburton Thompson at the Board of Health. The importance of this for the purposes of this thesis is that in the dominant racist beliefs of the period, Asian people were seen as especially susceptible to bubonic plague. It was not always clearly spelt out whether this was because of inherent ‘deficiencies’ or because of their perceived tendency to crowd together in congested and insanitary ‘slums.’4 Not everybody was persuaded by this, however. In his report on the effects of the plague, Ashburton Thompson dryly commented that of a total population of 456,000 in the metropolitan districts, Chinese numbered less than 4,000 altogether, even if they were concentrated in three separate neighbourhoods. Of the total number of plague cases, 10

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Certain alien races in our midst too, create slums by their own habits, as coral insects build continents and spiders spin webs. They can never be taught to realise our standards of civilised life; and thus we hear of the Chinese slum-dwellers boarding up their windows to shut out light and air, and herding in droves in on room.

(J.D. Fitzgerald, 1906: 115)
were Chinese and 293 ‘among the whites.’ However, such views, with their implied criticism of the received wisdom, were rarely noted.

The term ‘slum’ is placed in inverted commas advisedly, because it was rarely a term used simply to describe rundown or crowded housing; it was a useful portmanteau term to cover a range of references. To outside observers, the lives and values of the working-class denizens of the ‘slums’ were as alien as those of the Chinese or the Indians. The term was used pejoratively to describe a way of life and a group of people utterly unknown to the people who used it. ‘Darkest London’ was matched by the Rev. S.D. Yarrington’s ‘Darkest Sydney,’ in which he described with considerable verve and lurid detail ‘some incidents in slum life,’ with a picture of a Chinese opium den on the cover. He told of ‘the drunkard, the gambler, the White girl in the Chinese opium den, the poor unfortunate woman of the Underworld of Sydney, or the painted Jezebel under the lamp post’ (Yarrington, 1914). Among other things, Yarrington proposed ‘a strong force of women’ to patrol the streets and control the traffic of prostitution, and that it should be made compulsory for every white girl ‘living with a Chinaman to show her marriage certificate’ (Yarrington, 1914: 31, 42). Interestingly, he also called for a better employment structure to assist the unemployed, for building regulation, and for ‘slum’ resumption – indeed, he came close to calling for expropriation of wealthy landlords (Yarrington, 1914: 9, 46-47).

The Millers Point area, along with other working-class enclaves like that around Wexford Street in Surry Hills, and Chippendale, had also been seen for a long time – by those who did not live there – as a sink of vice, moral depravity, crime and drunkenness, with people crowded together in dirty and rundown hovels in back lanes, courts and squares. Mayne has reconstructed the dramatic format created by the press as journalists in the late nineteenth century followed the Lord Mayor and the ‘Inspector of Nuisances’ on regular processions.

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4 See, for example, SMH, 15 January 1900: 6.
5 On the other hand, he also reported that eight of the 10 Chinese died, while the death rate for ‘whites’ was 32 per cent (Ashburton Thompson, 1900: 8).
around the ‘slums’ to investigate the condition of ‘slum’ housing, and issue orders for cleansing and repair, or that a place was unfit for human habitation (Mayne, 1991, 1993).

1.2. PRESSURES FOR RESUMPTION

When the plague broke out in 1900, the Premier, William (later Sir William) Lyne concentrated his efforts on dealing with it. On 21 March, Lyne met a deputation of seven parliamentarians, who pressed him to place a general quarantine over the waterfront district. He promised to call a conference immediately with the maritime interests that would be affected. The following day he had a lengthy meeting with five major interstate shipping companies and a further meeting with a deputation of harbour ferry companies, to discuss what could be done about the plague. The shipping companies agreed to the cordonning off and cleansing of the wharf area, provided satisfactory arrangements were made for their shipping to be loaded and unloaded (Coward, 1988: 209).

Strikingly, the shipping companies urged Lyne ‘with a considerable degree of force’ to resume all the privately-owned wharves in Darling Harbour and reconstruct them ‘on a broad national basis’ (Coward, 1988: 209). Clearly, they saw an opportunity to get the Government to take over expensive infrastructure in need of upgrading and expansion, so long as they could recover the costs of their own investment (and, no doubt, make a profit into the bargain). Lyne baulked at this on account of the huge cost involved in buying out the shipping companies (SMH, 23 March 1900: 3). Nevertheless, the way the same meeting was reported by the Daily Telegraph suggests resumption was very much on the agenda:

...a splendid opportunity now offered for the resumption of the whole of the wharves by the State, and, while there seemed a general agreement as to the desirability of such a step, the question was not seriously discussed (DT, 23 March 1900: 5).

Yet further pressure came from the Parliament itself, when, although Parliament was not sitting, 89 Members signed an unusual ‘round robin’ urging the Premier to resume the wharves. While the petition urged resumption as the only means of getting rid of the plague, it did not indicate how this might be the case, except to say that the government should own the property and that ‘radical improvements’ should be made. In the newspapers of the time, there were occasional references to a concern to ensure Sydney’s colonial primacy in international shipping. Nevertheless, the handwritten petition only hinted at this. What it did say was:
We the undersigned Members of the Legislative Assembly desire to urge upon you the expediency of at once resuming the whole of the Wharf Property lying between the Government’s Property at Darling Harbour and that at the Circular Quay.

We urge this action from the twofold reason that it is advisable the Government should own this property and that radical improvements should be effected in this quarter at once as the only guarantee against the present disastrous plague getting a permanent hold on Sydney to the great loss of life.6

This clarion call to State intervention appeared to have been initiated by a country representative, the Member for Wellington, Mr John Haynes, and was later the cause of considerable dispute in Parliament, with some Members clearly regretting having been stampeded into signing it. The signatories included conservatives like the City Mayor, Sir Matthew Harris, the City Mayor; J.C.L. Fitzpatrick, later the Local Government Minister responsible for killing off the State-owned Daceyville housing project in the 1920s; and Joseph Cook, later Prime Minister; and Labor leader McGowen. The Opposition Leader George Reid was not a signatory, and soon made great play in Parliament of the illegality of the first round of resumptions.7 However, even he protested that he thoroughly supported the resumptions, and only opposed the government’s method of undertaking them. In fact, as a result of the pressure and the apparently near-unanimous support for resumption, the Premier issued the proclamation of the resumptions on 3 May 1900, even before Parliament met – to the anger of some Members (NSWPD, 28 June 1900: 559). Unusually, the Darling Harbour Wharves Resumption Bill was hotly debated at its initiation on 28 June 1900, even before it got to Second Reading stage. In addition, a Bill to create the Sydney Harbour Trust to manage the resumed area was introduced at the same time (NSWPD, 26 June 1900: 362).

In fact, what became clear more than a decade later was that it was Lyne who stood behind Haynes in getting the petition up in the first place. In 1914 the Lyne Government’s Attorney General, B.D. Wise, recounted in his reminiscences in Lone Hand how Lyne was worried precisely about the illegality of the resumption, and chose this method of obtaining an ‘implied promise of indemnity’ before submitting the proclamation to the Governor. In addition, he wanted to act quickly rather than recalling Parliament, which would have involved a delay of six weeks. He reasoned that delay would give the Members time to reflect, especially if wharf owners and other affected parties mounted a campaign against the resumption (Wise, 1914: 269). Undoubtedly, his political instinct was correct.

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6 Copy held in Mitchell Library ‘News clippings’ Vol. 116.
The extraordinary thing was the degree of unanimity that initially surrounded the resumptions. The shipping companies saw it as a way of ridding themselves of expensive infrastructure costs and responsibilities.\(^8\) Primary producers saw it as an opportunity to improve their access to markets and reduce their costs.\(^9\) The colonial government saw it as a way of enhancing Sydney’s claim to colonial leadership in the development of international markets; for the Labor Party, it matched with the then-dominant theories of state socialism and, perhaps, held out the promise of better working and housing conditions for waterside workers. Very few voices of dissent were raised. The City Council and the Sydney Labour Council, for example, found themselves in surprising unity in calling for resumption of the wharves (SMH, 30 March 1900: 3). In the parliamentary debates that ensued as legislation was introduced to legitimise resumption, dissent was most usually expressed by disagreement over detail rather than in outright opposition. The legislation set aside the huge sum of four million pounds to cover the costs of resumption, and established a generous rate of four percent interest for up to five years. The shipping industry had every reason for satisfaction. Reid noted there had not been a murmur of protest from the shipping companies over the ‘illegal’ seizure of the wharves, and commented that ‘that is ominous for the public purse’ (NSWPD, 28 June 1900: 547).

\(^8\) For example, the general manager of the Adelaide Steamship Company saw the resumptions as ‘a good opportunity for going in for a broad and comprehensive policy on the part of the government.’ SMH, 23 March 1900: 3).

\(^9\) The Member for Wellington, John Haynes, commented: ‘who can doubt for a moment that the wretched and abominable wharf arrangements existing in Sydney have hugely hampered the development of agricultural enterprise inland? The cost of the transmission of produce by the Darling Harbour railway to the ship’s side represents almost one-third of the cost of its production (NSWPD, 28 June 1900: 553).
In fact, after the initial takeover of a limited number of wharves, resumption was undertaken in a fairly piecemeal fashion. Fitzgerald & Keating spell out the reasons for the resumptions as including the redevelopment of the wharf facilities to bring them up to international standard, and for facilitation of the construction of a bridge connecting Sydney to the North Shore (S. Fitzgerald & Keating, 1991: 69f). Lyne commented that he intended to ‘deal with the whole of “The Rocks” question... there must be an absolute remodelling of the whole of that part, and with that remodelling it is proposed to run a street, to be an offtake for an approach to North Sydney at some time’ (NSWPD, 5 July 1900: 719). The Government was also anxious to widen streets such as Sussex Street. Sussex Street was then the main artery for transport of produce between the wharves and the markets at the other end of Darling Harbour; and was so congested as to represent an early example of traffic gridlock. Land was also needed for plans to extend the railway around the wharves to Circular Quay.

Where did ‘slum’ clearance come in this scale of priorities? Probably not very high, though it was discussed from time to time. Certainly, the Premier had it in mind to get rid of the ‘slum’ housing in The Rocks through his resumptions. In Parliament, he professed to have been shocked during a recent visit there, and commented:

> It is a place - practically in the heart of the city – which is really a disgrace to any city in the world. There are narrow lanes and crooked lanes, and until you get up near Fort Street, there is no thoroughfare which you can call a street. I am having a design made to submit to the House, with a proposition to deal with this particular part of Sydney – practically to take down the whole of that part and rebuild it (NSWPD, 28 June 1900: 547).
However, this tended to recede into the background as more and more Members – especially country Members – expressed their concern at the State taking on such a task, which they saw as more properly that of the municipal body. Thus R.D. Meagher, the Member for Tweed (and soon to become an alderman on the City Council), commented that:

...any attempt to mingle the municipal aspect of reform with a national undertaking cannot be to the advantage of the latter. While as a member for a country constituency, I heartily support the resumption of the wharves, I would be no party to utilising public money in order to ape the efforts of the London County Council in their huge operations for the improvement of the east end of London, where the death rate is abnormally high, and where the social conditions are of the most squalid character.... We have not here the conditions which enabled the London County Council to tear down acres and acres of rookeries... I will not support any attempt to improve that healthy locality in Sydney called ‘The Rocks.’ As a matter of fact, the working men of that neighbourhood do not live at ‘The Rocks.’ The conditions of Sydney are changing every day, and the men who work in the city do not live there, but in the healthy suburbs (NSWPD, 28 June 1900: 559).

Fundamentally, clearance of the housing was seen rather as a necessary prerequisite for getting on with redevelopment priorities, than as a means of providing better housing for the inhabitants. These were darkly perceived as a lawless element and as a seedbed for the nurturing of infectious disease by their perceived slatternly and insanitary customs. In plans to redevelop the area, it appeared to be imagined that when the housing disappeared, the residents would simply melt away, presumably to the suburbs where contented workers would reside in their cottages and commute to their workplaces. The difficulties of cost and of lack of proximity to work – particularly on the wharves, where the unpredictabilities of the pick-up system and the arrival and departure of shipping required immediate availability – and the fact that unsewered and unserviced suburbs could be every bit as unhealthy and insanitary as ‘the slums’ – and, moreover, even more congested – occurred to few.¹⁰

The fact remained, that in resuming the wharves and a large portion of the area behind them, in addition to getting the chance to clean up and extend the wharves, the State Government also inherited a substantial amount of housing; housing, moreover, that was tenanted. After the initial resumption of some of the privately-owned wharves on 3 May 1900, in addition to taking over the rest of the wharves, the Sydney Harbour Trust took over a total of 803 properties from February to June 1901, including 430 dwellings (SHTC, 1901: 28).

¹⁰ Those few included Ashburton Thompson, who noted that because of high incidences of typhoid fever – a more infectious disease than bubonic plague – the suburbs were not as healthy as some believed. The Royal Commission for the Improvement of the City of Sydney noted 45 persons to the acre in the City, compared to 55 persons in both Redfern and Paddington, 59 in Newtown and 77 in Darlington (RCICS, 1909: xxviii).
1.3. The Sydney Harbour Trust as Landlord

From the beginning, the Trust was ill at ease with the role of landlord. Its primary concern was with wharf management and infrastructure, and having to collect a few shillings’ rent from reluctant tenants was a tiresome interruption:

It can easily be imagined that the collection of rents from a body of 400 to 500 tenants, occupying houses at a few shillings per week, is an exceedingly difficult matter (SHTC, 1901: 28).

Nevertheless, dwelling rentals proved to be not unprofitable. From February to December that year, the Trust took in 5,935 pounds in revenue from its dwellings, while laying out 690 pounds in repairs to residential properties (SHTC, 1901: 43). The latter ranged from 2 pounds, 5 shillings for a property in Jenkins Street to 110 pounds, 17 shillings for another in Lower Fort Street. The Trust, however, remained peeved that at the end of the year it still had outstanding rental arrears of 3,842 pounds owed by people still in possession of the properties. This was despite the fact that it was clearly attempting to carry out a no-nonsense policy on evictions, for the Report went on:

...and as the Commissioners are only Trustees for the public, and have no right to allow the property of the State to be non-productive, they have had in numerous cases to take the necessary legal action for the recovery of rent or the ejectment of the tenant. The Commissioners have every sympathy for genuine cases of distress, and consistent with their duty give consideration to applications to stay proceedings temporarily; but it has been evident that a number of tenants of the resumed properties, having the Government for a landlord, had no intention of paying rental if they could help doing so, preferring to apply the money to other uses (SHTC, 1901: 28).

The nature of the comment leads to the suspicion that there may have been different views of the nature and function of Harbour Trust management of its housing. Clearly, the Trust wanted to conduct it on a commercial basis, and aside from a nod to charitable considerations, sought to do so. Equally clearly, the size of the rental arrears compared with actual receipts, suggests both that the Trust may have been inexperienced in housing management, and also that it may have been meeting resistance from tenants with a different perception of what it was about. Finally, the Trust Commissioners had little appreciation of
the effects of low and unpredictable incomes on the capacity to pay rent. On the one hand the Report suggests that tenants preferred to ‘apply the rent to other uses,’ like, presumably, alcohol; and on the other hand, it recognises that there is little point in pursuing tenants owing a total of 415 pounds who have flitted or been ejected, ‘from whom the money cannot be recovered, as they do not possess it.’

The reality behind such comments is not hard to discern; there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the Trust’s relationship with its working-class tenants was not a happy one. A newspaper columnist, ‘Old Chum,’ tells of a brutal episode in January 1902, in which the Trust evicted tenants for two pounds twelve shillings in rental arrears, and then sold off their sticks of furniture and bedding in distraint of rent. In fact, according to the columnist, the Trust omitted to carry out its legal obligation to advertise the sale as being for distraint of rent, presumably in the hope of avoiding public criticism. A pawnbroker bought the bedding, and offered to sell it to back to the couple for 4/6, but refused to do so when they offered him the 3/- they raised from a neighbour. The house was then boarded up (Mitchell Library newspaper cuttings vol. 116). Later the same year, the Daily Telegraph recounted how the Trust – frustrated by the high cost of maintenance and repairs – served an attornment notice on all the tenants to make them responsible for repairs. When the tenants got together and refused to sign the notice, the Trust issued them all with notices to quit. The tenants launched a campaign, and after pressure on the Trust president (Mr R.R.P. Hickson, an engineer, and a man hardly calculated to have much interest in housing management) from the local Member (Mr W. Daley) and the Premier (Sir John See), the notices were withdrawn, and no more was heard of the attornment (DT, 25 October 1902: 6). The same article detailed several hardship cases controverting the Commissioners’ claims to compassion, including one in which the bailiff himself refused to evict a wharf labourer who was in hospital and three of whose children were sick with measles.

In fact, for the period 1901-1912, the Trust’s residential rental returns regularly were in excess of 11,000 pounds per annum (Keane, 1994: 57). In any event, housing rental revenue of 6,000 pounds or 10,000 pounds – or, for that matter, the 20,758 pounds it made from its overall property portfolio, which included shops, hotels, bond stores and factories as well as houses – was unlikely to weigh very heavily on the minds of Commissioners dealing with a total income of 169,500 pounds. They were far more likely to be concerned about road-building than rental revenue. Indeed, this was one of several sources of friction between the Trust and the City Improvement Advisory Board set up to ‘advise the Government as to the
best and most effective means of dealing with the properties resumed’ (S. Fitzgerald & Keating, 1991:74). With overlapping areas of responsibility, quite apart from personal animosities between the respective chairmen, Hickson and Varney Parkes, conflict was inevitable, and it may have been this that led to the Harbour Trust takeover of properties in June 1901, for which the Advisory Board had drawn up detailed plans. The Advisory Board was disbanded in 1903, either as a result of the conflict or, more likely, because the politicians were worried about the cost of Parkes’ grandiose redevelopment plans. The outstanding housing reformer of the time, J.D. Fitzgerald, lamented that the Board ‘would have done good work, but that it was cut down as a flower’ (J.D. Fitzgerald, 1907a: 563). Indeed, to demonstrate his good faith, Fitzgerald had offered, with the permission of his family, to move into one of the proposed tenement flats (RCICS, 1909: 126).

From the point of view of the future of government-owned working-class housing, it may have been unfortunate that the Harbour Trust was left with the housing redevelopment, while the City Improvement Advisory Board was wound up. The Board was clearly concerned to establish such housing as one of its priorities, and, unusually, it was prepared to consult with Millers Point residents rather than simply dealing with them in commercial terms. On 6 January 1902, it announced a visionary plan to remodel Millers Point, which included road and rail construction and development of approaches to the proposed north shore bridge (DT, 7 January 1902: 6). However, central to its plan was also a scheme to house up to 4,000 people (including 700 families) in three separate tenement buildings of five stories in Windmill, Fort, Argyle and Kent Streets. The plans for the main tenement included broad balconies, separate entrances and lifts, ground-floor shops, and an interior common courtyard of two and a quarter acres – and in the basement swimming baths, gymnasium, library, lecture hall, and perhaps even a school. The would be of varying sizes to meet the needs of single people and families, and rents were calculated at between five shillings a week for single men and 12/6 per week for five rooms for a family. How practical this scheme may have been never had the opportunity to be tested. The Advisory Board estimated that all of the works together would cost 500,000 pounds, but Government Ministers were concerned that it would cost between one million and two million pounds (DT, 7 January 1902: 6). In the outcome, the Government was prepared to spend up to four million pounds on reconstructing the wharves for the benefit of shipping, commerce and the State economy, but it was not prepared to spend a substantial but lesser amount on housing for the workers who fuelled the economy, but who could provide little in the way of financial return.
Figure 1.8 The Rocks. ‘Bird’s eye view of the area to be remodelled... with improvements to streets and ferry wharves.’ Plan prepared by the City Improvement Board (NSW LAV&P, vol. 6, 1901: 4).

Figure 1.9 The Rocks re-envisioned. “Sketch plan of building areas as rearranged.” Plan prepared by the City Improvement Board (NSW LAV&P, vol. 6, 1901: 2).
1.4. **The View from Below**

In the following May, the Board held a public meeting in the newly-named Federation Hall in Millers Point to discuss the scheme with local residents – an early example of community consultation (*DT*, 3 May 1902: 10). The Board chairman, Varney Parkes, detailed the proposal, now somewhat refined from the initial plan, and handed around plans and small models for residents to examine. Initially, he faced a hostile audience hurling questions and criticisms at him in rapid succession, like ‘you want to build dog kennels and make the working man live in them!’ ‘What about the youngsters?’ ‘What’s a man to do with six or seven kids?’ ‘Will you pay our gas bills?’ On the reporter’s account, Parkes won the crowd around, with ‘the greater portion of the men in the meeting... favourably impressed by the idea of dwelling in the proposed flats’ (*DT*, 3 May 1902: 10).

Clearly some of their concerns related to issues of privacy, raising children in flats, cost, and tenement housing as an issue in itself. These are the sorts of issues that are still regularly raised in discussions over proposals for medium- and high-density public housing in inner city areas. What was also interesting in the discussions in the early part of the twentieth century was the frequency of references to overseas experience with tenements. In this particular debate, one resident asked how the buildings compared with Peabody’s buildings in London. Such references were not unusual at the time, and were almost certainly a product of the immigrant composition of much of Sydney’s population: working-class Sydney was more cosmopolitan than people sometimes realised. Working-class resistance to tenements is, perhaps, more understandable when seen in this light, on the basis of unsatisfying experiences in tenement housing in London and New York, to which reference was regularly made in discussions. Parkes was careful to distinguish – particularly in terms of space and privacy – between the sorts of tenements the Board was planning and those his listeners may have experienced or seen overseas.

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**SLUMS & TENEMENTS: SLIPPERY CONCEPTS**

On the question of slums – it was all a matter of definition. To his mind, a slum was a place that did not allow of a reasonable amount of air space on at least three sides of the dwellings, having some distance between the roadway and the front doors, and a backyard in which they could more than swing a cat, so that the baby and the dustbin should not be found crowded side by side.

Comments attributed to E.C. Rigby

(Rigby & Ellery, 1917: 55)
Flats or apartments were a development only in its infancy in Sydney, and sharp distinctions were not drawn between flats and tenements. Indeed, the term ‘tenement’ could be used in ambiguous ways, so that it could become simply a catch-all phrase for the ‘slums’: J.D. Fitzgerald, at one moment could speak of the Hotel Australia as ‘a tenement house on a glorified scale,’ and at another as ‘the tenement’ being ‘an American synonym of slum’ (S. Fitzgerald & Keating, 1991: 34; RCICS, 1909: 126). This lack of definition was a feature of discussions about the respective merits of tenements/flats and cottages for many years to come. It may well be that the stridency of working-class opposition to tenements was as much a response to a perceived attack on working-class standards and values as it was to a particular form of housing. While it is true that almost back to the beginnings of the colonial era in Australia working-class people expressed a preference for freehold ownership of detached suburban houses, for most, this was never the reality, and this was certainly not the case in inner Sydney at the turn of the twentieth century (Davison, 2000: 6-25; Jackson, 1970: 138-154).

Even more important than all of this – both then and now – was the attachment of people to their home and community. Entirely justifiably, residents were worried that the tenements proposed were no more than ‘castles in the air,’ and that if their homes were pulled down there was no guarantee they would be provided with alternative housing. Even more basically, they did not see why their homes should be pulled down at all. With a sardonic flourish about ‘the free and independent of The Rocks’ (that is, ‘they’re shiftless, not stable and settled like us’), the Daily Telegraph’s reporter at the May 1902 meeting entirely failed to understand that working-class people may be just as attached to their neighbourhood as any middle-class resident of the suburbs. He simply could not comprehend how people could express ‘in clearly comprehensible, but not delicately-worded phrases... their preference for the buildings with which the “Rocks” have been covered in the past.’ Instead, he could only brand them as ‘retrogressionists’ whom the housing reformers must combat. From Parkes’ sharp rejoinder that there would be no problem getting tenants once the tenements were built, it is likely that the housing reformers were similarly ignorant (DT, 3 May 1902: 10). In any event, by the following year, Parkes’ Board had disappeared.

What certainly would have worried the tenants were housing demolitions. The Harbour Trust claimed that up to the end of 1901 it was necessary to condemn 71 properties because they were in a ‘dilapidated and insanitary state,’ though whether any of this was related to road-widening or ‘remodelling,’ the Trust does not say. The fact is that the Trust demolished
far more houses than it ever built. It is hard to get an exact estimate, because, while the Trust was fairly precise about how many properties it built in the period 1902-1912 – 120, give or take a few – it was uncharacteristically vague about how many homes it demolished.\textsuperscript{11} It is impossible to get an exact estimate from the Trust’s Annual Reports. This did not lead to the desired exodus of tenants to the suburbs. Instead, it simply led to further crowding in reduced housing stock – precisely the opposite effect to that intended by ‘slum’ clearance.

Loss of housing was certainly the primary concern of a ‘public indignation’ meeting called in the evening of 19 September 1908, with speakers addressing the crowd from a hotel balcony in Cumberland Street in The Rocks (\textit{DT}, 19 September 1908: 14). The meeting was chaired by the president of the Coal Lumpers’ Union, Mr W. Macey, and a prepared motion was debated and adopted by the meeting. The motion was put by two City Council aldermen, O’Connor and William Fitzgerald (the latter later became a Labor Lord Mayor). By this time, the City Council had little reason to love the Harbour Trust, given ongoing conflict over rates collections and responsibility for roads in the resumption area (S. Fitzgerald & Keating, 1991: 74f), so this also has to be factored into an already complicated equation. The purpose of the meeting was to urge the Government to erect workmen’s dwellings in The Rocks area. This was the primary concern, and clearly the motion had been prepared, but it also did not stop a member of the audience – with the support of the audience – adding a clause to the effect that ‘we, the citizens, strongly object to living in tenement houses.’ However, if the \textit{Daily Telegraph} report is to be trusted, this was introduced only late in the proceedings and the discussion in generally did not take this tenor. Instead, most of the discussion concerned the failure of the Harbour Trust to provide sufficient affordable housing for the waterside workers. The core of the motion was to indicate that the meeting ‘protests most emphatically against the action of the Government in demolishing old buildings in The Rocks resumption area without taking the necessary action to at once erect new buildings in lieu thereof.’ It also called on the Government to ‘proceed forthwith with the erection of workmen’s dwellings to meet the requirements of the waterside workers,’ who had to live close to their place of work.

There was also criticism of the standard of some of the housing, as well as questions about affordability, with speakers criticising the Harbour Trust for charging rents in its houses in Windmill Street that workers could not afford to pay. There had, indeed, been an earlier deputation to the State Treasurer asking for construction of more workers’ housing, and for

\textsuperscript{11} For a table of property numbers, see Keane, 1994: 71.
rents to be set at no more than 12/6 a
week. The meeting formed itself into the
Gipps Ward Progress Association to
undertake further action, and organised
yet another deputation to press its views
with the Government.

The meeting coincided with hearings of
the State Government’s Royal
Commission into the Improvement of the
City of Sydney. While workers’ housing
was not a central feature of the
Commission’s interest, middle-class housing reformers ensured that it received attention in
the evidence they gave. From the Commissioners’ repeated references to the strength of
workers’ opposition to tenements in The Rocks, it was clear they were acutely aware of the
publicity that was being generated. Undeniably, there was certainly strong opposition
among residents to the construction of tenement dwellings in the Millers Point area – indeed,
when a Labor Government came into office not long after, in fact it pledged not to build any
more tenements (DT, 16 February 1911). This clearly suggests that the housing the Harbour
Trust had already built – double-storey rows of flats, with separate entrances for the upstairs
flats – was regarded as tenement housing. But what is clear from the debates of the time is
that behind all the discussion about housing standards and about tenements versus cottages
or separate dwellings was a failure to comprehend that people were attached to their
neighbourhoods and communities, and were utterly alienated from the decision-making
process. To people steeped in beliefs that the slums were irredeemably evil haunts of
depravity and misery, it was all but inconceivable that people should actually be attached to
their surroundings.

Why were working-class people so opposed to tenements? There were probably several
answers to this question: one was certainly confusion over what tenements were, and the lack
of anything but negative examples. Another was an understandable concern about the
standard of housing that they would provide, and also whether new housing would mean
increased and unaffordable rents. Yet another concern was disenchantment with the
Harbour Trust as landlord, and other reasons included concerns about privacy. This last

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12 See for example, Canon Boyce’s exchange with the Commission: RCICS, 1909: 111.
should not be underestimated: for workers who often enough had large families, and who also had to take in lodgers to help pay the rent (Mitchell, 1977: 88), privacy must have been a scant possibility. This was especially important when wharf labourers had to grab such sleep as they could after long and heavy labour on the wharves at odd hours. Another consideration might have been a preference for private garden space, no matter how small, for a vegetable patch and maybe a few chickens. Finally, there was anger and frustration about being ‘pushed around and treated like specimens to be dissected and analysed.’

1.5. **The View from Above**

It is worthwhile looking at the views of some of the housing reformers of the era. On 15 January 1900 – a few days before the outbreak of the plague in Sydney – the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the return of the Rev. F.B. Boyce, rector of St. Paul’s Anglican Church, Redfern, from a 12-month overseas tour (*SMH*, 15 January 1900: 3). At a welcoming function, Boyce said that on his tour he became interested in the housing of the poor of London and other towns, and examined model dwellings in several quarters. While the rents appeared high, they were popular, were centrally situated for workmen, and were complete with ‘all the most modern sanitary and other arrangements.’ This was the genesis of a long-term concern with ‘slum’ housing. He had been rector of St. Paul’s in working-class Redfern since 1884, remaining there for a total of 46 years, almost until his death in 1931. Boyce was a talented self-publicist and prolific writer of tracts, pamphlets and booklets, as well as producing an autobiography that was published posthumously (Boyce, 1934). He also made it his practice to preach an annual program of social reform in his church on the first Sunday of each year, and to send a copy to the *Daily Telegraph*, which regularly published it. Along with aged pensions and temperance, ‘slum’ clearance became an issue on which he regularly campaigned (Boyce, 1913). He was particularly concerned about the Wexford Street area, which was in his parish. Like the City Mayors of old, several times he organised tours of the area with politicians and the press. Labor Party politician and later Premier, J.S.T. McGowen, was for 32 years superintendent of his Sunday School (Boyce, 1934: 77).

Consistently throughout his career, Boyce called for ‘slum’ abolition, although this was partly based on physical determinist beliefs as expressed in comments like ‘immorality and crowded areas always go together,’ and ‘what could be expected morally... when streets were only 20 feet wide, and yards were no larger than rooms?’ (Boyce, 1913: 17). Nevertheless, he regularly expressed concern about the cramped, inadequate and unhealthy conditions under
which people lived, and called for construction of wider roads with model workers’ dwellings, for affordable rents, and for at least basic building regulation, such as requiring landlords to provide bathrooms. While he did not recognise that some of these goals were incompatible and may lead to rental increases, at least he was one of the few who recognised that if housing was pulled down, other housing had to be found for the residents (Boyce, 1913: 17). In common with other housing reformers, like J.D. Fitzgerald and Boyce’s friend, the Rev. George Campbell, President of the Sydney City Mission, he also favoured the building of flats as the best means of ensuring affordable housing on expensive city land.

Other housing reformers also favoured workers’ tenements. The most notable of these was J.D. Fitzgerald, printer, barrister and Labor Member of the NSW Parliament until the conscription split of 1916, after which he continued as a Nationalist Minister. Fitzgerald was centrally involved in the town planning, city improvement and greater Sydney movements of the early part of the twentieth century. As an alderman of the City Council in 1902, he attempted to introduce a Housing of the Working Classes Bill. His municipal Housing Bill was repeatedly brought before Parliament, but never received consideration (Keane, 1994: 91). He served as chairman of the Housing Board of NSW and as Minister for Local Government steered the Local Government Act 1919 through Parliament, which remained the basis of local government legislation in NSW until quite recently. He was also the author of numerous articles on ‘the slums’ and the housing problem.

Boyce, Campbell and Fitzgerald all gave evidence to the Royal Commission into the Improvement of the City of Sydney in 1908 and all strongly supported the development of tenements for working-class people in the city, as distinct from separate dwellings. Responding to comments from Commissioners that they had recent evidence that residents of The Rocks did not want tenements – a clear reference to the protest meeting shortly before – Fitzgerald responded that earlier attempts at building separate workers’ cottages in the suburbs had failed, that ‘workers’ mansions’ had been very successful in England.
Further, it was important to rehouse people displaced as nearly as possible on the old site; and that there was ‘not a really good example in Sydney of a modern tenement house.’ He also pointed out that wharf labourers and coal lumpers needed to be near the wharves to pick up work, and that it would not be possible to erect separate dwellings there. Fitzgerald said The Rocks residents preferred terraces, but that the houses the Government had recently built would ‘become slums, because the principle is wrong’ (RCICS, 1909: 126). On this, Fitzgerald was wrong. The housing he was referring to were terraces with separate entrances recently completed by the Harbour Trust in Dalgety Street (now Moore Street). The housing has magnificent harbour views, and is anything but a ‘slum.’ Some of the design complaints have been addressed in recent times by the landlord, the NSW Department of Housing.

However, another witness was emphatically opposed to the construction of tenement housing for workers. She was Catherine Dwyer, from the Trades and Labour Council, and she appeared at the Royal Commission at the suggestion of Boyce (Boyce, 1913: 15). Boyce clearly had links with Trades Hall, because from time to time he and the Labour Council co-operated in campaign activities, and the Council also wrote him a warm letter of appreciation for his evidence to the Royal Commission (Boyce, 1913: 6, 21). On Dwyer’s evidence, the Labour Council took up the issue of remodelling of the Wexford Street area at Boyce’s suggestion. Ideally, the Council preferred separate dwellings, but recognised that land values in the metropolitan area were such that this would not be possible; instead, the
Council preferred the sorts of dwellings that the Harbour Trust was, in fact, building. With some exceptions, the Council approved of the Harbour Trust dwellings. Somewhat confusingly, Dwyer referred to these as ‘tenement dwellings.’ One of the Royal Commissioners was R.R.P. Hickson, head of the Harbour Trust, which was at the time carving out High Street at Millers Point and planning a double-storey block of flats there, with separate flats on upper and lower levels – a block of flats which could well be termed tenements. Knowing this, Hickson asked Dwyer:

[Commission]: Would the fact of having separate entrances to the top floor make any difference in your opinion about the tenement houses?

[Dwyer]: I think it would make it more private.

[Commission]: You are aware that the houses to which you are drawing attention have separate entrances?

[Dwyer]: Yes, and I approve of that (RCICS, 1909: 179).

Adroitly, Hickson had drawn the Labour Council into supporting Harbour Trust tenement housing, so long as it had separate entrances. To this day, there are separate stairways from the street to each pair of upstairs flats in High Street, Millers Point.

Alternatively, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that an arrangement had been struck: the Harbour Trust was clearly under pressure from all of the adverse publicity, the recent protest meeting, and even more recent deputations to politicians. Dwyer’s evidence to the Royal Commission was certainly somewhat surprising in its attitude to the Harbour Trust’s housing – with some reservations; her evidence was relatively supportive of the Trust’s efforts in Miller’s Point, even though clearly much more could have been said. It may not be without significance that in its next annual report (1909), the Harbour Trust was, for its part, no less surprisingly strong in its support for workingmen’s housing, and, in particular, for the housing of waterside workers. It had never before been this explicit in its commitment to housing waterside workers:

It is the policy of the Commissioners to provide houses, where possible, for those of the waterside workers who must, of necessity, live near their work... (SHTC, 1909: 7)

The impression is even more strongly reinforced by the no less surprising agreement between Hickson and Dwyer as to what would constitute a reasonable rent for wharf labourers – around 10/- a week. Rental costs and rental increases had, inevitably, been a major subject of dispute between the Harbour Trust and its tenants.
Both in their line of questioning of housing reformers, and in their recommendations, the Royal Commissioners opposed introduction of the ‘tenement or flat’ system into Sydney on the rationale that Australian workmen did not ‘take kindly to those communal dwellings.’ They referred specifically to the experience of the Harbour Trust Commissioners, who ‘provide separate houses for waterside workers’ (RCICS, 1909: lv). It is hard to know how much influence Hickson exerted in the final product, but the thrust of the Royal Commission’s recommendations affecting Millers Point was to recognise that because of the nature of their work, the needs of waterside workers should receive ‘special provision’ in or near the city. However, in general, workmen should be encouraged to live in separate houses in suburban areas. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Hickson wanted to limit the amount and expense of housing the Trust would be required to provide, and to maximise the opportunity for gains in the commercial development of valuable land currently being used for residential purposes. Thus in the Trust’s Report of 1909, the Commissioners qualified their policy of housing for waterside workers as follows:

...but a great deal of the land vested in the Commissioners is too valuable to be used for this purpose, and is required in connection with the improvement of the facilities for shipping at the various wharves. In accordance with this policy, a number of suitable dwellings will be erected within the next few months on the limited area available for the purpose (SHTC, 1909: 7).

1.6. **CONCLUSION**

This early experiment in public housing in New South Wales was clearly not very extensive, nor was it entirely satisfactory. A key reason for this is that it may well have been placed in the wrong hands. None of the Harbour Trust Commissioners were appointed for their skills in housing or in social service; all were appointed because of their capacity to manage a harbour authority. It was clear that to them that working-class housing was an interruption – however necessary some element of it was – to the main task of developing an international port. The future of public housing may well have been otherwise had it been left in the hands of a body like the City Improvement Advisory Board. In addition, it would be some time before the realisation dawned that public housing for low-income people could not, by its nature, be treated as a commercial proposition. In the meantime, it is clear that for all the discussion about tenement housing, whether by harbour managers, royal commissioners, or even middle-class housing reformers, the one factor hardly taken into account was the real wishes and needs of the working-class people who inhabited Millers Point.
One other tentative conclusion also comes to mind: while laissez-faire ideology dominated at the turn of the twentieth century, there was clearly a need for governments to take an increasingly interventionist role in the provision of expensive infrastructure. The bubonic plague outbreak of 1900 provided a conjuncture at which it became possible for government to take over run-down and inadequately-managed privately-owned port facilities in the interests of redeveloping the port of Sydney to international standards. This suited the interests of all concerned, with the possible exception of the wharf-owners themselves; and even they could be placated so long as they were offered an acceptable price. The readiness even among conservatives to undertake surprisingly strong State intervention, and to call for even more dramatic forms of State control calls for further investigation. On the other hand, such readiness was also much more apparent when it was seen to be to the benefit of business and the well-to-do, than that of the working-class people whose homes – be they ever so humble – stood in the way of progress.

Figure 1.13 Part of an image titled ‘Sunshine in the Alley’ (Cazneaux, 1911b).
2. DACEYVILLE

2.1. INTRODUCTION

At the very end of 1911 – on 30 December – the NSW Labor Treasurer, J.R. Dacey, announced the State’s first planned involvement in the direct provision of housing to be built on 400 acres of sandy wasteland previously reserved for the Church of England just south of Kensington. The Government had found itself almost the accidental heir of working-class housing when it resumed a large slab of the Millers Point area for port expansion and to get rid of slum housing. However, what later came to be called Daceyville was planned as a model for what government could do to provide good and affordable housing in the new garden city/suburb mode.

As the first planned experiment in State housing, the Daceyville scheme was dropped into a fiercely contested political arena. The recent development of the Australian Labor Party as the political wing of the labour movement only 20 years before represented a serious challenge to the liberal dominance of politics in NSW, where previously interests within a broad liberal consensus had grouped around issues like free trade versus protection (Rowse, 1978). Not only had much of the sting particularly in the free trade/protection argument been removed by the advent of federation in 1901, but the new Labor Party brought a new range of issues – working-class interests like industrial issues and social equity concerns – to the political bargaining table. It was not uncommon for Labor men at the time to proclaim themselves ‘state socialists,’ by which they meant government conducting a range of enterprises previously the sole preserve of private enterprise, as a means of controlling prices, guaranteeing jobs and ensuring a measure of social equity. This set the stage for ongoing confrontation between the Labor Party and the variety of liberal interests increasingly finding common cause against it.

In addition, the Daceyville scheme was first mooted amid a heated controversy over land tenure. Much of the land held by pastoralists in rural NSW was held on leasehold terms from the Crown. When the Labor Party came to office in NSW it was seen as a serious threat to rural landholding interests, especially when it introduced legislation aimed at changing the pattern of leasehold. For the liberals of the time there was a fundamental conflict of principle between leasehold and freehold title to land, and they bitterly opposed the Labor Party for breaking down the liberal principle of freehold land title – the individual
property right \textit{par excellence}. It was at this moment that the Daceyville scheme was instituted, and when it was presented as a leasehold project on land that would remain in Crown hands, it played directly into the wider debate. In addition, it threatened the dominance of private developers like Richard Stanton, who coincidentally was planning an ‘industrial garden suburb’ in Rosebery virtually next door to the Daceyville scheme at the very time the latter was announced.

The first Labor Government in New South Wales came to office in October 1910. As mentioned earlier, it was led by J.S.T. McGowen, who had already been active in urban planning issues through, for example, his membership of the Royal Commission for the Improvement of the City of Sydney, and his association with the Rev. F.B. Boyce, a long-term and vocal crusader against ‘slum’ housing (Boyce, 1913).

In addition, the Labor Council of NSW had also adopted an activist role on low-income housing issues. It had lobbied previous governments over rental and housing issues in the resumed area of Millers Point, and one of its officers, Catherine Dwyer, had given evidence on working-class housing problems to the Royal Commission. In 1911, it lobbied the Government to introduce legislation to control rents. Landlords and agents opposed the resulting Limitations Bill, arguing that the working class were not reliable or well-behaved tenants, and that building regulation had already increased the cost of construction and forced rents to rise. In the wake of the hullabaloo, the Government backed off and failed to introduce the Bill (Keg, 1988: 19).

Nevertheless, a zealously reform-minded Government pressed on with its program. Early in 1912 it carried through the \textit{Sydney Corporation (Dwelling Houses) Act 1912 (NSW)}, giving the City Council power to resume land for, among other things, erection of dwelling houses, and authorizing the Council to raise loans for this purpose. Shortly afterwards, in August, it commissioned the foundation Professor of Economics at the University of Sydney, Robert Irvine, to undertake a commission of inquiry into ‘the question of the housing of workmen in Great Britain and the Continents of Europe and America,’ and to recommend for adoption whatever he considered useful for NSW (Irvine, 1913: 7-14).

In the same session the Parliament passed the \textit{Savings Banks Amalgamation Act 1912 (NSW)}, which established an ‘Advances for Homes’ Board under the control of the State Savings Bank, and set aside 300,000 pounds a year to help people build homes. The scheme offered advances of up to 500 pounds at six percent interest to first-home purchasers/builders, and
was based on similar legislation in Queensland and South Australia (Keg, 1988: 24). This measure did not involve the Government directly in the provision of housing. However, it was also clear that many low-income earners could not afford the deposits or repayments to benefit from such a measure, and the Government introduced the first *Housing Act 1912* (NSW). This established the NSW Housing Board and provided a framework for the construction by government of publicly-owned housing for rental. It was this last point that attracted the opposition of the conservative parties, who fiercely opposed the Daceyville development as a program that was not appropriate for government to undertake, and it was J.C.L. Fitzpatrick, Housing Minister in the conservative Stevens’ Government, who ended the program in the 1920s. It was one thing for Government to offer assistance for self-help for the deserving poor, but quite another for Government to engage directly in the provision of housing, and rental housing at that.

The idea for establishing the Housing Board appears to have come from Ambrose Campbell Carmichael during his term as Treasurer (Irvine, 1913: 38). In fact, it was a central element of a short Workers’ Dwellings Bill introduced by Carmichael in July 1911, only a few months before the Daceyville proposal (*NSWPD*, 11 July 1911: 1473). The Bill aimed to give the State Government the power to buy land and erect workers’ dwellings on it, on the recommendation of a board to be constituted under the Act. Carmichael then went on to comment:

> The next power asked for is one to enable the Government to erect dwellings on that land, or on Government land, as the case may be, and to dispose of those dwellings to workers on the credit foncier system, or by sale right out (*NSWPD*, 11 July 1911: 1474).

The Opposition immediately reacted, and Opposition leader Charles Wade challenged Carmichael to define exactly what he meant, and accused him of ‘chucking up’ the leasehold principle. It then transpired that Carmichael was being somewhat disingenuous, in that while freehold purchase would indeed be an option, leasehold tenure was very much on the agenda. The precise nature and variety of arrangements was unclear, as Carmichael spoke of several options: purchase of land and house, either by outright sale or payments over 20 to 30 years; leasehold of both land and house; and even leasehold of land and ownership of the house, a proposition the Opposition roundly ridiculed. This last proposition was, however, based on an earlier failed scheme at ‘Crickville’ under the *Blockholders Act 1901* (NSW), which
provided land on 99-year leases. That scheme failed, however, not on grounds of leasehold tenure, but because of onerous provisions for erection of housing on the land.

But it was up to his successor, John Rowland Dacey, to carry through the proposal, and it was from him that first Dacey Gardens and finally Daceyville took its name. Dacey represented the Botany and Alexandria electorates from 1895, and campaigned for public housing from that time. He introduced the Housing Bill to the State Parliament on 22 February 1912, and it was assented to on 4 April 1912. Dacey himself died just a week later, on 11 April. The Housing Board of three members was appointed shortly afterwards, on 24 April with J.D. Fitzgerald as chairman.

2.2. BACKGROUND TO THE SCHEME

At the time Daceyville developed, two separate ideas coalesced. On one hand, the era saw the expansion of the suburbs beyond the city environs, and increasingly the inner metropolitan area was becoming seen as the commercial and business hub of the State. Land values were increasing, and working-class residential enclaves were increasingly seen by politicians and reformers as barriers to progress. In addition, these same areas were perceived as dirty, disease-ridden haunts of depravity and vice – as ‘slums,’ fit only to be torn down and the residents relocated somewhere else. We have seen something of this

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13 For the debate on this legislation, see NSWPD, 28 August 1901: 881.
process in the redevelopment of the Darling Harbour port area, and similar stories could be told of the development of Central Railway station and the widening of major streets like Liverpool Street.

All too often, the fate of the dispossessed tenants was not of major concern, beyond a vague belief that they would drift out to the newly-developing suburbs where clean air and semi-rural surroundings would create a healthier and more compliant working class. This tended to overlook some uncomfortable facts like the lack of infrastructure ranging from sewerage to transport, the sheer cost and time involved for working people to get to their metropolitan jobs, and the lack of rental housing affordable or otherwise. What tended to happen instead was that, rather than take the problematical road to the suburbs, the dispossessed denizens of the city crowded into the remaining housing – if nothing else; rents would be more affordable by virtue of subletting. For the middle class, and also for the upper ranks of the working class in stable reasonably well-paid jobs, the suburbs certainly provided the opportunity to ‘own your own,’ to build or buy a home on ‘That block of land.’ However, while overall New South Wales had a very high percentage of home ownership – 50 percent by the outbreak of World War II – this overlooks the fact that this varied dramatically in the inner-ring suburbs of Sydney, with much higher percentages of renting (Jackson, 1970).

On the other hand, this era also saw the fashion for the ‘garden city’ and ‘garden suburb.’ In 1898, Ebenezer Howard published his ‘Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform,’ retitled in 1902 as ‘Garden Cities of Tomorrow.’ He was at least as much responsible as anybody else for the term ‘garden city’ passing into common language. Even more so when considering that within a few years of publishing his book he had collected some likeminded souls and developed the garden city of Letchworth on a rural site in Hertfordshire, 35 miles from central London, followed by Welwyn Gardens in 1919, and even closer to London. Howard was not the first to use the term. Chicago, for example, called itself ‘the Garden City,’ and
Christchurch, founded in 1850, was known as the Garden City of New Zealand (Osborn, 1944: 26).

What is a Garden City? In 1919, the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association, in consultation with Howard, defined it:

Garden City is a Town designed for healthy living and industry; of a size that makes possible a full measure of social life, but not larger; surrounded by a rural belt; the whole of the land being in public ownership or held in trust for the community (Osborn, 1944: 26).

In an essay introducing the 1945 edition of Howard’s book, Lewis Mumford apostrophised the garden city along with the plane as two great inventions at the beginning of the twentieth century, ‘harbingers of a new age’ (Mumford, 1965: 29). He went on to expand the rather bald definition of the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association as synthesising proposals for:

The provision of a permanent belt of open land, to be used for agriculture as an integral part of the city; the use of this land to limit the physical spread of the city from within, or encroachments from urban development not under control at the perimeter; the permanent ownership and control of the entire urban tract by the municipality itself and its disposition by means of leases into private hands; the limitation of population to the number originally planned for the area; the reservation for the community of the unearned increment from the growth and prosperity of the city, up to the limits of growth fixed; the moving into the new urban area of industries capable of supporting the greater part of its population; the provision for founding new communities as soon as the existing land and social facilities are occupied (Mumford, 1965: 35).

Interestingly, Howard was very much influenced by Edward Bellamy’s 1887 utopian socialist vision of Boston in 2000, articulated in his Looking Backward 2000-1887 (Bellamy, 1966/1888). It was no doubt Bellamy’s influence that led Howard to predicate his garden city on a form of public ownership, and may have lay behind Dacey’s original idea of working-class home ownership on crown land, and behind the Daceyville experiment of government-owned rental housing.

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14 First published in 1888, the book gained considerable international notoriety, was soon translated into more than a dozen languages, and inspired William Morris to write his News from Nowhere. It was also influential in the Australian labour movement, and was serialized by William Lane in his newspaper Australian Worker.
It did not take long for garden city derivatives like ‘garden suburb’ and ‘garden village’ to develop. The British expatriate architect John Sulman was one of the founders of the NSW Town Planning Association, and was also involved in the planning process for Daceyville. His 1921 *Introduction to the Study of Town Planning in Australia* was still being used as a text at the University of Sydney until recent years, and what he saw as distinctive about the garden suburb was:

...the allocation of special quarters or sites for each kind of building, the absence of congestion of dwellings and their better arrangement, the ample provision of parks, playgrounds and open space, the planting with trees and grass of part of the width of the roads where not required for traffic, and the provision of greater opportunities for social intercourse (Sulman, 1921: 106).

Inevitably, terms like ‘garden suburb’ were taken up by private entrepreneurs like Richard Stanton, who developed Haberfield as a ‘model suburb’ from 1902, marketed it as a ‘garden suburb’ from 1909, and was about to develop Rosebery as a ‘garden industrial suburb’ (*Building*, November 1911: 89) at the moment Dacey announced his new project at nearby Kensington. Indeed, Stanton’s Town Planning Company of Australia complained Dacey had ‘stolen their thunder’ (*DT*, 6 January 1912: 13) as they were planning to start the building on Gardeners Road (on to which Daceyville also fronts) of 100 cottages for sale – perhaps a factor in the jaundiced view Stanton took of Daceyville. Stanton was also one of the founders of the NSW Town Planning Association, and was interested in integrating planned subdivision, housing construction and basic development control on large tracts (Freestone, 1987: 62). Inevitably, the term ‘garden suburb’ became a selling ploy of developers and real estate agents, as in the extensive advertising of Arthur Rickard.

![Figure 2.5 The text accompanying this July 1908 poster asks “WHY NOT?” and ends with the statement “YOU WILL BE INTERESTED” (Freestone, 1987: 63).](image)
2.3. **Reasons for the Scheme**

What were the reasons for developing Daceyville, especially in the teeth of fierce opposition? Probably there were three fundamental and inter-related reasons why the Labor government decided to embark on its – and Australia’s – first planned public housing scheme. The Labor government wanted to resolve the housing crisis faced by the working class, it wanted to do so by intervening directly in low-cost housing provision, and it wanted at the same time to establish a model garden city community – and one, moreover, that did not rely on charity but paid its own way.

In introducing the legislation, Dacey noted that the government was seeking to provide options for two groups of people – for home purchasers, through the *Savings Banks Amalgamation Act 1912 (NSW)*, and for people who wanted rental housing. In the evidence he went on to adduce, it was clear he had in mind working-class people who could not enter the home purchase market, and who were being exploited in the rental market, or displaced by resumptions. He spoke passionately about the problems faced by working-class tenants, quoted cases where tenants faced severe problems in poor and unaffordable housing, and commented:

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 (*NSWP*, 28 February 1912: 3251).

Dacey also noted that public protest meetings were being held over resumptions that had displaced long-term tenants in some areas, as with City Council resumptions, and railway resumptions in his own electorate of Alexandria, where hundreds of houses were to be pulled down for what would become the Eveleigh goods yards. He commented that it was incumbent on the government to ‘prevent the overcrowding that is now taking place in different parts of the city,’ and inadvertently provided evidence of what happened when people lost their homes in crowded ‘slum’ areas like The Rocks. There he found ‘one terrace of six ordinary houses [there are no less than seventy persons residing’ (*NSWP*, 28
February 1912: 3251). Clearly, when homes were pulled down, people were crowding into what was left. In introducing the legislation, Dacey commented:

We propose to establish a garden city, and to offer the people healthy conditions for living. It has been truthfully said that the city beautiful will yield big dividends to the nation. We propose to establish a city beautiful, which Australians abroad will be able to point to with pride and say, ‘There, that is how Australia builds its garden cities’ (NSWPD, 28 February 1912: 3251).

The Government was clearly influenced by the town planning movement in New South Wales, personified by the first Housing Board chairperson, J.D. Fitzgerald, who commented of his instructions:

[We] should carry out a model garden village housing scheme; that we were to erect a good type of house, one suitable for the occupation of working men and their families, that the rents should not be high, and that we should as far as possible, introduce the garden surroundings that are known in connection with such villages as Bournville [Port Sunlight in England and Essen in Germany (Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, 1913: 4).

Rents were also an issue. There were numerous complaints about the high cost of rents for working-class people – later in 1912 the Legislative Assembly appointed a Select Committee to inquire into ‘the increase in house rents’ (Select Committee on Increase in House Rents, 1912) – and at the time Dacey made his announcement there was a lively letter-writing discussion in the press. In addition, the day before the announcement the NSW Labor Council had discussed increasing rent levels, and organised a delegation to go to the government on the issue. It also resolved to urge the government to introduce a Rent Limitation Bill ‘at the earliest opportunity’ (DT, 29 December 1912: 6). It was, accordingly, significant that Dacey referred specifically to the development of the housing scheme ‘as a beginning of our policy to build so as to bring rents down to a fair market level’ (DT, 30 December 1912: 13). He also indicated that when the first scheme was completed, the government intended to build more homes elsewhere in the city. His initial statement was probably a hasty one – perhaps to pre-empt the Labor Council delegation – as he initially proposed selling the houses but continuing to lease out the land on which they were built, and building in weatherboard rather than brick because of shortages of bricks and bricklayers at the time. In the face of controversy, he rapidly backtracked on both proposals.

The fact remained that while the Government wanted to ensure that rents would not be high, it was also anxious to ensure that it was not perceived as charging rents at less than market

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15 See, for example, letters to the Daily Telegraph 30 December 1911: 6; 10 January 1912: 7; 12 January 1912: 11.
rates, representing a drain on the taxpayer. It knew the entire project would be controversial, and was anxious to forestall the inevitable attack. In his initial statement, Dacey commented:

I hope to place the estate under the management of a non-political board, so that there shall be no political influence with regard to rents and so on. It will be a strictly business transaction (DT, 30 December 1912: 13).

Disputes over rentals in the Millers Point resumed area were still fresh in memory – indeed, they were the subject of ongoing disputes. Only a few months before, they had been cause for questions in Parliament, the local Member (Mr. Cochrane), referring to ‘the objectionable practice’ of garnisheeing workmen’s wages, and development of ‘a system of espionage’ involving identification of when and where workers were employed. When the then Treasurer, Carmichael, protested there had been some limits on rental arrears, another Labor Member, Mr John McNeil, of the inner-city electorate of Pyrmont, interjected with the case of men who had been tenants for 12 years, and who were now being garnisheed for a debt of only two pounds eight shillings (NSWP, 6 June 1911: 520). With criticism already developing, Dacey remained anxious to point out that the scheme would be a business enterprise, not a philanthropic exercise, and that the Housing Board would operate as a ‘private capitalist’ (DT, 13 February 1912: 11). The Minister for Public Works, A. Griffiths, commented of this:

This is not a question of charity; it is a matter of business, a civic matter, not a matter of Philanthropy. We propose to meet the requirements of the people by providing a healthy, wholesome suburb, and one charging a reasonable rent that will recoup the public for the investment for its money (NSWP, 27 March 1912: 3255).

The consequence of this was that rents were rather high, and beyond the capacity of many working-class people. Thus, in discussions on his Savings Bank Bill, Carmichael instanced the cost of rentals for two-room houses with kitchens, in his electorate of Leichhardt: rents for these had risen from 8/6 to 9/-, and then to 10/- per week (NSWP, 18 July 1911: 1687). The lowest weekly rent at Daceyville was 14/6 for a semi-detached cottage with two bedrooms and combined living room/kitchen, ranging up to 21/- for a house with three large rooms, and separate kitchen and living room. The cost for a unit of housing (including infrastructure) ranged from 500 pounds to 640 pounds (Irvine, 1913: 40). Irvine estimated that rents of the cottages were from 15 to 20 percent cheaper than private rentals for similar housing in less expansive surroundings, and provided a net return of four percent (Irvine, 1913: 40).
In addition to political expediency, Griffiths’ rejection of charity and philanthropy may also have been entirely genuine, and it is consistent with Dacey’s own viewpoint. It may well have embodied a working class horror of being patronised and condescended to. Thus in talking about model villages like Bourneville, Dacey commented

[T]hey deserve every credit for what they have done; but except for their efforts, nearly all enterprises in a similar direction have been tainted with charity. In this free Australia there is no submerged tenth, and I do not want to carry out a scheme which would enable people to put their heads in the air and say ‘That is where the working-classes live. No one is allowed there who has more than a certain income. We do very well for that sort of people.’ Anything of that kind is very repugnant to me and to the party to which I belong (NSWPD, 28 February 1912: 3251).

The language of charity being ‘tainted’ and ‘repugnant’ to Dacey is more than the language of political expediency, but one of a firm rejection of the notion of working class people being patronised by their betters, or of being dependent. It also reflects a view that working class people are entitled to decent housing, and that there is no reason why this cannot be supplied by government. In the face of criticism, Dacey in a press interview clearly aimed at calming troubled waters the day after his announcement somewhat surprisingly played down the notion that the scheme was aimed at working class people at all:

We wish to work upon the same lines as any private capitalist would work,… Personally I don’t care if a man is a millionaire. If he does not own any other house property, he will be as much entitled to one of those houses as anybody else, on the same conditions as anybody else, and I wish to make that clear in order to do away now with any idea of class distinction (DT, 1 January 1912: 9).

Indeed, the interviewer went on to comment:

The Treasurer was also anxious to make clear that he was all against anything that might have a tendency to create slums. It was in order to guard against anything of that sort that he was so vehement in his discouragement of the suggestion that this property would only be available to people of one particular class (DT, 1 January 1912: 9).

Nevertheless, it was unlikely any millionaires would be likely to be tempted by the residential possibilities of a cheap, modest, government housing scheme in the sandhills of Botany.
Quite probably Dacey was being cautious in the face of a looming State election, but there was also a further agenda. Working class housing provision had never previously been on the agenda, at any level of government. Australian housing policy had historically been shaped by market forces, and such government intervention as there had been was limited to building regulation (Troy, 1988: 20-30). Insofar as government housing intervention developed at all in the early – and even later – twentieth century, it was much more along the line of providing assistance and incentives for home ownership, rather than direct or subsidised housing provision. When public concern was directed at the slums in inner Sydney, it was most often along the lines of the health risks they posed – and even then, Sydney was unusually late in getting a Public Health Act, only in 1896 (Coward, 1988: 185). It took the plague scare of 1900 to frighten political leaders out of their complacency.

Once governments began to be concerned about the problems of working-class housing, it then became a question of the level at which responsibility should be accepted. Insofar as government accepted responsibility at all, the argument was whether it should be taken at state or local government level. Until the very end of the period, the prevailing view was that it was a local government responsibility. Accordingly, the State government of 1912 wanted Dacey Gardens to provide an example to municipal governments of how housing schemes could be carried out. The Sydney Corporation (Dwelling Houses) Act 1912 (NSW) had previously been gazetted, and provided some powers for the Sydney City Council to construct public housing. Dacey Gardens was aimed at setting a standard for municipal low-income housing so that, as Dacey said, ‘the people of the whole state will profit by a model which can be advantageously followed’ (NSWPD, 28 February 1912: 3254), and further commented:

We are going to give an example to municipal bodies, and we are going to take a step forward not only in the direction of meeting public requirements, but also in affording an object lesson as to the rentals which would be charged to the poorer classes (NSWPD, 28 February 1912: 3266).

Here, as at other points, Dacey could appear confused: was it specifically an experiment in working class housing, or was it meant for everybody? Was the State Government going to own the land and sell the house, or sell both, or was it going to retain ownership and rent the housing to tenants? If it rented out the housing, did it plan to do so at commercial rates of return, or did it plan to use the scheme and others like it as some form of market control on rents? Did the government itself plan to develop public housing, or did it want Daceyville to be a model for local government to take up? In fact, Dacey had jumped the gun, as he himself rather sheepishly confessed in an interview: not only did substantial expenditure of
the kind he proposed require the approval of a specially-appointed public works committee, but the government could neither sell nor lease houses until legislation had been adopted (DT, 6 January 1912: 13).

It could also be argued that the Dacey Gardens experiment was an early expression of the ‘state socialism’ that influenced the Labor Party in its formative years. Dacey expressed this classically – and indeed, deliberately counterposed it to non-interventionist liberalism – when he said:

> If the railways had not been constructed by the state, the liberals of today would fight tooth and nail against the government having control of them. The necessities of this state compelled the state to construct railways, and it is the necessity of today that forces the Government into building these houses for the people. I am not sure that the time has not arrived when the rack-renting landlord should be pushed aside in favour of the state. If it is a good thing to provide the public with pure water to drink, and that city transit should be in the hands of the community, and not in the hands of the company, surely it cannot be a bad thing to say that the provision of sanitary dwellings should be in the hands of the community also (NSWPD, 28 February 1912: 3254).

In defining housing simply as a service to be provided by the state along with railways and water supply, Dacey may well have provided the first expression in Australian history of public housing as a state responsibility. In addition, he went on to speak of charging something like cost rentals – a debate that resonates down the decades to the present day:

> I am going to call upon the tenants to pay for the services that are rendered to them...Once the houses are erected the capital cost will be ascertained, and the lowest rent possible will be charged (NSWPD, 28 February 1912: 3254).

Three months before the legislation had even been introduced, Dacey announced the scheme during the Christmas-New Year hiatus, when it was certain to attract minimum publicity (with Parliament not sitting, and politicians on their summer holidays, it was also a good time to minimise opposition, a ploy not unknown in current times). Dacey explained that due to the shortage of bricks and brick labourers the cottages were to be of prefabricated timber construction, and that the suburb would accommodate 5,000 people, with the aim of bringing ‘rents down to a fair market price.’ Four hundred acres of church and school land
that had reverted to the Crown had been selected at Kensington, and work on road forming and building was to start immediately \((DT, 30 December 1911: 13)\). The estimated cost of the scheme was 500 000 pounds, which was expected to cover the cost of constructing 500 homes, site works and buildings \((SMH, 8 February 1912: 8)\). The cost drew criticism from the press because public works projects costing more than 20,000 pounds needed approval from a Public Works Committee. Dacey wanted to avoid this possible delay – which would also have given time for the Opposition to mount an attack on the proposal – by carrying out initial site works up to a value of 18,000 pounds, and effectively presenting the Opposition with a fait accompli.

Figure 2.8 A substantial portion of a page was dedicated to illustrating and explaining the proposed Daceyville scheme \((DT, 1 February 1912: 11)\).
The announcement received support from leading unions, but was attacked by real estate agents and the Master Builders’ Association, who saw it as an attack against the private landlord and private builder (DT, 1 January 1912: 9; 9 February 1912: 9; SMH, 9 February 1912: 8). The press obliged by providing substantial coverage, including articles on public housing initiatives in New Zealand and in other states (DT, 4 January 1912: 11), illustrations of how Dacey Gardens was expected to look, and plans for the suburb (DT, 4 January 1912: 11; 1 February 1912: 11; SMH, 8 February 1912: 8). Within days, Dacey had received what he called:

[S]hoals of commendatory communications from all quarters, and a few of a censuring nature from land agents and others, who fancy that their interests may be placed in jeopardy by the action of the Government (DT, 4 January 1912: 11).

He also noted that he had received numerous enquiries about applying for the housing, one of which read:

I beg to enter my application for tenancy of one of the cottages proposed for erection at Kensington, as mentioned in ‘The Daily Telegraph’ of last Saturday. I am willing to pay up to 15/- for a four-roomed cottage with kitchen and bathroom. My experience has been a particularly unpleasant one with landlords (DT, 4 January 1912: 11).

2.4. THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE

Dacey tabled the Housing Bill on 23 February 1912, but it had a rough passage through Parliament. Indeed, unusually the Opposition chose to oppose introduction of the Bill before it even got to the first reading, and put the Government on notice that it would moved to amend the Bill not only to allow people to choose freehold over leasehold tenure, but also to allow leaseholders to convert leasehold into freehold later (NSWPD, 23 February 1912: 3079). It was fiercely contested throughout the debate, and at one stage, a Labor Member was forcibly ejected from the Chamber by the Sergeant-at-Arms. This occurred when Mr Cochrane, the Member for Darling Harbour persistently tried to use the debate to draw attention to the plight of some of his constituents, with the Sydney Harbour Trust about to increase rents on its properties at Millers Point, from 20 shillings a week to 24 shillings (NSWPD, 29 February 1912: 3272).

Opposition to the legislation was led by the Opposition leader, Charles Wade, who argued essentially that housing should be left to market forces – the housing shortage and associated conditions were a simple case of demand being in excess of the supply of housing (NSWPD, 23 February 1912: 3079). He said any solution to the shortage of housing would need to
come from an equalisation of the market by supplying the necessary labour, through immigration. It was left unstated that this would also have the effect of driving down the price of labour. Wade said the scheme was ‘a mere drop in the ocean,’ and would be totally ineffectual in resolving the housing problems of the working classes, and branded the scheme ‘Audaciousville’ (NSWPD, 23 February 1912: 3079).

Figure 2.9 Dacey, depicted atop a biplane on which is written “WORKMAN’S BUILDING SCHEME” (DT, 6 January 1912: 14).
Wade reserved his most withering scorn for the rental proposition for residents of Daceyville. He cited the previous failure of housing at Crickville (or Lilyville) as proof that the Government should not involve itself in housing provision (NSWPD, 23 February 1912: 3080). The community desired freehold title, and a rental scheme would fail:

This insane idea of Labor that leasehold is a godsend and salvation of the country. You must face the inevitable danger from freehold competition. Under those conditions this scheme is doomed (NSWPD, 23 February 1912: 3081).

Other elements of the Opposition attack included that the project was too large an undertaking for the Government to manage efficiently; the proposed Housing Board would be open to political interference; and the construction of the suburb would create a drain on labour and building materials in Sydney, therefore further increasing the cost of home construction (NSWPD, 28 February 1912: 3249). To the last point, Dacey replied that the Government would import labour from England, and a recent upgrading of the State Brickworks would supply the required quantity of bricks (NSWPD, 23 February 1912: 3264).

In a clever reversal of the standard argument that had on other occasions been used by both sides, the Opposition questioned the use of the site selected at Kensington, rather than an inner-city location. If the Government was intent on providing working class homes, let it ‘build them where they are most likely to be filled by the people for whom they were catering’ (NSWPD, 23 February 1912: 3084). Previously, both sides had argued that the inner-city slums should be pulled down and the working class should be encouraged to move to the suburbs. But now Mr. W.H. Wood, Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party and the Member for Bega, argued:

My knowledge of human nature leads me to believe that the question of locality weighs more with most people than the class of house. I know no persons who are more governed by that consideration than the working-classes. It is a question of great importance to them – to live close to where they work... For instance, a waterside worker would not give much consideration to the representation that he would be much better off living in a model suburb 3 miles from his work (NSWPD, 23 February 1912: 3083).

The reference to waterside workers is a clear reference to the controversy that had surrounded the provision of working class housing at Millers Point.

There was also opposition to the estimated half-million-pound cost of the Kensington scheme. The Opposition argued that the government did not have ‘the right to use the money of the people to carry out any project which will benefit a mere handful of the population’ (NSWPD, 23 February 1912: 3085). The money could be better spent on
schools, railways and assisted immigration (NSWPD, 28 February 1912: 3268). But underlying all of this was the Opposition’s hostility to government intervention in the provision of housing at all. Far from Dacey Gardens being simply a means of resolving the housing problem; it was ‘a form of socialism to which the people have not given their sanction’ (NSWPD, 9 October 1913: 2499), and the Opposition would not have a bar of it:

It is bad in principle for the Government to thrust itself into business undertakings which the general public of the state are quite competent to carry on for themselves (NSWPD, 23 February 1912: 3087).

And:

[It] is only giving the Government authority for carrying out state socialism to a wider extent than ever (NSWPD, 23 February 1912: 3262).

The Opposition sought three major amendments to the Housing Bill. The legislation had originally proposed to vest the land at Kensington in the hands of Sydney City Council. Probably the reason for this was the fact that both the City Council and the Railway Commissioners had not long before resumed some of the city’s most notorious ‘slum’ housing in the area between Liverpool Street and the markets to widen Liverpool Street and construct Central Railway. Effectively, the displaced residents had nowhere to go, and the City Council at this stage still had no power to construct council housing. The Opposition moved to keep the land within the control of Mascot Municipal Council, no doubt to stir up mischief knowing that the Labor Member for Botany was opposed to the transfer, in a parliament where only one vote separated the Government from the Opposition.16

The second amendment called for provision to be made in the Housing Bill allowing land and dwellings to be sold freehold (NSWPD, 23 February 1912: 3088). Practically, this would not stop the Labor Party leasing the dwellings, but it reflected a statement of principle of the Opposition, and would make it that much easier to divest itself of the housing when it next came into office. The third amendment was to refer the scheme to a Parliamentary Select Committee on Public Works in accordance with the Public Works Act 1900 (NSW). The government had included a clause in the legislation aimed at avoiding this delay (NSWPD, 23 February 1912: 3270).

The Government accepted the first two amendments in the Lower House, and the Opposition had the third inserted into the legislation in the Upper House, where it had the

16 See for example, NSWPD, vol. 44, 23 February 1912: 3088, where the Member in question, Mr Page, sought to move an amendment along these lines even before the Bill reached the committee stage, only to be chided by Dacey. See also discussion in (Freudenberg, 1997: 92).
numbers. This last amendment made 75,000 pounds available for construction work to begin, with the rest being withheld pending the recommendations of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works.

The Housing Bill experienced a minor delay as the Speaker of the Lower House deemed the Legislative Council’s amendment unconstitutional on the ground that the Bill was a Bill of Supply, which could not be refused or amended in the Upper House (DT, 22 March 1912: 9). The Government simply withdrew the Housing Bill and resubmitted it with the amendments as a new Bill on 27 March 1912. It passed through all stages of Parliament and was gazetted on 24 April 1912, just under a fortnight after Dacey’s death.

The Housing Act 1912 (NSW) became the statutory document enabling the construction of housing on selected sites within the state – the Kensington scheme was intended to be the first of many similar projects around the state. The Act provided for the establishment of the Housing Board as the constructing authority. The Board was to consist of three members serving a maximum of five years in office, although they could be reappointed after their first term. The Board, with the approval of the Treasurer, had wide-ranging responsibilities to make plans on land either purchased or resumed by the Treasurer, and to carry out the necessary work to implement the plan. The Act also gave the Board legal authority to lease or let land and buildings to those who satisfied specific conditions to qualify for rental accommodation.

Section 6 of the Act permitted the sale of land or buildings to eligible applicants, and the remaining sections dealt with the financial structure of the Board, including the assessment of rents (section 5) and the payment of statutory charges. The Board could be removed only by resolution of both Houses of Parliament. The Act remained the basis for the operations of the Housing Commission and the Department of Housing until new legislation was passed in the 1990s.

The first Housing Board was selected by State Cabinet on 9 April 1912, two weeks before the Housing Act was gazetted. The first Housing Board comprised J.D. Fitzgerald (chairman), T.H. Nesbitt and J.W. Holliman. At the time of his appointment Fitzgerald was an executive
member of the State Labor Party, though he had previously been a Labor Member of Parliament and would be again, before finally being expelled from the party (for the second time) following the conscription crisis in 1916. He was also one of the founding leaders of the Town Planning Association, and was well known as an advocate for town planning, for a greater Sydney, and for working class housing provision. He would later be president of the first Australian Town Planning Conference and Exhibition in Adelaide in 1917, and he was also to become Minister for Local Government and to carry through the *Local Government Act 1919* (NSW) that would substantively operate in NSW until the early 1990s. Nesbitt was the Town Clerk of the City of Sydney, where he had had considerable experience of slum demolition. Holliman was the Under Secretary for Finance.

In accordance with the amendments made to the *Housing Act 1912* (NSW), a Parliamentary Standing Committee was established under the *Public Works Act 1900* (NSW) to report on ‘the expediency of the laying out an area of land and erecting thereon certain dwelling houses under the *Housing Act*.’ The Committee sat from 4 November 1912 to 24 February 1913, and inquired into matters large and small, ranging from the financial viability of the scheme to minor design details such as the elimination of front fences in the Daceyville plans. Its findings and recommendations were presented to the Legislative Council on 19 June 1913. The Committee concluded that the scheme was of an ‘experimental nature,’ and ‘deemed it desirable to limit the expenditure to an amount which, in their opinion, will be sufficient to test the efficiency of the scheme from every point of view’ (*Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works*, 1913: viii).

By a majority of one, the seven-member committee recommended supply not of 500,000 pounds for the project, but only 150,000 pounds. The Housing Board could continue work on the scheme until this amount was exhausted, but would have to go back to Parliament for any further funding.

The Committee’s recommendations were discussed in Parliament during debate on the Daceyville (Extension) Bill in October 1913. The Bill was aimed at making the recommended 150,000 pounds available to the Housing Board. Opposition was fuelled by the cost difficulties already being experienced by the Board. The Opposition argued that the scheme had already shown itself to be a financial and administrative failure (*NSWPD*, 9 October 1913: 2490-94) and that the rents being charged were too expensive (*NSWPD*, 9 October 1913: 2502). This latter was assuredly true, and indicates the difficulty of both housing low-income earners and providing affordable housing at market rent levels. In the
face of fierce opposition, the *Daceyville (Extension) Act 1914* (NSW) was passed in April 1914, and the construction of Daceyville continued until 1919, when it again became the subject of hot controversy.

### 2.5. The Building of Dacey Gardens

Work began on Daceyville in 1912 and the last dwelling was completed in 1920. During that time a total of 315 dwellings, six shops, a baby clinic, a picture theatre and a police station were built. The only new construction after 1920 was a public school. The construction program was limited by the funds voted by Parliament, which permitted construction to begin on 6 June 1912 (although site works had begun at Dacey’s direction even before the appointment of the Housing Board the previous April). The initial grant of 75,000 pounds was rapidly depleted, due to expensive site works (Housing Board, 1913: 2). By that December, an average of two dwellings was being completed each week (*DT*, 16 December 1912: 8), although this momentum was not maintained for long. The further vote of 150,000 pounds, as recommended by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, was made available in April 1913. This covered construction costs until 1919. While additional funds were provided to the Housing Board in that year, none was directly allocated to Dacey Gardens, as the government had changed, and was pursuing a different housing policy.

There were three successive plans for Daceyville. The first sketch plan for the project was drawn up by J.D. Fitzgerald, while W.H. Foggitt, Assistant Principal Architect of the Public Works Department, and later State Architect and Architect to the Housing Board, drew up plans for the first batch of houses (Briggs, 1972: 18). The sketch plans were approved by Cabinet in January 1912 – even before the legislation had been passed. Meantime, Sulman and Hennessy were commissioned to report on the plans, and to work with Fitzgerald in preparation of detailed drawings.

The first plan devoted 244 acres to housing, 69 acres to parks and recreation reserves and 130 acres reserved for roads and public buildings (*SMH*, 21 January 1912: 17). Ambitiously, it included provision for 40 shops, three schools, a technical college, four churches, two amusement halls, a post office and a fire station. On the basis of an English garden city standard of seven dwelling houses per acre for households averaging six persons, the site would house around 10,000 people (Briggs, 1972: 20). The plan emphasised the provision of community facilities, most of which forming a civic group around a formal park at the centre of the site.
By August 1912, Sulman and Hennessy had completed their report and drawn up a revised plan, which the Minister approved. Of the Sulman and Hennessy plan, Keg comments:

By modern standards, the plan has many shortcomings. Even so, the Suburb provides a valuable example of the physical/deterministic and a somewhat patriarchal attitude towards planning and housing at the time. Both Sulman and Hennessy were convinced that the improvement to the physical environment would lead to social improvement, as both concurrently stated, ‘the garden suburb is the great lever of social reform’ (Keg, 1988: 10).

The second plan more closely followed the topography in line with Sulman’s principles (Sulman, 1921: 17). It was designed on an axial principle centred on a school of arts flanked by a 32-acre park surrounded by other public buildings. The axial outline of the plan had, indeed, some similarities to a ‘ward and centre’ diagram in Howard’s book (Howard, 1965/1902: 53). The plan included a number of other smaller parks located on areas of natural dominance or in low-lying swampland.

Sulman also suggested hostels for single men and women, to prevent overcrowding created by people taking in lodgers, based on the model of ‘the Powton hostels for men, and others for women, in London, [offer good examples to follow, and appear successful in solving the problem of decent living conditions for the poorest paid single workers’ (Sulman, 1921: 197). Perhaps he did not take sufficient account of the fact that in the crowded ‘slums’ of Sydney, the motivation for taking on lodgers was often an economic one: it made rents affordable, and this could be an issue if low-income working-class families were to move to Daceyville.

Foggitt drafted the final plan in 1915, which included curved roads (not favoured by Sulman, but possibly influenced by Walter Burley Griffin and his visionary plans for Canberra, much more in the news at the time than anything occurring in the sandy wasteland of Kensington). He also introduced reputedly the first cul de sac of its kind in Australia, in Col. Braund Crescent (Freestone, 1987: 57).
It was originally intended that all the cottages built at Daceyville would be detached, but due to their high cost, semi-detached houses were initially constructed. Dacey himself had stipulated that the houses should have large verandahs, which could double as ‘open air beds,’ commenting that ‘the sleep-out habit is more than a passing fad’ (DT, 3 January 1912: 11). Indeed, the *Daily Telegraph* ran an article on Australian houses at the same time Dacey made his initial announcement, in which Australian and English houses were compared. The article noted that in the Australian climate there was less need for fireplaces and more need for broader verandahs on which people could do ‘more sitting out and sleeping out’ (DT, 3 January 1912: 11). On this, he was correct. In 1938, the next public housing experiment, at Erskineville, was planned with balconies that could be used as ‘sleep-outs.’
Three cottage plans were initially drawn up by Foggitt to commence dwelling construction at Daceyville. These plans were to be supplemented by other designs supplied by an architectural competition held by the Board in October 1912 (Housing Board, 1913: 2). The brief was to design a cottage that would cost between 300 and 475 pounds and provided a minimum of living room, kitchen, two bedrooms, laundry, pantry or storeroom, and two verandahs. There were three design categories: detached, semi-detached and grouped (duplex) (Building and Real Estate Magazine, 12 November 1912: 48). Keg comments that the use of the grouped homes may have been modelled on similar housing at Hampstead and Letchworth, and goes on to say:

The cottages built at Dacey Gardens have a distinctive character which has been described as a convergence of styles, combining the ‘the Californian bungalow style with that of the English cottage... in a late federation theme.’ Professor R. Irvine noted that the dwellings were ‘squat in appearance.’ The architectural fabric of the dwellings is individual and few, if any, comparable examples exist outside the Estate (Keg, 1988: 121).

Keg also notes that the interior features of the dwellings attracted praise from *The Women’s Weekly*, as including convenient features for the housewife:

Electric lighting, gas for cooking, deep wide shelves in linen press and pantry, lawns in front, and rooms for vegetable gardens at the back... - dozens of minor conveniences which have required thought, and will mean pleasure to the occupants of the cottages – such as concrete skirting boards, which will not harbour dust or insects, rounded corners, easily brushed clean, reinforced concrete tubs, which will never crack or rust (*Women’s Weekly*, 30 August 1913: 6).

Perhaps here we are discussing ideal homes, but perhaps also behind the sunny picture there lurks more than a hint of physical determinism – that is to say, unless you put in suitable
safeguards like concrete skirting boards which will not harbour dust or insects, the slovenly wives of the slums may lack the necessary skills or interest to keep clean homes. A quarter-century later rounded concrete skirting boards were once again installed to public fanfare in the Erskineville public housing flats for the same reason and informed by the same philosophy.

The development of Dacey Gardens was also stunted by the ever-increasing cost of building materials. Throughout its brief history, the scheme was threatened by problems with building materials and labour, both in terms of cost and reliability of supply, and those opposed to it were only too willing to use these as proof of its inefficiency and the incompetence of its management. Even before work began, Dacey attempted to secure labour from the Bricklayers Union (DT, 25 March 1913: 10), and was to import labour from England.

It had originally been proposed in 1911 to build the cottages of timber construction owing to a shortage of bricks (DT, 30 December 1911: 13). This suffered widespread criticism, including from the Fire Brigade on account of fear of fire (DT, 1 January 1912: 9). It was estimated that when it was under way the project would need 100,000 bricks per week (NSWPD, 28 February 1912: 3260). The State Brickworks at Homebush was expected to supply the bricks, with more bricks becoming available when upgrading of the Botany Brickworks was completed (DT, 9 February 1912: 9). The dwellings were built on rubble or freestone foundations, with brick, local hardwood and imported pine being the primary building materials. The roofs were originally to be constructed of slate, but cost factors stopped this, and terracotta and cement tile roofs. Were eventually used (Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, 1913: 12).

Rents were calculated on the basis of construction costs of the dwellings — effectively, an economic rent. Accordingly, it was crucial to keep costs down, and it was here that the problems began. In accordance with the Housing Act 1912 (NSW), rentals were assessed as a percentage, usually four to five per cent of the capital cost, including kerbing, turfing, sewer connection, drainage, guttering and asphalt footpaths (Parliamentary Standing Committee of Public Works, 1913: 12). That is, among other things, rents were assessed on infrastructure costs, an element which is not always calculated into development costs even today.

As Daceyville was not to be subsidised in any way, while at the same time rents had to be affordable for working class people, there was intense pressure on the Housing Board to contain costs. However, the Board was forced to report major cost blow-outs, with increased labour and material costs bringing dwelling costs in at 45 pounds over the estimate. If anything, the experience should have established that cheap housing required government
subsidy, but instead, Dacey Gardens became a whipping post for accusations of government incompetence and corruption.

In the quest for cheaper materials, the Housing Board experimented with a range of materials. For example, in 1914 it explored the use of concrete blocks called Samsonite bricks (Housing Board, 1914: 2). The concrete bricks were made of six parts ash to one part cement, and measured 18 inch by 10 inch by 3 inch. The Samsonite bricks were first used in 1915, and soon became widespread in Daceyville, realising cost savings of up to 25 pounds per dwelling (NSWPD, 15 March 1916: 5343).

Inevitably, World War I created severe shortages of both building materials and labour, putting further pressure on costs. Galvanised iron roofs were introduced in 1915, and dwellings were planned on a simpler, smaller, more austere basis than previously. All of these cost-cutting measures resulted in a considerable saving: in 1912/13, construction costs ranged from 505 to 640 pounds per dwelling, compared with 350 to 388 pounds per dwelling in 1917/18 (Housing Board, 1918: 1).

2.6 THE TENANTS OF DACEY GARDENS

The first tenants of Dacey Gardens were selected from a ballot of over 500 applicants, each of whose eligibility for the housing had to be assessed (Housing Board, 1913: 3). People who already owned land or housing were ineligible. Incapacity to pay would also have ruled out some applicants. Dacey Gardens was not a subsidised housing scheme, so rentals had to cover costs, in accordance with the scheme’s aims and the Board’s intention to operate on ‘a perfectly sound business like basis, and without the general tax payer being called upon to make good any loss on account of the same’ (Housing Board, 1916: 6).

Rents were assessed to cover:
- Interest at not less than 4% per annum on capital value of land and buildings;
- Cost of insurance, rates, taxes, repairs and maintenance;
- Proportionate part of expense of management, payable out of the Housing Fund;
- Sinking funds in respect of capital cost of the buildings

(Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, 1913).

In 1912/1913, the rentals ranged from 14/6 to 21 shillings per week. By 1916/1917, reduced building costs produced reduced rents from 12/6 to 20 shillings per week (Housing Board, 1917: 1). Rentals varied in accordance with the size and cost of construction. Keg notes that the Board experienced problems with rental arrears after World War I – major industrial trouble combined with loss of work due to the influenza epidemic saw rent arrears total 253 pounds for 1918/1919 (Housing Board, 1922: 3). This high level of arrears continued until abolition of the Board in the 1920s.

This raised in acute form the question of affordability for working-class people. Indeed, the Opposition argued that Daceyville was a middle-class suburb (NSWPD, 9 October 1913: 2507). The Board sought to counter this by listing the occupations of the existing tenants in its 1913 Annual Report, and at times used the waiting list for Daceyville as an indicator of the scheme’s popularity (Housing Board, 1913: 3; Housing Board, 1918: 1). In 1917, there were 240 applicants on the waiting list, and by 1919 it had almost doubled to 400, and had doubled again to 821 applicants by 1922 (Housing Board, 1917: 1; Housing Board, 1922: 4). It is hard to know, however, how much these figures were influenced by returning troops from World War I, and by the postwar housing shortage. In addition, the waiting list grew because preference was given in 1916 to the housing of war widows and incapacitated soldiers at the request of the Department of Lands, and 50 houses were set aside for this purpose (Housing Board, 1917: 2). This allocations policy continued after the war.

2.7 Community Life

The Housing Board set out to replicate ‘features of garden suburbs in the old world,’ by encouraging community involvement and the need for some community facilities such as a co-operative shop and vegetable gardens. It even sought to arrange activities for children such as pageants and story telling, ‘a feature of certain American cities which can with advantage be copied in the Dacey Gardens suburb’ (Housing Board, 1915: 2). The Board chairman, Fitzgerald, was a strong advocate of ‘community spirit’ as well as of housing for the workers, and had visited a number of model villages on trips to Europe and the United
States (Housing Board, 1914: 2). An annual Garden Suburb Day was instituted at Daceyville
and, at the second of these, Fitzgerald:

...exhorted them [residents] to cultivate a true communal spirit of friendliness, neighbourliness, mutual assistance, and mutual advice, but, above all, to do nothing that would interfere with the comfort of their neighbours, or that might act to the detriment of the settlement (DT, 5 January 1914: 9).

In addition to the landscaping of the streets, the maintenance of private gardens was also a key element of the appearance of a garden suburb, and also as an expression of the ‘community spirit’ the Board wanted to foster. Indeed, not only did the Board seek to foster this, it formally required the tenants to look after their gardens by the inclusion of a special condition in the tenancy agreement requiring tenants to ‘keep the garden in good order to the satisfaction of the Board’ (Housing Board, 1913: 6). The Board’s annual report for the following year emphasised that this clause was to be ‘adhered to’ (Housing Board, 1914: 2). Given the light, sandy soil of the area, this was more easily said than done, and when water costs began mounting up, some residents simply stopped watering their gardens. Commenting that ‘gardens and lawns must be kept well watered if the garden character of the suburb is to be maintained,’ the Board itself paid the excess water rates to ensure the upkeep of the gardens (Housing Board, 1917: 2).

The Board had to go to considerable lengths to get residents to maintain their gardens to its satisfaction. In 1915, it instituted an annual gardening competition, with a prize of two pounds for the best garden in each street (Housing Board, 1915: 2). In 1917, it provided six lawn mowers for lending to tenants to keep their lawns well trimmed, and when this predictably did not work too well, it made special purchase arrangements to buy lawn mowers for tenants at special rates. At the same time a branch of the Horticultural Society of New South Wales was formed at Daceyville to assist the Board’s stated aim to ‘gardenise the suburb’ (Housing Board, 1918: 2). The Board saw well-kept gardens not only as being in keeping with the principles of garden suburbs, but as visible proof of the scheme’s success. Similarly, the Board also attempted to develop cooperative ‘working bees’ to maintain the grass footpaths and public garden plots. The landscaping of streets and public areas was carried out with the advice of the Director of the Botanic Gardens, J.H. Maiden, and street planting began in 1913 (Housing Board, 1914: 2).

In addition, and as part of the aim of encouraging community spirit, a Progress Association was established in August 1915, and soon it had set up a co-operative store in Gardeners Road, just outside the site (Housing Board, 1916: 2). Also in 1916 a storytelling event was
held for the children of Daceyville, with Mrs. Holman – wife of the then Premier – reading fairy stories and distributing lollipops in accord with the Board's policy of 'developing the social side of the village plan.' The Labor Party – now in opposition, following the conscription split – found this 'a bit rich,' and branded it as 'overtly paternalistic' (*NSWPD*, 3 April 1916: 5987).

Keg notes that the extensive list of community facilities originally proposed were never built (Keg, 1988: 139). The only public buildings erected were a public school, baby health centre, picture theatre and police station. A site of five acres for a temporary school was allocated and a temporary infants’ school erected, and it was also used for local meetings and the storytelling activities. It was to be another nine years before the permanent public school opened on a new site at an estimated cost of 14,000 pounds (*Housing Board*, 1921: 1). Before that, however, the Board built a picture theatre in 1916 at a cost of 2,929 pounds, and this also doubled as a community hall, exhibition space and briefly as a temporary baby clinic (*Housing Board*, 1918: 2). Inevitably, the Opposition criticised construction of the theatre before a permanent school (*NSWPD*, 11 April 1916: 6466). A permanent baby clinic was erected in 1918, consisting of a small lecture hall, live-in nurses’ quarters and clinic (*Housing Board*, 1919: 2). The police station was built in 1920, and a Catholic Church in 1921 (on land purchased by the church) and an associated school soon after (*Housing Board*, 1921: 1).

### 2.8 FRIENDS AND FOES

Inevitably, the Dacey Gardens project attracted lively debate and controversy. It was locked firmly into an ongoing ideological division between the state socialism of the Labor party, with its emphasis on government ownership of social and business enterprises, and the prevailing liberal ideology, which both minimised the role of government and emphasised the importance of individual self-reliance.

One of the scheme’s persistent critics was the real estate developer, Richard Stanton. A few years earlier Stanton had developed Sydney’s first garden suburb, Haberfield, and this was...
very much a scheme for middle-class home purchasers. Stanton had gained considerable kudos – as well as profits – for Haberfield, and he was also one of the founders of the Town Planning Association of NSW. Stanton argued that Daceyville was a financial disaster, claiming that ‘private enterprise could, and does, carry out the same schemes with better results’ (Stanton, 1914: 157-160). His opinion was possibly even more jaundiced by an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* a few weeks previously, praising the virtues of Dacey Gardens by comparison with his nearby Rosebery Estate (*SMH*, 12 December 1913: 8).

Stanton’s friend, fellow-founder of the Town Planning Association and editor of Building magazine, George A. Taylor, agreed. Taylor was firmly wedded to liberal views of non-intervention by government and individual self-reliance and enterprise. Later he gave grudging support to the scheme, but opposed provision of rental properties only – the government had ‘erred in not giving tenants the opportunity to be their own landlords’ (Taylor, 1918: 113) – and reiterated the point at the first Australian Town Planning Conference held in Adelaide in 1917 (Taylor, 1917: 145).

Criticism also centred on the semi-detached cottages that were included in the plans for Daceyville. Anything other than detached cottages had already come under fire in controversy over plans for workers’ flats in Millers Point, and now even semi-detached cottages were attacked: one critic argued it was a grave error for economic considerations to outweigh the aesthetic and lifestyle opportunities offered by fully detached cottages Goldie (Goldie, 1913: 163). Stanton, too, used this argument against the Dacey Gardens scheme (Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, 1912: 27).

If the scheme had its detractors, it also had its supporters. Both the conservative *Sydney Morning Herald* and the rather less conservative *Daily Telegraph* ran articles generally supportive of the scheme when it was first announced, although this varied over time. The NSW Institute of Architects’ *Salon* magazine praised Daceyville in an article on garden cities generally, commenting ‘[w]e require, like the Mother Country, a Garden City Bill to enforce private enterprise to lay out suburbs on Garden City plans (Anonymous, 1913: 113). Florence Taylor, Australia’s first qualified female architect, whose ideology was similar to that of her husband George, was able to see some benefit in the Daceyville scheme:

> In Daceyville, the moral effect of living under conditions of control that insist on clean streets, tidy homes, nice private gardens and lawns, engenders clean home life. All these cannot fail to be other than uplifting to the human mind and body (Taylor, 1915: 93).
It was a flawless expression of the physical determinism that would echo through the years in both her own writing and that of her husband, and that of many others as well.

2.9 CONCLUSION

In the postwar years, the scheme fell foul of an ideological battle between those favouring State intervention, and those strongly opposed to it. Several conservative politicians began stirring the pot, sensing an election issue, and before long scandalous stories began appearing in the press about corruption, theft of materials, and the construction of dubious and inadequate foundations in the sandhills beyond Kensington. A Royal Commission was appointed by the Nationalist Government, but was unable to uncover evidence of criminal conspiracy or corruption sufficient to lay any charges – and such construction inadequacies as there were could be as much due to inadequate provision of resources in the first place as to criminal conspiracy to siphon off resources and materials.

Nevertheless, it was sufficient for the Government to wind down the scheme and to turn it into a home purchase project – thus ensuring working-class people had little opportunity to participate – rather than one for rental. The Housing Minister of the time, J.C.L. Fitzpatrick, made it entirely clear from the moment of his appointment that he regarded it as his task to work himself out of any housing portfolio. Accordingly, only 315 houses of the planned suburb were built before the entire construction project was shut down in 1924.

Figure 2.18 An unnamed street in Daceyville circa 1913 (State Library of NSW & NSW GPO, 2002e).
3. ERSKINEVILLE

3.1. INTRODUCTION: A REVIEW OF HOUSING ISSUES IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

When politicians and social reformers of the early twentieth-century looked at all at any models of State-provided housing, it was to ‘the Mother Country’ – as in so many other things – that they looked for inspiration. It was at this very time that local authority housing was beginning its meteoric development in Britain, with well over a million units of public housing being constructed by local authorities between the wars. Accordingly, on the infrequent occasions when scholars like F.R. Irvine, foundation Economics Professor at Sydney University in 1911, or politicians like Bertram Stevens in 1936 undertook overseas study tours, they returned to Australia imbued with the gospel of local government as the appropriate body to undertake any governmental experiment in housing for low-income people (Irvine, 1913: 7-14; Stevens, 1937-1938: 7-14). From the reports, there seems to have been little reflection on the considerable differences between local governments in the two societies.

Thus, in Britain, local government played a far more central role in life. It had its roots deep within the shires and boroughs: so deep, indeed, that it could challenge the authority of the Crown. Thus, one of the consistent threads of English history has been one of relations between city and country, Crown and the provinces, gentry and aristocracy. In Britain, local government had authority, power and resources. Not so in Australia. While a form of democratic self-government came earlier here than in Britain, local government never figured very much in that equation. It did not gain so much as a passing reference in the Constitution that was adopted with such fanfare in 1901. It was no more than the bastard offspring of the colonial and then State Governments – and often enough an offspring the State Governments preferred to cast off or undernourish, as in the repeated battles for distribution of resources and powers between the Sydney City Council and the State Government.

By the late 1930s, Sydney was a patchwork of 40 local councils, including such small areas as Erskineville, Redfern, Newtown and Alexandria. Unsurprisingly, the Sydney City Council
was the only council that could consider the issue of public housing seriously, although in the late 1930s the Ryde Municipal Council also instituted a housing project. The latter was quite probably as a result of the wish to attract people to the bush of an outer suburb, but awaits further research.

For its part, the Sydney City Council was particularly concerned with the redevelopment of Chippendale. Indeed, it had ordered the demolition of so many properties, and the cry was beginning to develop of how were these displaced people to be housed, that it initiated its own experiment in publicly provided housing. As a result, the Strickland Flats were first constructed in Chippendale in 1914, to be followed soon after by flats in Ways Terrace in Pyrmont. These were model projects of their kind, but did not escape the opprobrium regularly attached to flats and tenement development.
Meanwhile, another tier of government – the Commonwealth – began to take an interest in housing. Before the end of World War I, the Commonwealth had used its defence powers to erect homes for munitions workers at Lithgow in 1918. With the return of the troops after World War I, there was a strong emphasis on ensuring that they had adequate access to affordable housing: They should have ‘homes fit for heroes.’ In this lay the genesis of housing schemes for returned soldiers. The War Services Homes Act (Commonwealth) 1918 established the War Service Homes Commission to provide low interest loans for brick cottages for eligible returned servicemen. The Commission concluded agreements with Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania to advance funds to State banking institutions for onlending to ex-servicemen. In its first 11 years, the Commission assisted in the construction or purchase of 37,000 homes, before it ceased operations in 1931 because of the difficult financial position of the Commonwealth and also on the rationale that the supply of homes was in excess of demand. This last probably masked the fact that because of the Depression, ex-servicemen were thrown out of work and could not either keep up loan repayments or, for that matter, enter the housing market in the first place.

Then, as now, the question of how to ensure the private rental market was responsive to demand, that it would be a viable option for low-income people, and that it would offer a reasonable degree of affordability and security, was a vexed one. New landlord and tenant legislation had been
enacted in 1899 (*Landlord and Tenant Act* 1899, NSW), which at least ensured that contested evictions would have to go to court; other than that, it offered little to either party, but especially not to tenants. Other than legislation, governments could think of no way of addressing private rental housing, as they were fearful of upsetting market relations. And when legislation was proposed, it inevitably ran aground on the rock of landlord opposition. This was pre-eminently the case in the recurring debates over rent control, in which the property lobby invariably argued that any legislative change would inevitably result in a flight of capital and in a bad situation being rendered much worse by the drying up of the supply of rental housing stock. There was an element of truth in this, as the majority of landlords were small-scale landlords often running a marginal operation. This was one of the problems with the eviction battles of the Depression era: in terms of liquid assets, landlords could be in nearly as parlous a plight as their unemployed tenants.

Widespread poverty and unemployment led to large-scale defaulting on rental payments and consequent evictions. Combined with the lack of any adequate system of social security and an increased level of militancy by the dispossessed, this led to a backlash that expressed itself in marches of the unemployed and in resistance to eviction led by groups like the Unemployed Workers’ Movement. Resistance culminated in pitched battles at the scene of evictions in Bankstown, Newtown and Tighes Hill in Newcastle.

The scale of poverty led some church and charitable agencies to seek to develop a range of housing alternatives for unemployed men and their families. This could range from soup kitchens and hostels to an adventurous experiment in sweat equity with the construction of

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17 Compare this with the points made in relation to Daceyville in the previous chapter.
the eponymous Hammondville on the outskirts of Sydney, under the leadership of charity figures like Anglican Archdeacon R.B.S. Hammond.18

At the same time, a new generation of town planning experts, church and charity workers, and trade union leaders agitated to clear the slums. Consequently, this became a political issue, which resulted in moderate legislative amendment while Lang remained Premier in 1932. Yet Lang’s legislation did little to solve the problem of inadequate housing for working class people. In addition, little was done to clear the slums or to provide alternative housing, with the exception of half-baked schemes like the Homes for the Unemployed Trust to provide workers with small amounts of finance or with basic materials for primitive housing construction.

All of this achieved little, and indeed, it could be argued that the only serious contribution to the problem was undertaken by working class people themselves, with the development of a range of makeshift alternatives by dispossessed and unemployed workers and their families. Solutions ranged from camping on the Domain and living in caves around the headlands, to the development of so-called ‘happy valleys’ on the metropolitan outskirts. But the combined – and sometimes decidedly disparate – activities of church and charity agencies, town planning enthusiasts, the press and frustrated working class people and the labour movement led to renewed pressure for slum clearance during the era of the conservative Nationalist Government that replaced the sacked Lang Government in 1932.

18 Sweat equity refers to the process through which people accrue equity, in this instance in housing stock, through their work in maintaining or improving it.
3.2 THE HOUSING IMPROVEMENT BOARD AND ERSKINEVILLE

In 1936, Premier B.S.B. Stevens took the time-hallowed path of undertaking an overseas study tour to discern how overseas communities resolved the problem. His visit to England – which was in the throes of massive public housing development via local authorities – persuaded him that this should be the preferred option for New South Wales. It had the added charm that he could shift the responsibility and the political obloquy from the State to local government. The difficulty, however, was that on one hand local authorities in New South Wales differed vastly from their English counterparts both in terms of scale and resources, and of constitutional recognition; and on the other hand; the areas most affected by the slum problem were inevitably – apart from the City Council itself – in the poorest and most resource-strapped areas, and were almost uniformly of a hostile political complexion.

In 1938, the Stevens Government built 56 flats in a series of seven two-storey units on three and a half acres at the top western end of Erskineville Park. The scheme was begun in March that year – a matter of weeks before the State election of 26 March – and the first tenants moved in on 19 December. The flats were designed with the utmost care by the Housing Improvement Board, and incorporated a series of then novel features. The seven blocks were situated in spacious grounds 66 feet apart from each other, built in a north-south direction with a depth of no more than two rooms so that all rooms at some time of the day caught the sunshine. They included built-in cupboards and gas heating, washable walls and concrete skirting boards, inlaid linoleum and grouped plumbing services (Herman, 1939: 68-73) (Building, 1938).

To all intents and purposes, it was a model scheme. Indeed, all the care and expenditure lavished on the flats were aimed at just this. Introducing the Housing (Further Provisions) Bill – aimed at, among other things, making the scheme possible – Stevens commented:

Figure 3.8 Erskineville Housing Scheme in December 1938 (City of Sydney Archives, 2002c).
The Government is going ahead with a first scheme at Erskineville as a demonstration of what can be done under modern town planning. When that is carried through it will be in a position to decide a permanent policy of slum clearance in the light of public discussion of the scheme itself and in light of the results which will be achieved in abating overcrowding through the indirect results of our broad home-building policy (NMWPD, 8 December 1937: 2394).

In fact, the Erskineville scheme did not become the model for a permanent policy of slum clearance or public housing provision, and was controversial throughout its development. It was an oddity. The product of the conservative government of Bertram Stevens – a government committed to the encouragement of private enterprise – and erratically decried by a Labor-dominated Erskineville Council – and, on occasion, the Labor Opposition in Parliament – partly on grounds that landlords would not receive a sufficient return on their threatened investment.

3.3 PRESSURES FOR GOVERNMENT ACTION

How did this extraordinary situation develop? The answer is tied up in a series of connecting factors: a severe housing crisis, and political interest in home ownership and slum clearance.

3.3.1 THE HOUSING CRISIS

By 1938, housing construction had returned to its pre-Depression level. For all the recovery, however, there was a lot of slack to make up, as the following index of residential building activity for that period in indicates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sydney residential building</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>100 (base)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Spearritt, 1972: 58)
According to the figures quoted by Stevens in debate on the Housing Improvement Bill on 15 December 1936, there was a wide disparity between the number of marriages and the number of homes constructed each year in the city and suburbs. Overall, going back to 1929, there had been 152,000 marriages in the city and suburbs, and 37,000 homes constructed (NSWPD, 15 December 1936: 1201). And, according to the Housing Commission Report of 1948, by the outbreak of hostilities in 1939, ‘there was an estimated shortage of probably 80,000 adequate homes in New South Wales’ (HCNSW, 1948: 7).

While the building industry was making a rapid recovery, it had scarcely begun to put a dent in the housing problem. In 1938, Sydney was facing a housing crisis that was reflected in high building costs, rising rents, increasing evictions and overcrowding. Linked with this was the continuing problem of unemployment, and it was felt that a revival of the building trade would soak up a good portion of the excess. Thus, town planning lobbyist and subsequent Housing Council of NSW secretary Norman Dick wrote in 1935:

The work of demolishing and rebuilding will give a large amount of employment to the building and allied trades, leading to an increase in the purchasing power of the people with a corresponding improvement in the Government’s revenue derived from direct taxation (Dick, 1935: 84).

The employment question was also part of the background to the strong support given to slum clearance in general and the Erskineville project in particular by the Bricklayers and Carpenters’ Union:

Millions of pounds can and must be spent in providing decent homes for the people. In the process a double purpose will be served — that of housing the people as normal civilised beings, and the other that it will be an excellent contribution to industry, creating employment directly and indirectly for thousands of workmen (Trade Union Review, 15 December 1937).

It was an argument Labor politicians were not slow to take up.

To counter the housing crisis, the Stevens Government had instituted a series of inexpensive schemes. These included the Homes for the Unemployed Trust, the guaranteeing of home loans through the Rural Bank, and the introduction of legislation for the large-scale development of co-operative building societies. All of these schemes also matched admirably with the ideology of private home ownership – an ideology that showed itself capable of achieving a broad social consensus among the representatives of the major opposing political forces.
3.3.2 HOME OWNERSHIP

Certainly, the Government believed in home ownership for as many people as possible. Stevens could report glowingly:

One half of our people already have their own homes. We aim to see the proportion increase, and we aim to see the quality of all our homes increase. The average man aspires to own his own home, particularly the man in poor circumstances. The true objectives of a well-conceived housing policy are among the noblest works to which any Government or any community can set its hand. For the home is the cradle of our race, and the quality of our race will largely depend on the quality of the homes in which it is nurtured.... The very foundations upon which, in the last resort, our national strength will rest, are the character, stamina and contentment created in the home, which is the basis of family life (NSWPD, 8 December 1937: 2393)

Yet for all the fine words, it is clear that the government did not really believe that home ownership on this model could ever be universally realised. Thus, one of the key factors that impressed Stevens on his overseas tour was the large-scale nature of local government involvement in housing that remained firmly in public ownership.

For its part, the Labor Opposition was, if anything, more seriously committed to home ownership than the conservatives were. The Party’s tradition of a relatively unreflective egalitarianism led it not so much in the direction of questioning the whole basis of ownership and the unequal distribution of resources, as towards a demand that individual home ownership should be opened up to all, and not just a privileged minority. Repeatedly, Labor spokespersons insisted on cottages in the suburbs – ‘the wide open spaces’ – for the workers. Indeed, they were not above suggesting compulsion, as when the Member for Phillip, Mr T.J. Shannon suggested:

It is far better that the people should be forced to live in the outer suburbs and that zone fares should be reduced in order to enable them to travel cheaply to the city (NSWPD, 16 May 1939: 439).

3.3.3 SLUM REFORM

Yet sometimes a whiff of something else drifts in. The reformism of the Labor Party is nowhere clearer than on those occasions when spokespersons insist on private home ownership as a means of making people content with the present social structure, and of creating good citizens. Even Mr J.M. Baddeley, usually so acutely aware of the economic basis of inequality, spoke approvingly of home building on a government subdivision at Cessnock and commented:
Better homes mean better citizens. People will sacrifice little things in order to make their homes more comfortable. When they have homes, they will fight for them (NSWPD, 14 December 1937: 2319).

And, out of the genuine concern he felt for the poverty of the people he saw as he walked through the streets Redfern, Chippendale and Darlington, Arthur Tonge commented:

The time is fast approaching when the Government... will have to take drastic action to remove these people from the inner to the outer suburbs of the metropolitan area. Unless this is done we shall breed discontent and an agitation against the present system of government. Under our system of democracy every man and woman of 21 years and over has a vote, but nevertheless, while a large percentage of the people live in congested areas we shall never have a contented community (NSWPD, 26 November 1936: 821).

As the concern was genuine, so too was the essential conservatism.

Initially, poverty and ‘slum’ living were seen by middle class opinion leaders as the fault of the people living under such conditions. Thus C.E.W. Bean, founder of the Parks and Playgrounds Movement, was moved to write from his home in Lindfield to the editor of the Sydney Morning Herald:

Slumdom is a state of mind and not merely a state of building; a slum is a city area in which the conditions tend to wreck good citizenship; in which the young folk have little chance of decent development; to which the dregs of the city tend to gravitate, and in which the citizens whose only crime is poverty have to bring up their families as best they can in surroundings of the underworld (SMH, 12 July 1935: 6).

Certainly, the Sydney Morning Herald was at one with Bean. Earlier, it had editorialised:

There are ‘slum minds,’ and some of them are not cured by the gift of new dwellings, ‘swept and garnished.’ Every country, old and young, possesses a percentage of inferior characters who cannot be forced into cleanliness, let alone culture. Of these the community must everywhere take account, and prepare, in its most promising schemes to discover a ratio of failure. It is easier and quicker to erect a model dwelling than it is to render a degenerate type fit to inhabit it (SMH, 23 August 1933: 12).

However, as ‘slum clearance’ increasingly became an issue throughout this era, it became increasingly clear that poor housing had social and economic causes rather than being the result of individual lack of moral fibre or some kind of herd mentality. In a nice blend of both, the Australian Christian World stated:

Sordid homes... make sordid people, and from the point of view of public health, the slum is one of the greatest dangers. It has been shown time and again that slum-dwellers, removed to hygienic homes, generally conformed in habits to their new environment (Australian Christian World, 12 November 1937).
The development of the ideology of physical determinism, and the campaigns of town planning bodies like the Town Planning Association and Norman Dick’s Housing Council of NSW, as well as church bodies like the Combined Churches’ Debating Societies Federation have been too thoroughly documented by Peter Spearritt to need further exposition here (Spearritt, 1972). Such groups made slum clearance a public issue, and forced it into political consciousness.

In particular, the Labor Party became fiercely committed to the ideology of slum clearance, and of large-scale transplanting of the slum populace to the ‘broad acres’ and ‘open spaces’ of the suburbs. The Labor Daily also weighed in, with headlines like:

‘SYDNEY’S HUMAN WARRENS AND SLUMS’
‘SLUM HORRORS ARE EXPOSED’
‘WOMEN MUST FIGHT TO ESCAPE SLUM HOUSES’
‘SLUM DESTROYER STEVENS DESTROYS NO SLUMS’

The outcry was joined by the trade union movement, with Frank Cotton suggesting in the Australian Worker that ‘DOWN WITH SLUMS!’ with make ‘a telling slogan for the Labor Party’ (Australian Worker, 2 December 1937). The Bricklayers and Carpenters’ Union’s Trade Union Review regularly called for slum clearance and rebuilding (for example, Trade Union Review, 15 August 1937; 2 December 1937; SMH, 5 July 1935: 11), and a little later the Labor Council began to take up the issue of slum clearance.20

It was only rarely that Labor spokespeople perceived any kind of an alternative to the promotion of home ownership as a solution. For example, Heffron mostly went along with the prevailing ideology, but on one occasion, he was moved to comment:

I am sceptical about the ability of the average man to purchase and pay for his home. Experience teaches that it takes a lifetime to do this, and in the interim the man has to pay for repairs, rates and so on. As a rule, he would be infinitely better off paying a reasonable rental (NSWPD, 15 December 1936: 1221).

He went on to refer to government housing schemes at Matraville and Daceyville, and said:

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19 See for example, the speeches of Labor Members at NSWPD, 15 December 1936: 1222-1224; 16 December 1936: 1263-65, 1283; 14 December 1937: 2630; 9 May 1940: 8413.  
20 Correspondence from the Labor Council’s Unemployed and Relief Workers’ Department, Newtown Council ‘Housing and Slum Clearance’ file, May-June 1940.
I have been closely associated with both settlements, and am of the opinion that the weekly tenants are infinitely better off than those who paid a deposit on their homes, paid a higher rate each week than do those at the Dacey Garden Suburb, and ultimately lost their equity entirely. There is nothing to stop the Government of the day taking advantage of the position it happens to be in, by virtue of owning so much of that Crown land, where they could erect buildings that they could let at rentals which would meet the purse of the average man in work today. That would be a better proposition, if the State itself would undertake a great housing scheme of that kind for the purpose of housing people whom we hope to remove out of those slum areas. It would be the best form of reproductive scheme, because those dwellings would be revenue-producing (NSWPD, 15 December 1936: 1221).

Insofar as it foreshadowed the large-scale development of the Housing Commission in the post-war era, this statement was forward-looking. There is, however, little in Heffron’s statement – and less in those of other Labor spokespeople – to enable any penetrating critique of the Stevens housing proposals, or of the ideology of slum clearance. All that was left was to disagree on matters of detail or inconsistency – which is essentially what the Labor Opposition did.

3.4 THE SCHEME PROPOSED

In 1936, the State Government had passed the Housing Amendment Act 1936 (NSW), which essentially set out to achieve three things:

- to enable the large-scale development of co-operative building societies on the English model (it was this more than anything else that had impressed Stevens on his overseas visit, as a means of making finance available for homes for middle class and working class people in regular employment and on regular incomes);
- to set up the Housing Improvement Board; and
- to give local councils the power to undertake demolition and rehousing in slum areas.

The town planning lobby had for some time been pushing for the establishment of a strong central housing authority, so that ‘slum clearance should never become the plaything of party politics’ (Dick, 1935: 83). Presumably, it would be staffed by the objective, non-partisan, non-political town planners and their friends. Certainly, Dick wanted the authority to be ‘free from political control, with full power to carry out the task of slum clearance according to a preconceived plan drawn up by experts’ (Dick, 1935: 83). A.J. Brown of the Town and Country Planning Association, an influential housing expert in New South Wales who had been involved in the model Welwyn Gardens project in London, and who had been a member of the Housing Conditions Investigations Committee and the Housing Improvement Board’s advisory committee, supported Dick’s view in almost identical words:
The whole question of slum clearance should be dealt with by a commission, invested with adequate powers, but free from political control, in order that it may pursue a continuous policy (Brown, 1935).

Stevens recognised the force of this argument – or perhaps the force of its proponents, or the way it offered for defusing an explosive political issue – in his report. Again, the words are familiar:

...a permanent body which must be free from partisan influences to the maximum extent consistent with due control by the government. The direction of such activities must, if they are to be successful, be entrusted to a small group of persons skilled in housing and allied matters, and who must be free to exercise judgment and take prompt action (Stevens, 1937-1938: 19).

However, like his other housing initiatives, Steven’s first moves in this direction were timid ones. The Housing Improvement Board was not in itself intended to be a permanent body. It could not move on slum clearance without the concurrence of the municipal council in the area concerned. Its primary function was to investigate the slum situation (though this had just been done by the Housing Conditions Investigation Committee – an awkward point Stevens never succeeded in getting around). The Board was to consider schemes for improvement and relief of ‘congested areas,’ and prepare a report together with draft legislation within six months. It could also advise councils on slum clearance planning and procedures, and co-operate with them in the carrying through of such schemes. However, it could not operate independently. If a council rejected a scheme, or decided to be obstreperous, the HIB was powerless. It was this provision that bedevilled the Erskineville scheme throughout its troubled history.

### 3.4.1 THE PARAMETERS OF GOVERNMENT ACTION

The Erskineville scheme was designed specifically as a persuasive demonstration of how slum clearance could be undertaken, and of the possibilities of State-local government co-operation. Stevens himself and his ministers stressed the necessity of securing council co-operation (Stevens, 1937-1938: 11). This was very much modelled on the English pattern of large-scale municipal involvement in housing projects. It would also be in accord with Steven’s general policy of keeping government expenditures to a minimum – a point swiftly seized upon by the Labor Opposition, which inevitably – and not without justice – accused him of shifting his responsibility onto councils. What Stevens had failed to take account of were the realities of New South Wales States politics, and the comparative weakness and ineffectuality of local government, particularly in the patchwork of pocket-sized councils in the working class areas of greatest housing need.
The scheme was also designed to reach the low-income sector of the population that remained untouched by the Government’s other initiatives promoting home ownership. With rents of one pound or 25/- per week in areas like Erskineville, home ownership or the raising of a deposit for great numbers of people were simply beyond imaging. This, in fact, was the fundamental problem, and was recognised as such by former Premier Lang:

The Premier has stated that the object of the scheme is to enable the workers to obtain homes and to become good citizens. But it is utterly beyond the capacity of the basic wage worker to participate in this scheme. This Bill will not enable the average worker to obtain a home. It has been accepted right throughout the years that the rent paid by a worker should be one-sixth of his wage (NSWPD, 16 December 1936: 1279).

In fact, the intention of Steven’s legislation was clearly spelt out in a contemporary review by F.A. Bland:

Recent housing legislation in New South Wales had three main objectives: to facilitate home ownership by the average member of the salariat, to remove slums and erect flats and houses at rents within the resources of lower-paid wage-earners, and to provide cheap dwellings for the unemployed in outer suburbs or country towns, where land values are low, and ample room is available (Bland, 1938: 78).

It is clear from this, as it is from the course of debate in the Legislative Assembly, that the Government’s broad intention was to deal with the housing of the working class only partially. This is clear in the following exchange during debate on the Housing Improvement Bill on 15 December 1946:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mr BADDELEY:</th>
<th>It is practically impossible for any worker to find a deposit of 20 per cent. A man, to come under this scheme, must be respectable and in more or less permanent occupation.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brigadier-Gen LLOYD:</td>
<td>Does not the Hon. Member think that men of that type should get the benefit of this scheme?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr BADDELEY:</td>
<td>There are few workers in a position to take advantage of the scheme. What is the good of humbugging: you say you have a building scheme to assist people who are down and out?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brigadier-Gen LLOYD:</td>
<td>This is not a scheme to assist people who are down and out. It is to assist people who are in regular employment and it is a very good measure (NSWPD, 15 December 1936: 1211).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Stevens Government entered the Erskineville housing project with one more premise in mind: it was filling a gap in the housing market that could not be filled by private enterprise. This was the substance of a good deal of advice that was given to the government, and this was reinforced by Steven’s experience of English conditions. Thus, the Housing Conditions Investigation Committee reported:

[Private enterprise has shown itself powerless to handle three sections of housing: to provide adequate dwellings for the lower income groups of the community; to maintain adequate standards of maintenance and repair; to clear sub-standard or slum areas where there is no immediate demand for these areas for commercial or other purposes affording a remunerative return. If, therefore, public housing activities are substantially confined to dealing with these sections, which have proved to be beyond the capacity of private enterprise, we feel there can be no legitimate grounds for complaint by those interested in commercial housing enterprise (Housing Conditions Investigation Committee, 1936-1937: 2).

The same thought was being expressed by the housing and town planning lobby generally. A little later, in 1938, Norman Dick issued a circular in which he commented:

The primary essential of any slum clearance project is necessarily the elimination of profit because it is obvious that in bridging the gap between demolition, building and land costs on the one hand and the rent which the lower-paid worker can afford to pay, there is no margin either for the speculative builder or the land ‘sweater.’ For this reason, the housing the basic-wage earner must be regarded as a national responsibility... (Dick, 1938).

While not stated so explicitly in the Stevens Report, it is clear that this is the same underlying premise. Needless to say, while there is clear criticism of the failure of private enterprise to cope with what, in fact, represented the major sector of the State’s housing needs, there was no intention here to threaten the activity of private enterprise, or to wipe out its profits. Stevens, and government apologists generally, were careful to draw a distinction between the role of private enterprise, and of the State in providing welfare housing. Thus, at the conclusion of his Report, Stevens commented:

[I]n every enlightened and progressive country, housing, including slum clearance and the provision of dwellings for low-paid workers, is recognised as a definite social service, administered for the national good and the contentment of the individual (Stevens, 1937-1938: 19).

Stevens, in particular, legitimised this social function for government as a means of allowing private enterprise to get on with its own untrammelled activities:

In all European countries... there has been a development of housing from a speculative business to a long-term public investment recognised as an essential social service. Private enterprise has been developed conjointly with community schemes and finance has been recognised as of fundamental importance (Stevens, 1937-1938: 18).
It was clear that government contracts for public housing could become a lucrative source of revenue for builders. Thus in one stroke, the government hoped it could do something to resolve the housing crisis, restore employment, and give incentive to the building industry.

### 3.4.2 PROPOONENTS

The Housing Improvement Board held its first meeting on 10 February 1937 (HIB minutes, 10 February 1937). The chairman was builder and Sydney Lord Mayor Mr (later Sir) Archibald Howie MLC. The members were Mr T. Armstrong MLC; Rachel Forster Hospital almoner, Miss K. Ogilvie MBE; builder and prominent government spokesman on housing matters, Mr A.H. Moverley MLA for Randwick; and Mr C.R. Chapman. Office assistance was to be provided by L.H. Bowler, G.R. Gerlach and A.A. Cooke, all of whom had formerly served the Housing Conditions Investigation Committee. Chapman had been vice chairman of the Committee, and Moverley a member. Gerlach, an architect by training, was soon to become prominent as the Board’s Executive Officer, and virtually assumed sole responsibility for the Erskineville scheme. It was very much his personal project, down to the smallest detail.

At the first meeting, the Minister for Social Services, Mr H M Hawkins, stressed the necessity to secure the co-operation of municipal councils (HIB minutes, 10 February 1937). He suggested the Board should seek to undertake improvement schemes in a small city section, in a suburban section, in an area like Newcastle, and in a country section. He said it may not be possible to finish these schemes, but they could be accepted for attempt during the year. It was also not long before Hawkins put pressure on the Board for swift action (HIB minutes, 9 March 1937). The reason was obvious – an election was due in early 1938.

The Board began by looking at a number of areas: Chippendale, Redfern, Paddington, Waterloo and Balmain were suggested as well as Erskineville. The Board asked Gerlach to investigate specifically Paddington, Redfern and a city area (HIB minutes, 24 February 1937). On 9 March 1937, the Board resolved to give Paddington and Newtown first and second preferences, respectively, for careful investigation, followed by Woollahra and Redfern. Investigations were done in both Paddington and Newtown (HIB minutes, 20 April 1937), and preliminary plans were drawn up in conjunction with the Paddington Council (HIB minutes, 11 May 1937).
However, at the same time, Gerlach reported that Erskineville Council was ‘definitely interested’ in the rehousing scheme previously considered – a reference to a scheme drawn up, in fact, by the Housing Conditions Investigation Committee (HIB minutes, 11 May 1937). The plan involved redesigning the whole of Erskineville at an estimated cost of two and a half million pounds (Housing Conditions Investigation Committee, 1936: 5). It included relocation of the schools and park in the area, cutting down the number of streets from 40 to 20 and widening the remainder, and relocating the entire population of about 7,000 in three-storey flats. Actually, there would be a ‘surplus population’ of about 600 who would ‘require rehousing in some other locality.’ This scheme was clearly dear to Gerlach’s heart. While the Board was deciding to go ahead with 56 flats in Paddington for 224 people (HIB minutes, 11 May 1937), Gerlach was holding discussions with Erskineville Council, along with the Premier. Gerlach was also chivvying the Board’s technical advisory committee (which included the ubiquitous A.J. Brown) for a report on the Erskineville proposal (HIB minutes, 11 May 1937; 25 May 1937). On 19 April, Gerlach attended the Erskineville Council meeting and outlined the broad scheme.

Even at this first meeting, the question of flats came up, when Gerlach was asked what action would be taken if Council objected to them. Gerlach replied that the Government would have to submit an alternative scheme. However, he pointed out that provision would have to be made for about 1,600 flats – which would occupy 30 to the acre, by contrast to 12 cottages to the acre. Following a lengthy series of questions, Alderman A.P. Henry moved that Council ‘view the scheme as outlined, and make the necessary application to the Local Government Department to have several areas classified by the scheme, applied to Erskineville’ (Erskineville Council minutes, 19 April 1937). On this basis Gerlach was able to report back to the Board that the Council was ‘definitely interested’ in the scheme (HIB Minutes, 20 April 1937). The Board continued to discuss other schemes but soon found itself discussing nothing but Erskineville. When the Premier carried out an inspection of the site on 9 June, and recommended an immediate start (‘if economic’), and suggested that the

![Figure 3.9 A plan of the three-storey residential block proposed for construction in the Glenmore Road area in Paddington as part of the Housing Improvement Scheme (SMH, 4 May 1937: 16).](image)
Board ‘might concentrate on completion of Erskineville, thereby gaining practical experience,’ the course was set (HIB, 1937).

There were some obvious reasons why Erskineville might be preferred. It was a small (166 acres), homogeneous municipal area, fairly densely populated, and known as one of the slum regions of Sydney. According to a statistical list compiled by Erskineville Council in 1937, there was a total population of 7,610 in Erskineville – 3,380 males and 3,230 females – living in 1,564 dwellings. There were 638 brick houses, 29 weatherboard houses, 719 brick cottages, 178 weatherboard cottages, and 11 vacant dwellings (Erskineville Council minutes, 6 August 1937). There were 243 owners occupying their homes, or 15.5 per cent of the population. This meant that the tenancy rate was somewhat lower than the inner city average of more than 90 per cent (at the 1947 Census), but its home ownership rate was still well below the 45 per cent home-ownership rate in metropolitan areas of Australia at that time (Allport, 1987: 106).
Aside from its general reputation, Erskineville received notoriety as a slum through the findings of the Housing Conditions Investigation Committee. The findings were cited in State Parliament:

The main problem... in so far as Erskineville is concerned, is one of bad housing. On every hand, one finds evidence of faulty construction, poor ventilation, crude sanitary arrangements, and general disregard for even the slightest comfort for the unfortunate tenants. Of the 1,552 occupied dwellings, 185 were weatherboard and 1,367 brick. Eight hundred and eighty-two out of the 1,552 are without bathrooms and laundries.

Five have laundry only. One is without kitchen, bathroom and laundry. Even where bathroom and laundry exist or have been provided by order of the local council, no thought and very little money have been expended on them. In the majority of cases any old shed seems to be good enough for such amenities. Very rarely also were running water or sinks available in the kitchen. The weatherboard houses, particularly, are dilapidated and form a very grave fire risk. On a conservative estimate about 80 per cent of brick dwellings are without dampcourse, and are constructed with nine inch painted external walls.

In every case the houses are damp, some more so than others. There is ample evidence to indicate that in quite a number of instances windows and roofs are not weather-proof, and, although, a far proportion of the houses have the front painted regularly, inspection discloses that the same attention has not been given to the interior (NSWPD 15 December 1936: 1214-16).

This was cited by Moverley, himself a member of the Committee, during debate on the Housing Improvement Bill in December 1936. It was clear that Erskineville was well on the way to becoming a slum symbol. If the Council was willing to co-operate, the whole municipality could be redeveloped as a model slum clearance scheme.

In addition, on the border of the municipality was a large, undeveloped park that would be ideal for commencing a housing scheme. This would get around the ‘vexed question’ of what to do with residents whose houses were being pulled down for rebuilding (HIB minutes, 9 June 1937). As well, resumption costs for a public park were a lot cheaper than those for private housing – costs could go down 25,000 pounds by resumption only of the area within the proposed park west of the railway line. The political attraction of Erskineville was obvious. The scheme was ‘more than a rehousing project:’

It envisages the clearance of one of the worst slum areas in Sydney, its transformation into a delightful park to serve a very congested and densely populated area, and the rehabilitation of the eastern section of Erskineville Park for a sportsground... they are really district requirements and form part of a comprehensive redesign of the area as a whole (HIB minutes, 25 May 1937).

Under an overall scheme presented to the Board on 25 May 1937, about 300 flats in two- and three-storey blocks were to be built at a cost of about 350,000 pounds, including resumptions and disturbance of business, rehabilitation and so on. This ran out to a gross cost of about
1,160 pounds per flat — an expensive experiment in slum clearance. At his inspection of 9 June, Stevens agreed to a slightly scaled-down version, and suggested the Board should go ahead, if the scheme was economic. It involved placing the flats on 11 acres of Erskineville Park, clearing an area west of the Illawarra railway line, and transforming that area into a pleasant park, to take in a nursery school and community centre (HIB minutes, 9 June 1937). Rents also were to be kept as far as possible to the same level as the people to be rehoused were currently paying (HIB minutes, 13 July 1937). In practice, the administrators were later to make sure that only people with a reasonable income were so much as to be allowed into the flats. With a few revisions, by August the scheme provided for erection of 220 dwellings, two shops, a nursery school and two children’s playgrounds, at an estimated cost of 227,000 pounds. The government would provide 120,000 pounds of this, and the Council was expected to pay 107,000 pounds over 40 years. Gross annual income was calculated at 10,069 pounds, and gross expenditure 3,669 pounds. On this basis the net return would be 6,400 pounds. Various types of accommodation were to be provided:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Rent</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bedsitter</td>
<td>7/6 per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 bedroom</td>
<td>10/6 per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 bedroom with sleep-out</td>
<td>13/6 per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 bedroom with sleep-out</td>
<td>17/6 per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 bedroom with sleep-out</td>
<td>22/6 per week</td>
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This was to be the first stage of the scheme originally drawn up by the Housing Conditions Investigation Committee. It was to provide the Stevens Government’s answer to the problem of slum clearance.

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Correspondence from Gerlach to Erskineville Council, 13 August 1937, Erskineville Council ‘Letters’ file no. 78, Mitchell Library.
3.4.3 OPPONENTS

However, trouble had already started. Optimistically, Stevens had told the Constitutional Association as early as May 1937 that the Government’s work of slum clearance would begin at Erskineville ‘within a few weeks’ (Sun, 17 May 1937). It was to be the better part of 12 months before the first sod was turned, and then only after further enabling legislation had been passed to override the objections of the local council. The Council took full advantage of the opportunities the Housing Improvement Act 1936 (NSW) had given it to thwart the intentions of the Board.

In fact, it was not the Council per se that objected. The Mayor, Alderman Jack Elliott, consistently favoured the scheme, despite his concern that pensioners should not lose their pension rights if they were compensated for loss of their homes but could not afford to buy a home elsewhere (Sun, 29 July 1937). This is interesting, because this oft-repeated concern indicates that there were at least some elderly owner-occupiers – though their numbers could not have been large. In addition, Elliott came from the ward in which the housing scheme was to be located; that he favoured the scheme may be an indication of the feelings of his electors, especially since a council election was due later in 1937. On at least one occasion, when five aldermen – a majority, in a council of nine – agreed unanimously at a deputation to the Premier to allow the first part of the scheme to go ahead (HIB minutes, 26 August 1937), the ensuing Council meeting went the opposite way (HIB minutes, 10 September 1937). It was obvious that the ruling Labor caucus had decided to oppose the scheme.

A key factor in this turn-around was Alderman A.P. ‘Pop’ Henry. Henry had been a member of the deputation to the Premier; it was also he who had moved the initial motion favouring the scheme. Yet he was to prove a fiery opponent of the scheme, and to drive the Premier to near distraction. In his 20 years as an alderman, Henry had served as mayor six times (DT, 26 November 1937: 7; Labor Daily, 30 November 1937). He was one of the tough ward bosses of earlier days and a key figure in the local Labor machine. It so happened that Henry was also a real estate agent.

Even before the Council had come down against the scheme, Henry had started his campaign of opposition. On 16 July 1937, he was reported as having canvassed 150 of the 225 families affected by the scheme – of whom, 140 were opposed to flats (DT, 16 July 1937: 8). It is not known how many of these paid their rent to Henry. At the same time, Henry
circulated throughout Erskineville a petition that repeated all the popular stereotypes about flats, and even made an appeal to Catholic sentiment about birth control. The petition read:

WE the undersigned RATEPAYERS and RESIDENTS of ERSKINEVILLE desire to protest against the proposed erection of FLATS in ERSKINEVILLE PARK, and wish to emphaisse [sic] that if any rebuilding scheme is carried out the people shall be supplied with semi-detached cottages or such other designs of building that will give each family a definite form of homelife embodying a backyard to each home.

Our objections are based on the following grounds:

1. FLATS are not desirable. Where they have been undertaken on Communal lines in New South Wales they have invariably been a failure as instanced by the efforts of the Sydney Council (City).

2. FLATS are unsuitable in an industrial area because the industrial classes have the largest families and large families and family homelife has been the backbone of the development of the British Empire.

3. FLATS on moral and religious grounds have a definite tendency to make people limit their families by birth control methods, which has a definite injurious effect on the health and morals of married people.

4. Community grounds for drying clothes on washing day takes away from the homelife which families have been used to and is foreign to industrial classes who have always had their own drying grounds. The washing and drying of women’s private garments (personal hygiene, etc) demands the amount of privacy every female is entitled to.

5. Private space for gardens and lawn tends to increase the homelife of the individual supplying for him a hobby that is so essential. This also allows children to play in their own backyards where they are under direct control of the parents. The appalling number of street accidents to children speaks for itself.

6. If we desire to populate Australia with Australians [sic] we must encourage them to propogate [sic]. If people are encouraged to live in FLATS small families will result.

7. The swampy area intended for building will make it necessary to have an up- to-date drainage system instituted. In England it is illegal to build on made soil.

8. Infectious diseases in children must be isolated. How are we to isolate in COMMUNITY backyards?

In view of the foregoing, we therefore voice our unified protest and ask the Housing Board to refrain from building FLATS on the plan introduced.22

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22 An original typed copy, and 350 signed carbon copies, of the petition are in Erskineville Council ‘Letters’ file no. 78, Mitchell Library. The carbon copies are stamped and dated 23 August 1937 by the Housing Improvement Board, but the petition is not mentioned in the Board’s Minutes.
Henry was assiduous in peddling his petition. By his own account, 1,700 people signed – an extraordinary number for such a small area (Sun, 23 August 1937).

A second point of hot contention was that of compensation to property owners whose properties were resumed by the scheme. While there has never been any suggestion that Henry himself would make any financial gains out of stopping the scheme, it is also clear that the interests of many of Henry’s clients would be directly threatened if closing and demolition orders were slapped on their premises. This was even more so if compensation was on a minimal basis, such as unimproved capital value. Both the Housing Conditions Investigation Committee and the Government suggested that landlords in slum areas should by compensated only on the unimproved capital value of their property in any slum clearance scheme. This was because, in their view, the buildings had paid for themselves many times over, and were in any case in ramshackle condition.

As Henry said on one occasion, ‘I do not want the landlords – poor wretches – to find themselves suddenly out of money’ (DT, 26 November 1937: 7). Henry argued strongly that compensation should be paid not merely on improved capital value, but on the values of 1936 instead of the lower values of 1937. He persuaded Council to adopt a measure on this score on 15 November 1937 (Erskineville Council minutes, 15 November 1937).

Other sections joined the reaction. A protest meeting was held at the Chamber of Manufactures on 30 November 1937, and Henry was one of the principal speakers (SMH, 1 December 1937: 12; Labor Daily, 1 December 1937). The meeting formed a Home Owners’ Protection Society, and elected a committee to protest to the Premier next day at his confiscatory methods. Mr H. Amadio – another Erskineville real estate agent – was elected chairman. The pressure seemed to have had some effect, for Stevens was at pains to provide reassurances that not everybody would be penalised – only the dishonourable landlords who had allowed their premises to go to rack and ruin:

There has been a good deal of misrepresentation in relation to this matter Those properties... which were in reasonable order and condition would be resumed under the ordinary terms which apply to a resumption of this character, and compensation payable accordingly. But in the case of buildings which had been declared by the authorities concerned to be unfit for human habitation, the only compensation which could be considered was the value of the land, together with the demolition value of the buildings. This is the procedure followed in other parts of the world, and I am sure Honourable Members will agree with me that if the owners have not maintained their properties in such condition that decent living would be possible, it would be outrageous to suggest that they should be compensated other than on the basis which I have now mentioned (NSWPDL, 8 December 1937: 2399).
As it happened, Opposition Members were not prepared to agree with the Premier – or at least, to admit that they did – and insisted on payment on the valuation of the property and not just the land. In fact, the disagreement was not really substantial, for Opposition spokespeople agreed that in some instances properties had been paid for ‘over and over again.’ Nevertheless, it was an odd reversal of positions: conservatives penalising property-owners, and Labor speakers galloping to the latter’s rescue. Clearly, it had more to do with politics than principle – an election was due in a few months.

The Parliamentary debate records Henry’s influence in the arguments of Labor Members who defended the landlords. In parliamentary debate in December 1937, Newtown Labor Member Frank Burke, in an attack on the Government on the compensation issue, described Henry as ‘a man of considerable shrewdness and intelligence,’ and went on:

Mr Henry assured me that at the time of his last interview with the Premier, that the Premier was insulting. The Premier, Mr Henry declared, said, ‘whom are you standing for? You are standing for Myerson [Emmanuel Myerson, a landlord with large holdings in Erskineville] out there; you are fighting Myerson’s battle.’ The Premier is trying to fasten Myerson onto Mr Henry because of Mr Myerson’s reputation as a landlord is not supposed to be the best. I do not know Mr Myerson, and would be the last man in the world to put up a fight for him, because he has been a rather hard landlord in many instances. If we take away the equity of individuals we shall be branded throughout the country as repudiationists... (NSWPD, 9 December 1937: 2494).

At the Council meeting following Council’s resolution on the compensation question, Henry mysteriously resigned – though he continued to maintain a firm grip on local affairs, hosting caucus meetings at his premises and becoming known as ‘the tenth alderman’ (O’Grady, nd). At that meeting, when Henry sought to read out a statement and move yet another motion along the same line, the Mayor gagged him and protested ‘you have not treated this scheme fairly’ (Labor Daily, 30 November 1937). Whatever else he might be accused of, Henry could not be faulted in his diligent pursuit of his clients’ interests.²³

There was one further complicating political factor that lay behind the stops and starts of Council policy. Certainly, the Government was correct to see Council’s opposition as being politically inspired, at least in part. But not all the politics was aimed at the U.A.P. – the intramural feuding of the Labor Party itself had a lot to do with the wildly swinging policies

²³ A final note on the activities and outlook of A.P. Henry: later, when the scheme was nearing completion at the end of 1938, the Housing Board received an application for appointment as managing agent. The applicant was A.P. Henry. The Board advised Henry that it would manage the estate itself (HIB minutes, 20 October 1938).
Erskineville Council was narrowly split between Lang Labor and ‘official’ Labor, the latter holding a shaky one-vote majority in the Council — shaky not only because it depended on a 100 per cent turnout at each meeting, but also because there was much crossing back and forwards between the two groups. Thus, it was never certain from meeting to meeting, which group would have the majority.

The result was a completely erratic position in relation to the scheme and the Board. Sometimes the Council would come down hard against the scheme (Erskineville, Council minutes, 26 July 1937; 15 August 1937; 6 September 1937; 15 November 1937). At other times it would appear ready to compromise, or even to agree to the scheme (Erskineville Council Minutes, 19 April 1937; 13 July 1937; 18 October 1937; 10 January 1938). On occasion, Henry himself seemed prepared to seek a compromise involving a mixture of cottages and small flat buildings – on that particular occasion he lost, because one of his supporters was missing (Erskineville Council minutes, 15 August 1937). On 6 August 1937, the Council decided not to undertake further negotiations until more information was available – and refused to ‘entertain any system of flats’ (Erskineville Council minutes, 6 August 1937).

At a special meeting the following week – just prior to the deputation to the Premier – after a series of tied votes (one alderman was missing), the Council decided to object to the flats scheme and seek an alternative plan from the Board (Erskineville Council minutes, 15 August 1937). Anxious to get the scheme off the ground, Stevens offered to limit the height of the flats to two storeys, and to undertake the first section at no cost to the Council. This involved building 56 flats in seven units on three acres of Erskineville Park, and the rehabilitation of the eastern area as a sports ground and park. It would cost an estimated 65,000 pounds. Stevens made this concession on the basis that if the first section proved successful, the Council would co-operate in the completion of the whole project – to the extent of paying 107,000 pounds of the total estimated cost of 220,000 pounds.

By this stage of discussions, what had been meant originally as the first section of the scheme had tacitly become the entire scheme. The five aldermen – including Henry – present at the deputation agreed to the Premier’s suggestion, subject to Council confirmation (HIB

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24 U.A.P. stands for United Australia Party, the party retained Federal Government with the Country Party Coalition after the 1937 federal election.
25 Correspondence from Gerlach to Erskineville Council, 6 September 1937, Erskineville Council ‘Letters’ file no. 78, Mitchell Library.
minutes, 26 August 1937). However, the numbers were reversed at the subsequent Council meeting (Erskineville Council minutes, 6 September 1937). Moverley attended on behalf of the Board, and reported back that ‘it was very evident that the matter had been discussed in caucus.’ Addressing the Council meeting, he said that if councils refused to shoulder their responsibilities, the government would probably undertake the whole matter of housing and compel councils to realise their position – a foreshadowing of legislation to come if the Council did not fall into line. According to Moverley, his remarks ‘received the applause of the large public gallery present’ (HIB minutes, 10 September 1937) – an event passed over in silence in the Labor Daily report of the meeting (7 September 1937).

A wave of adverse publicity followed. Predictably, groups like the Legion of Christian Youth and building trade unions – not to mention newspaper leader writers and correspondents – attacked the Council for playing politics and holding up the urgent work of slum reclamation. The Daily Telegraph, under the boxed comment ‘Erskineville alderman have turned their backs on the government’s scheme to start sweeping away the slums from their district,’ published a heart-rending article entitled ‘I LIVE IN AN ERSKINEVILLE SLUM’ and purporting to a timely item written by a mother in the district (DT, 14 September 1937: 6). The tale reads suspiciously like a story compiled from all the stereotypes (many of which were certainly true) of what slum life was like – and written in the middle class offices of the Daily Telegraph.

Possibly as a consequence of the sharp press reaction, at the meeting of 20 September Henry and two of his supporters gave notice of a rescission motion that ‘owing to further information forthcoming Council accept the offer without making it obligatory for Erskineville Council to accept any other commitments’ (Erskineville Council minutes, 20 September 1937). In other words, the Council was happy for the first section to go ahead – but it was not making any deals on paying 107,000 pounds for the rest of the scheme. The motion was carried on 18 October.

Possibly to Henry’s surprise, the Premier was still willing to make further concessions. On 27 October, the Housing Board was told that the Premier was prepared to accept the Council’s offer and find the necessary finance. He also took the Board’s advice, and indicated that the Council should be asked to undertake to serve closing orders on 56 houses in the area unfit for human habitation (HIB minutes, 27 October 1937). The Board also hedged its bets and stressed that occupancy of a condemned house would not necessarily entitle the family concerned to selection as tenants, consistent with the Board’s determination throughout that only the best potential candidates were to be selected.
At all events, the Council baulked yet again. It refused to do the government’s ‘dirty work’ and act as ‘bailiffs’ for the eviction of workers – that is, it refused to issue closing and demolition orders (Labor Daily, 22 November 1937). A compromise motion to issue closing orders but to leave demolition orders and compensation up to adjustment between government and owners was lost (Erskineville Council minutes, 15 November 1937). At the same meeting, Henry pushed through his motion seeking compensation on the basis of the 1936 improved capital values. Henry told the press:

[I]f the Council went ahead with the demolition and acquisition of the land at unimproved capital values without compensation for buildings, it would be involved in litigation that would cripple it.

Apart from that, the scheme is unjust, and will result in financial institutions taking everything and landowners losing the lot.

We met with the Premier by deputation and with him was the whole paraphernalia of the Main Roads Board.

The Premier did not meet us on our main point, and we told him the Council would not stoop to do the sewer work the Government wanted it to do.

The Premier threatened to wipe out Erskineville Council altogether (DT, 22 November 1937: 6).

For the Government, this was the ‘last straw.’ The Board had already expressed its fear that full co-operation from the Council would be ‘improbable,’ and the Premier had told the Board that if necessary a short Bill should be prepared so it could go ahead and manage the scheme (HIB minutes, 3 November 1937). After the Council’s ‘thumbs-down,’ an obviously government-inspired story was splashed on the front page of the Sunday Sun, under the headline ‘DRASTIC NEW POWER FOR HOUSING.’

The story told how the State Government intended to clothe the Housing Board with drastic new powers that would render it independent of councils. It also referred to a new Bill in draft form that would empower the Board to resume slum areas without compensation for unfit buildings. It went on:

In Cabinet circles it is declared that if the Erskineville scheme is completed, the benefits will be so obvious that there will be no lack of public support for further action…

Since the scheme depends on the issue of closing and demolition orders by the Council, the project is held up and Erskineville children must continue to play in the gutters.

According to a prominent Minister the Council has done the Government a good turn by making it necessary to give the Housing Board adequate powers (Sunday Sun, 21 November 1937).
The Housing (Further Provisions) Bill was introduced in the Parliament on 7 December; the Legislative Assembly passed it on 10 December, and the Legislative Council on 17 December (with some minor amendments). It received the Royal assent the following day. From the speed with which it went through, it is clear Stevens was already planning his election for March 1938, and that he wanted slum clearance underway for it. It provided for ‘improvements and extensions’ related to the co-operative building societies guaranteed by the government, and to the Homes for the Unemployed Trust – as well as to the issue of slum clearance (NSWPD, 8 December 1937: 2391). The Act authorised commencement of the Erskineville scheme, and gave the Board power to issue closing notices. The scheme could now go ahead, with or without Council approval. The Board immediately called for tenders, and the first contract was let out to A.W. Edwards, builder, in February 1938. In January, Erskineville Council indicated that it was now in favour of the scheme.

### 3.5 THE TENANTS

Meanwhile, what were the people of Erskineville thinking? As already indicated, the strong support Elliott gave the scheme in an election year, and in the ward most affected by the scheme, may be an indication that not all electors went along with the Council’s hard line, even if landlords did. It may have been that a lot of people, tired of the endless pursuit of housing of a reasonable kind, tired of rent hikes, and tired of the endless fear of eviction, would have been happy to have new housing of any kind, if it offered relief from these factors – and especially if it was built in their own area.

Nevertheless, there was opposition. At the very least, many people did not want to move out of their immediate area: a social survey taken by Ogilvie indicated that at least 60 per cent of the people surveyed had no desire to move (DT, 1 September 1937: 2). Much of the opposition crystallised in a fierce dislike for flats. Despite the fact that many flats were being built in the more fashionable parts of the city and suburbs, it was still the received wisdom that ‘the flats of today are the slums of tomorrow.’

It was a refrain that was to be taken up often during the controversy over the Erskineville housing scheme – notably in Henry’s petition, cited above. Whether the petition originated

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26 See, for example, NSWPD, 15 December 1936: 1201, 1263; 9 December 1937: 2492, 2630; 16 May 1939: 4638, 4641; 14 May 1940: 8472; 21 May 1940: 8674. See also Labor Daily, 28 July 1937: 6; Sun, 28 July 1937; 27 August 1938. Note that some reporting was relatively favourable, along the line of ‘flats are better than slums:’ DT, 22 January 1937; 24 August 1937; 20 October 1937; 18 December 1937; Woman, 27 May 1937.
from the feelings of the local population or from the mind of an alderman determined to oppose the scheme, it seems that some local people adopted its objections as their own. Thus, in interviews with women residents, Miss Ogilvie found that the major objections were:

That they would be deprived of private garden space; that there would be a danger of their being thrown with undesirable neighbours; and that the establishment of public playgrounds to replace private yards would make difficult the supervision of children while at play, and would tend to break up the family group (SMH, 26 August 1937: 17).

The objections may well have been based on ignorance of the scheme’s potential – enthusiasm certainly mounted as the scheme neared completion the following year – but they seem no less to have been based on a well-founded mistrust of what appeared to be an attempt to manage their lives.

Occupation of the Erskineville flats began on 15 December 1938, with 245 tenant families (including 38 children) moving in. Magazines like Woman (26 December 1938) and Pix (7 January 1939: 3) published pages of pictures of beaming families, and drew the inevitable contrast between the grim battle for survival of decent standards in the slums and the luxury of the flats designed, in the words of their architects, M.E. Herman, ‘as though I was going to live in them myself’ (Pix, 7 January 1939: 3). Previously, the Board had arranged inspection tours for prospective tenants, including evening hours so husbands could look too. ‘The kitchen is a woman’s paradise,’ said one of them, a motor body assembler, and another said that if he got a flat he would consider himself ‘one of the luckiest men alive’ (Labor Daily, 18 November 1938). The Board also appointed a visiting English property manager on a temporary basis to vet prospective tenants. Miss Margaret Ratcliffe had not ‘made a special study of psychology, but I think common sense is what is required most in this job’ (DT, 18 November 1938: 9). Earlier, she had told Board interviewers that she was ‘able to develop in tenants – even those from some of the worst slum areas – a pride in their estate’ (HIB minutes, 16 August 1938). With such professional advice it may even be that a school suggested by Canon R.B.S. Hammond at which ‘dirty and undesirable tenants could be compulsorily taught domestic cleanliness’ (DT, 29 June 1937: 1) would not be needed.27

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27 Canon Hammond made his remarks in an address to the first annual meeting of the Housing Council, and went on to propose that a court should be empowered to commit such tenants to the school for training at certain hours in the principles of hygienic domestic duties. The Trade Union Review then enquired why ‘this Christian gentleman’ had not gone on to suggest ‘a Special Prison Training Farm for rapacious, heartless and undesirable landlords and property agents who create the undesirable tenants?’ (15 July 1937).
At first, the intention was to invite low-income slum dwellers from houses intended for clearance in Erskineville to become the new tenants. However, in view of mounting criticisms, the Board became increasingly anxious to put its demonstration scheme beyond reproach. Accordingly, it set rather high standards for incoming tenants. It even went so far as to suggest that ‘rather than putting in tenants who might prove unsuitable it would be preferable not to attempt to fill all the flats immediately they become available for occupation’ (HIB minutes, 8 November 1938). It had already decided that only ‘selected
tenants’ would be considered (HIB minutes, 3 November 1937). Thus tenants were required to be in regular employment; the maximum income permissible was initially set at 4/2/6 per week, then raised to 4/10/- per week, and then, so that discretion could be exercised ‘in the case of desirable tenants,’ stretched to 5 pounds per week (HIB minutes, 5 July 1938; 8 November 1938). This was well above the basic wage, quite apart from the fact that basic wage earners would in any case find it hard to pay 19/- per week in rent. Prospective tenants were interviewed and their homes inspected, and those not possessing adequate furniture of high enough standard were ruled out. In some cases, according to original tenants, furniture was fumigated before being allowed into the flats.28 In addition, the original requirement of residence in Erskineville was also eased to make sure desirable tenants were selected. Thus, by early January 1938, 35 flats were occupied, and Gerlach was reporting that he expected it would be necessary to take 10 applicants from districts adjoining Erskineville. It seems that like Abraham’s plea for Sodom of old, not 10 righteous men could be found in Erskineville.

In fact, it is clear that the Board’s selectivity was something of an embarrassment. At its meeting following the decision to stretch maximum permissible income for tenants to 5 pounds per week, the Minister for Social Services said that both he and the Premier were anxious to see closing and demolition orders on any substandard homes from which tenants might be chosen, and that tenants should be selected from a limited income range. The Board was, however, unyielding. It responded that ‘as the scheme was educational in character and therefore was more or less experimental, it was essential that every effort should be made to select desirable tenants’ (HIB minutes, 29 November 1938).

There were around 200 applicants for the 56 flats. Pix was entirely – if unconsciously – accurate in its laudatory comment that ‘only the most deserving cases were considered’ (Pix, 7 January 1939: 3). Incoming tenants had to sign an eight foolscap page ‘memorandum of agreement’ in which they committed themselves to, amongst other things, cleaning all their windows at least once a fortnight; to keep the WC and all pipes regularly cleansed; not permit their own ‘or any other children to comport themselves in such a mariner in or about the said flat or grounds that their conduct may be an annoyance or cause discomfort to other tenants of the said Block of Flats;’ not leave any boxes or rubbish or tools around the entrance hail, staircases or landings; not make any alterations to the fittings, or remove any partitions, doors or cupboards, or put any screws, nails or hooks into the walls; not to keep any pets in the premises; not play a radio or any musical instrument, or allow any singing, between 11:30 pm

28 As recalled by original residents in interviews conducted by the author, 1982.
and 6:30 am; and look after an allotted portion of the garden or grounds ‘in a tidy and proper manner.’ Having struggled through the innumerable clauses and subclauses of the agreement and signed the same, the tenants could then enter upon their inheritance for the sum of 19/- weekly – a sum the tenants agreed to round out to 1 pound weekly to cover the Christmas holidays. Normally, tenants were expected to be parents of around two children, and not too many more, in order to prevent ‘abuse.’ Indeed, the Board stipulated a number of requirements with the same end in mind. Thus ‘daily pails’ were provided for each flat because they were ‘less liable to abuse’ than refuse chutes. Gas fires were installed because they were ‘less liable to abuse’ than the use of wood, coal or coke – and the ‘method of obtaining fuel is also liable to abuse’ with these latter. The chosen skirtings, picture rails and windows were selected as the ‘least liable to abuse and most resistant to vermin.’

The Board continued to take a paternal interest in the wellbeing of its charges. It made a donation to the children’s Christmas party, encouraged the establishment of a tennis club, and protested vigorously – and but unsuccessfully and too late – over the transfer of a liquor licence from Alexandria to across the road at Swanson Street (HIB minutes, 9 March 1939). In any case none of the tenants appeared worried – the press could not find so much as a mother to complain – and one man robustly asserted that he liked a few beers on the way home from work (Sun, 7 March 1939). The Board also acted to limit the number of tradespeople calling on the flats, thus provoking yet another row with the Council, which accused it of discriminating against local businesses (HIB minutes, 7 February 1939; Erskineville Council minutes, 20 February 1939). In addition, the Board frowned on the employment of married women and threatened eviction should any dare to take jobs (HIB minutes, 5 March 1940). Installation of a children’s day nursery had been part of the original scheme – though not, it was stressed, to allow women to leave their children there while they went to work – and came to fruition with the building of the Lady Gowrie Children’s Centre there in 1940. Part of the middle class concern of the time was to get the children off the streets, and to teach them middle class values. The Lady Gowrie filled this need admirably:

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29 Original Housing Improvement Board lease, in possession of an original tenant resident, cited by the author, 1982.

30 Notes of proposals by the architect W.R. Richardson, 2 June 1937, in Erskineville Council ‘Housing’ file, Mitchell Library.

31 In interviews with the author, residents recalled that evictions for this reason were threatened and carried out.
The children attending the kindergartens come principally from poorer class homes, and attempts are being made to bring before the parents the desirability of carrying on kindergarten training in the home (Australian Council for Educational Research, cited in Spearritt, (Spearritt, 1974: 591)).

Meanwhile, awareness was beginning to dawn at the Housing Board that whatever else it might be, the Erskineville housing project was not exactly a program of slum clearance. A somewhat chastened Gerlach found it necessary to point out to the Board that it was violating the first principle of slum clearance: more families were now housed in Erskineville than before the flats were built. And Ogilvie capped this neatly, when she ‘advanced her opinion that something must be done to cope with the people who can only pay a low rent’ (HIB minutes, 1 August 1940). But wasn’t that what it had all been about?

3.6 Conclusion

Despite the fanfare proceeding the introduction of the Housing (Further Provisions) Bill, its further provisions were modest indeed, so far as the Housing Improvement Board was concerned. It could go ahead with the Erskineville scheme, but was given no further statutory powers; and with the Erskineville scheme underway, it found itself in a limbo not dissimilar to that of the local Council. It is clear that the Government was reluctant to set up a powerful housing authority, despite the pressure of church and planning bodies.

It will be remembered that the Board was originally given two charges: to consider schemes for improvement and relief of congested areas; and to report to the Government on town planning legislation. While the Board was developing the Erskineville plan as a model of government housing involvement, it was at the same time preparing its Report. This was completed in November 1937 – just as the Erskineville controversy was forcing the Government into legislative action. It was tabled in Parliament the following April (HIB, 1937). In the Report and the draft legislation that accompanied it, the Board recommended ‘the large-scale operations of a central housing authority’ – that is, the granting of sweeping executive power to the Board itself – as well as other recommendations, like organising the building industry and standardising equipment, planning the use of housing funds, and imposing a special housing tax of 1d in the pound to finance a housing program. It also came to the conclusion that state-municipal housing along English lines would not work in New South Wales:
It is a most difficult matter to even interest. Councils, let alone obtain their co-operation in the actual planning of a project. The Board is, therefore, reluctantly compelled to the conclusion that the problem is one which is beyond the resources and capabilities of Councils as presently constituted (HIB, 1937: 2).

It was no doubt a heartfelt sentiment. Gerlach expressed it rather differently in an address to the Real Estate Institute of NSW, when he spoke of the Erskineville Council as reminding him ‘of the perennial Irishman – who is always ‘agin the Government’ (Gerlach, 1937).

It was clear that once the Erskineville scheme was underway and its report submitted, the Board was a spent force. It was given no real powers or finance to initiate further projects, and seven months after its Report was submitted the Labor Daily was able to gibe that the latter was buried in ‘one of Mr Hawkins’ less accessible pigeonholes at the Department of Social Services’ (Labor Daily, 10 June 1938). A few months later Board member Ogilvie was still protesting that the only way to tackle the housing problem was to have a controlling authority (Daily News, 3 December 1938: 8). The Daily News – successor to the Labor Daily – had also picked up a rumour that ‘certain members of the Housing Improvement Board are said to be seriously considering resigning’ (Daily News, 13 December 1938: 3). The article quoted unnamed Board members as claiming the government had done nothing more to fulfil its slum clearance and rehousing policy since the erection of the first seven units at Erskineville. They said that the Board felt it was a purely nominal body with no legislative authority and no guarantee its services would be used in 1939. The article went on:

The Board has been trying for some time to obtain from the Minister for Social Services, Mr Richardson, who is in charge of housing, some idea of Government intention. Evidently he is also in the dark as to when slum clearance and rehousing will begin in earnest (Daily News, 13 December 1938: 3).

The following day, Richardson, of course, denied everything, and insisted the scheme would go on during the current financial year. It never did, and it is extremely doubtful that the Government had any intention that it would do so. It was clear that it had found the scheme too expensive and too controversial. At the same time, it was also reluctant to admit that it had abandoned any further plans for slum clearance.

This was particularly so after the fall of Stevens and his replacement by Alexander Mair in July 1939. At the beginning of the following year, Mair inspected the Erskineville flats and spoke optimistically about putting up another 56 flats, but was careful not to commit the Government. He was also careful to say that cottages were preferable so ‘the tenant could have the pleasure of growing his own flowers and vegetables’ (SMH, 6 January 1940: 16). The Board’s draft legislation was quietly shelved, and the Board found itself reduced to
plaintive pleas for contact with the Premier and senior ministers, and for pocket money to wind up the Erskineville project with reinstatement of the sports oval (HIB minutes, 9 August 1940; 4 February 1941; 7 October 1941). The Board limped along until late 1941, with less and less to talk about, until its last meeting on 2 December that year. The following year it was replaced by the Housing Commission of NSW, set up under McKell's Housing Act 1941 (NSW) – a Commission with very much the charter that the Board itself had been seeking.

Figure 3.13 A woman and her two children standing amidst the rubble of a collapsed wall in Erskineville in 1934 (City of Sydney Archives, 2002e).

In defence of Australia... BUILD HOUSES

This -
or this?

LABOR WILL BUILD HOMES FOR THE PEOPLE

Figure 3.14 In the 1941 state election, the NSW Labor Party - led by William McKell - wooed voters with its promise to ‘build homes for the people.’ Labor won office and shortly after established the NSW Housing Commission (Aplin, Foster & Howie-Willis, 1987: 198). Public housing was squarely on the political agenda.
A CONCLUSION...

In the absence of a conclusion written by Harvey, the following does what he did not have the chance to do – draw the threads together.

By Shirley Fitzgerald

The provision of housing that is affordable for all of the population is as much an issue in Sydney today as it was a century ago, but this work by Harvey Volke explains that the philosophical assumptions and political practice behind housing policy are very different. In 1900, the NSW Government considered it ‘advisable’ to own waterfront land, from Circular Quay to Darling Harbour, because the uses to which private property interests had put this land had resulted in conditions that were deemed not fitting for a modern, efficient port city. Current and recent NSW governments, both the Liberals and Labor, have been assiduously selling off this land, arguing the assumed inherent benefits of private development.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, as Volke’s study shows, state and local governments were arguing over which tier had the strongest claim to build public housing. This is a far cry from today’s tepid debates around this issue, where all tiers of government are in retreat. Part of the value of an historical study such as this one is to lay bare the ideological assumptions behind what currently masquerades as rational decision making behaviour.

A shift from the early twentieth century belief that the city was not really the place for living and that inner city land was too valuable for housing, to the present residential trend back into the inner city serves only to emphasise that housing comes in as a poor second to other land use considerations. These trends tell us more about the changing needs of capital in a period of deindustrialisation that is generating obsolete urban land than they tell us about any genuine choices being made in favour of dense inner city living. Volke’s study does not address current developments, but for anyone attempting to understand them, the kind of detailed examination of earlier practices and theoretical arguments provides salutary lessons.

At the micro level, early reforming and political ideas of what constituted suitable qualities to aim for in workers’ housing are also instructional.
In the first decades, Labor’s interest in model suburbs, in methods of land tenure other than freehold, and the establishment of the NSW Government Housing Board to provide public housing for purchase and rental all rubbed up against the hitherto unchallenged rights of private enterprise. The aim was not to provide charitably cheap housing, but to redress untenable market costs through the insertion of quality housing at fair costs into the market place. Supporters argued that the state’s role in the provision of decent dwellings was similar to its role in providing clean water supply or urban transport. At the time, this argument was questioned by conservative forces. Today, the debate is so muted as to be unheard, with state housing widely understood to be primarily for the poor and dysfunctional. Debates about the legitimacy of any role for the public sector in provision of model housing have dropped off the radar.

Volke’s discussion of the Daceyville experiment could be criticised for its preoccupation with the empirical story rather than with teasing out the theoretical issues, but as with the earlier Millers Point material, the comparisons with current issues are easy for the reader to make, and this renders it a valuable piece of work. Dacey’s statement that the government intended to build ‘so as to bring rents down to a fair market level’ is not a statement one would anticipate any politician contemplating today.

The piece on Erskineville tracks subsequent shifts in policy. Volke observed that ‘governments could think of no way of addressing private rental housing, as they were fearful of upsetting market relations.’ This begs the question of Daceyville, however ineffectual that experiment may have been. It is an appropriate segue into conservative Premier Steven’s arguments concerning the ‘social service’ nature of public housing in providing something that private enterprise could not. The qualitative distance between this rhetoric and that of the earlier period is a measure of the toll that a war and the depression had taken on the public psyche.

All of these case studies may be seen as an experimental prelude to the main game that emerged with the Housing Act of 1941, but the issues and debated surrounding these projects provide a necessary backdrop to the shifts and the pressures on official thinking concerning an issue that remains vitally important today.

Shirley Fitzgerald

City Historian
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Housing Improvement Act 1936 (NSW)
Public Works Act 1900 (NSW)
Savings Banks Amalgamation Act 1912 (NSW)
Sydney Corporation Dwelling Houses Act 1912 (NSW)

4.2. Reports and Minutes:

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Housing Improvement Board, Minutes.
Housing Improvement Board (1937a) ‘Notes of inspection and discussion with Premier, 9 June 1937,’ Housing Improvement Board file, Department of Housing.
Housing Improvement Board (1937b) Report, in NSWPP, vol. 18, 1940.
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New South Wales Legislative Assembly Votes and Proceedings.
New South Wales Parliamentary Debates.
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Mayne, A.J.C. 1991, Representing the Slum: Popular Journalism in a Late Nineteenth-century City, History Department, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Vic.


Stevens, B.S.B. 1937-1938, 'Housing, Slum Clearance and Abatement of Overcrowding in England, with Brief Mention of Similar Activities in Germany, Scandinavia and Italy', *NSWPP*, vol. 5, pp. 7-14.


### 4.4. Newspapers & Magazines

(Time did not permit a thorough check of all of Harvey’s sources – those for the Daily Telegraph and the Sydney Morning Herald are close to complete.)

*Australian Christian World*

*Building*

*Daily News*

*Daily Telegraph*

*Labor Daily*

*Pix*

*Sun*

*Sunday Sun*

*Sydney Morning Herald*

*Trade Union Review*

*Woman*

*Women's Weekly*

#### 4.4.1. Daily Telegraph


"'Daceyville" As It Will Look' (1912), *Daily Telegraph*, February 1, p. 11.


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1 Jennifer Gamble performed a check of most of Harvey Volke’s sources as any student would before submitting their thesis. Additional images were also sourced and I include those references as well. All effort was made to ensure that these supported Harvey’s existing work.
4.4.2. Labor Daily


'Housing Scheme is Rejected: Council Wants to Give Some Assurances: Assurance' (1937), Labor Daily, September 7, p. 5.


4.4.3. Sydney Morning Herald

'The Bubonic Plague' (1900), Sydney Morning Herald, June 23, p. 9.

'The Bubonic Plague' (1900), Sydney Morning Herald, January 10, p. 5.

'The Bubonic Plague' (1900), Sydney Morning Herald, January 13, p. 13.

'The Bubonic Plague: Further News From Name' (1900), *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 5, p. 6.

'The Bubonic Plague: Government Scheme for Combating It: Certain Wharfs to be Isolated: Ferries to be Removed: Ferries to be Cleansed and Disinfected: Steamer Traffic Rearranged: Conference with Steamship Owners' (1900), *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 23, p. 3.


'The Bubonic Plague: Precautions Adopted by the Health Officers: Removal to Quarantine of Relations of the Patient: Discussion by the Premiers' (1900), *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 26, p. 3.


'The Bubonic Plague: Suspicious Case in Sydney: A Family Quarantined: Interview with the President of the Board of Health: The Chances of Contagion: No Need for Alarm' (1900), *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 25, p. 5.


'Erskineville Town-Planning Proposal' (1937), *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 4, p. 16.

'Garden Suburb: Mr. Dacey Congratulated' (1912), *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 8, p. 8.


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4.5. Online Sources for Images:

Anonymous 2001/c.1920, *Welwyn Garden City Poster*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology: MIT OpenCourseWare, viewed October 9 2006


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A FAREWELL...

It is a great testimony to Harvey Volke that so many of his friends and colleagues participated in the drawing together of his work for this Master of Philosophy thesis. It is inevitably a partial rendition of Harvey’s work towards a Ph.D. Beyond the included writing, the references that Harvey cites reveal the traces of a larger more complex work yet to come. This document will provide others with an entry point to that end. However, as valuable as that is, the following extracts of a eulogy by Mary Perkins and Karine Shellshear show that Harvey’s academic work was only one aspect of a life well lived.¹

Harvey Volke, Housing campaigner, 1939-2005

An extract from a text by Mary Perkins & Karine Shellshear

…Harvey made a difference to countless lives, without fanfare or a desire for recognition. He believed that if people had affordable housing, many other social justice problems would be solved. A keen and talented communicator, he was not shy about engaging in vigorous policy debates with politicians and housing bureaucrats. He wrote many submissions and articles, made numerous presentations, and contributed to community and professional forums and to the teaching programs at the universities of Sydney and Western Sydney.

…For someone who might have appeared brash at times, Harvey was an incredibly well-read and highly cultured person, without any pretensions. He was gutsy and down to earth. He enjoyed everything from good food and wine to more heady pleasures such as music, poetry and literature - from Rumi to Rimbaud, from Messiaen to Arvo Part, from the theatre of Brecht

¹ The full text is available from Shelter NSW Annual Report 2004-05 available on the internet at the following URL: http://www.shelternsw.infoxchange.net.au/docs/rpt05annual.pdf and accessible at the time of printing in October 2006.
APPENDIX I...

to the novels of Tim Winton. He savoured history, which tells of human struggle and human triumph, from the very mundane to the most extraordinary.

Harvey lived the ambivalent life of a non-conformist – a rambunctious yet gentle-hearted person with a passionate temperament and a seemingly gruff exterior. He recognised the power of symbolic language in particular - the capacity for words to provoke and arouse.

There was no hereafter in Harvey’s world view, only the moment, and he made every instant precious and meaningful, while retaining a wry sense of humour.

Mary Perkins &
Karine Shellshear

A Final Laugh by a friend and colleague....

A friend and colleague of Harvey generously agreed to the reproduction of the following two frames of a longer cartoon strip. It seems fitting to give Harvey the last word...
5.2. Appendix II

This Appendix includes unedited documents by Harvey.

5.2.1. Ph.D. Proposal

5.2.2. Ph.D. Thesis: Preliminary Outline: Low-Income Housing Reform in Sydney 1900-1939

5.2.3. Draft Workplan
A STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF LOW-INCOME HOUSING REFORM IN SYDNEY IN THE PERIOD 1900-1939

by Harvey Volke

Submitted in partial fulfilment of Ph.D. Proposal

Faculty of Architecture,
University of Sydney

Supervisor: Dr. Anna Rubbo
Adviser: Mr. Colin James
Ph.D. Thesis, Harvey Volke: Low-income housing reform in Sydney 1900-1939

Preliminary outline of thesis

Chapters 1, 2: Introduction

Early history of government housing policy

Background to period under review, 1900-1939:
  Growth of the city and suburbs
  Developing awareness of problems of slum housing

Chapter 3: An accidental landlord

1900 Plague outbreak
Rocks resumption and management
Responses to Millers Point housing issues:
  Government
  Middle class reformers
  Residents

Chapter 4: A planned approach

Establishment of Housing Board
Early development of Daceyville

Chapter 5: A local government solution?

City Council housing

Chapter 6: Legislative approaches

Fair rents legislation
Home purchase protection

Chapter 7: Postwar experiments

The end of Daceyville
Voluntarism and soldier settlements
Homes fit for Heroes –
  War Service Homes
Chapter 8: The Depression and its aftermath

Eviction struggles
Slum clearance
Charity responses – Hammond and Hammondville
Government responses:
  Legislative regulation
  Homes for the Unemployed Trust
  Government loan guarantees

Chapter 9: A reluctant landlord

Establishment of Housing Improvement Board
An experiment in Erskineville
Establishment of NSW Housing Commission

Conclusion

The golden mean: home ownership and a life in the suburbs
The failure of slum clearance
Limited State housing
The workers: What it takes to survive
Abstract

Historically, housing policy in New South Wales has been one of consistent disengagement of Government from issues of low-income housing policy. Characteristically, until the 1940s, Government responses were dictated from within a laissez-faire liberal framework in which housing provision was best left to the operations of market forces. This impacted severely on the availability of appropriate and affordable housing for low income people. Insofar as low-income housing policy was addressed at all, it was usually in terms of encouraging people into home ownership. Nevertheless the period from around 1900 to 1940 saw the beginnings of deliberate government intervention in the housing market in piecemeal attempts to address the issue. A range of factors combined to produce this outcome, including outbreaks of contagious disease in badly-drained and unsewered slum precincts, and increasing pressure from a range of disparate groups. These included the nascent town planning lobby, church and charity bodies, and not least, working class organisations and working class people themselves. Business interest in redeveloping prime commercial sites also played a role in the moves for slum clearance. The period was characterised by a series of attempts to resolve low-income housing problems in Sydney, or at least, the problems of slum clearance. These ranged from State resumption of the Rocks area, to attempts by both city governments and State governments to provide minimal amounts of public housing for some of those displaced by resumptions, and included attempts at encouraging self-help and self-reliance by church and charitable agencies, as well as State bodies. They also included attempts to address the problems of low-income tenants in the private rental market by legislative means, e.g., in introducing rent control and some limited efforts to control the rate of evictions during the Depression era. The fact remains, that the period is characterised by a marked failure to undertake any substantive initiatives that would make a serious contribution to resolving the manifest problems. The reasons for this failure are complex, but include a policy commitment to home ownership (and to separate homes on separate sites at that), a prevailing ideology of laissez faire liberalism, and a shifting of responsibility for dealing with the problems between local and State authorities. It was only at the end of the period that State Government accepted the responsibility for ensuring some attempt at meeting the needs of low-income people.
Literature review

In Australia, housing studies are still relatively in their infancy. Consequently, for the subject under discussion little substantive work has been published that bears directly on Australian housing history. This is even more the case with relation to the history of housing for working-class people. It is more often the case that housing is a subset of works on general aspects of the history of Sydney, or of welfare history or economic history. Where housing is looked at in any detail, it normally comes in one of three categories: architectural histories, planning histories, and social histories.

In 1952 Robin Boyd produced his groundbreaking study of "the small house" in Australia, which looked at the development of different styles of housing and construction within an historical framework from the beginnings of European settlement. Effectively, *Australia's Home* is a study of the history of the vernacular in domestic building. While his work contains original, thoughtful and well-informed reflections on the forms of housing available to low-income people at different times, its primary emphasis is on housing design and its historical development and changes. Nevertheless, he also sets this within a broad framework that takes account of social movements within Australian history, and of the geographical and environmental factors that shaped housing construction. In many ways, Boyd anticipated the debates that would later centre on these issues.

In 1975 Leonie Sandercock was the first to publish an historical study of urban planning in Australia, in the course of which she examined the emergence of the town planning movement from 1900-1920, and placed this within the context of ideologically-determined laissez-faire urban policies. Essentially, she saw the story as being one about failure: The failure of city planning in Australia to improve the welfare of city dwellers (1975, p.1). Broadly, she defined the town planning movement as middle-class and conservative, not wishing to address issues of social change or redistributive policies. While there is much truth in this, later studies (e.g., Keane, 1994) discern more complex interactions, e.g., between proponents of laissez-faire liberalism, progressive liberalism and State interventionism, both within the town planning movement and between this and other interest groups such as the labour movement. Her later work (1990) is essentially a US reprint, with a new introduction updating developments and drawing comparisons with the US experience. She also revisits the theoretical debate in such a way as to espouse a less structurally-determined approach and to take account of feminist historiography. Nevertheless, her pessimistic conclusion, although now more subtle and refined, remains essentially unchanged, if not quite so negative. In fact, while Sandercock felt the past was a matter of failure, her conclusion to the former work in looking to the future was relatively upbeat, written as it was during the years of the fevered urban reorganisation projects of the federal Whitlam government. Subsequent national experience returned the debate to the State arena, although the Whitlam years left their impress on even the state planning agencies that most opposed that government.
At the same time as Sandercock was producing her work on urban planning history, two social historians were looking at some aspects of Australian housing: Peter Spearritt and Max Kelly. Both of them also undertook studies of lower-income and especially slum housing, within the broader context of metropolitan and suburban development generally.

Spearritt addressed issues of low-income housing history in some sections of his *Sydney since the Twenties* (1978), and in a series of papers on slum housing in the twentieth century. Spearritt’s work was meticulously researched, and he put forward several theories, e.g.: (1) that a consensus developed in the inter-war period between reformist and conservative political forces that home ownership was the preferred option for working class people, and that accordingly government policy was consistently shaped towards this end, to the consequent loss of those unable to afford to gain access to home ownership; (2) that much of the social criticism of the slums was based on ideological factors like uninformed or blinkered middle-class perceptions of life in the slums, and theories of physical determinism: “you can take the man out of the slums, but you can’t take the slums out of the man”; and (3) the significance of the 1920s and of speculative land development in the shape and direction of Sydney suburban expansion. Spearritt’s *Sydney Since the Twenties* has since been superseded by his centennial work, *Sydney’s Century: A History* (2000), which takes the earlier work as a framework, adds new sections, edits it quite substantially and fills out and updates the detail in many sections without altering the fundamental conclusions.

Assuredly, there is much truth in Spearritt’s work, as well as a little romanticism: While it is true that middle-class observers were suffocatingly patronising and had little understanding of working-class lives or values, life in the slums was hardly carefree and gay, and slum housing was unbearably inadequate. Far from being content with their lot in life, most people would give anything to get out of the slums, but were denied the opportunity to do so by lack of resources, and by such factors as the need to remain close to places of work.

Spearritt’s work contains a plethora of extraordinarily valuable information -- it is an inescapable source work for any study that wishes to address Sydney’s history -- but it does not directly confront the issue this study wishes to raise, other than broadly in a descriptive way: Why did Governments so signally fail to address the question of the manifest housing need of low-income people in the decades prior to World War II? This was a period when, for example, the parent country, Britain, put vast energy and resources into the building of State-subsidised housing for those who could not otherwise afford stable housing. Yet in New South Wales, little occurred except for small and scattered experimental projects — a small amount of housing reluctantly provided in Sydney’s Rocks as a consequence of a State takeover of the area following the 1900 Plague outbreak; some experimental projects by Sydney City Council; the development of the first stage of the State Government’s garden suburb project at Daceyville; and the construction of a small number of flats in Erskineville. This was also a period when strenuous attempts were made by shifting coalitions of town planning enthusiasts, church and charity workers, and trade unions; yet their combined efforts in the end resulted in little change. Even at the height of the Depression, government policy was singularly
unproductive of results in affordable housing on the ground. Such experiments as there were – such as that at Hammondville – were often enough carried out by church and charitable agencies; or else, as at Matraville, they were government-backed projects carried out by voluntary labour.

In his work, Max Kelly has deployed a variety of methodologies, ranging from analysis of historical photographic collections (1977 and 1982) to studies of suburban land development (1978) and to collections of papers on issues in suburban history (1987). In his first work discussed here (1977) he tells the story of the effects of the bubonic plague outbreak in 1900 on the residents and housing of the Rocks area of Sydney, centred on a collection of photographs from that time. Clearly the photographs were formally commissioned to document the slum housing and the clean-up efforts of the period, and equally they were taken by a photographer with a sharp perception of prevailing social conditions. In his second study (1978) he challenged the then prevailing view that Australians in the "long boom" of the late nineteenth century had a relatively high standard of living, by examining "the Sydney slum" between 1860 and 1900. Kelly concluded that the City of Sydney had never housed its working population adequately. This housing crisis was exacerbated by the proliferation of commercial development in what was becoming the central business district. Added to the overcrowding this created as working-class people competed for declining (in every sense) housing stock, were the problems of housing that was -- and always had been -- substandard and insanitary. This was a disaster that only awaited the event of the Plague outbreak in 1900 -- and which was not unique, in any case.

Two historians who have taken a lively interest in low-income housing issues in the city of Sydney are Shirley Fitzgerald (1987, 1992) and A.J.C. Mayne (1982, 1991, 1993). Perhaps inevitably, given that their historical focus relates specifically to urban centres (in Mayne's case, specifically related to comparisons between three international urban centres, one of which is Sydney), their concentration has been on the issue of slum housing. Both anatomise in considerable detail social perceptions and something of the lived reality of slum housing, and the conjuncture of a middle-class ideological commitment to sweeping away the slums and economic interest in replacing them with commercial developments. Fitzgerald in particular sets slum housing within the context of a continuously dispossessed working class for whom upward social mobility was all but impossible at the turn of the twentieth century, contrary to the egalitarian social mythology of the time. In her earlier work she pays close attention to issues of occupational mobility, and demonstrates that far from Australia being a "workingman's paradise" in the period of the long boom before 1890, the expanding need for unskilled labour in a rapidly-growing metropolis led to a downgrading of employment and of older trades for many working people. For his part, Mayne concentrates on the political and ideological issues of the slums, particularly in relation to the internal power struggles of the Sydney City Council, and on media perceptions of slum living. Mayne's work relates almost exclusively to the second half of the nineteenth century, as does Fitzgerald's earlier work.

Both Fitzgerald and Mayne also place their work within the context of ongoing conflict
between State and metropolitan governments for power, with the former requiring the latter to take on a range of responsibilities (e.g., rates and water and power supply), but not really being willing to give them the power or resources to address these issues substantively. Instead, issues like sewerage and housing were used as clubs with which each party could batter the other, but in the end neither party was prepared to accept responsibility until provoked by major catastrophe such as that of the outbreak of bubonic plague in Sydney in 1900, which led to a State Government takeover of the area.

In a detailed study of Sydney's environmental history Dan Huon Coward (1988) takes up the issue of sewerage provision and of Sydney's health problems arising from lack of adequate provision. Coward's pre-eminent concern is to chart the history of pollution and waste management in the Sydney basin, which he sees as a product of an ongoing and unfinished industrial revolution. Like the other authors listed above, he also sees its effects as unequal in distribution, and as bearing down especially on working class people without the resources to compete equally in a market economy. Coward examines the history of legislation aimed at dealing with public health issues, and on the whole concludes that it has most often been a case of too little too late, and aimed at preserving middle-class enclaves from infections generated from badly-drained and rundown working-class areas. Like Fitzgerald and Mayne, he also sees legislation as too often and too tardily being the ineffectual outcome of power struggles between State and metropolitan governments. In coming to similar conclusions, Patrick Troy (1988) looks briefly at the history of government housing policy in NSW from 1788 to 1900, and, like Coward, does this principally through a study of the legislation (or lack of it, on his essential thesis) affecting housing.

Several collections of papers touch on various aspects of housing history, including Max Kelly (1978, 1987) and Jill Roe (1980). These cover a broad range of urban history topics and housing features only in some of the papers, and working class housing in even less. Because Kelly's later work (1987) is a collection of papers relating to suburban development, it concentrates more closely on housing issues, but this is usually related to the general development of specific suburbs. Carolyn Allport's contributions (1980, 1987) confront working class housing more directly, but her papers principally concern the development of the Housing Commission of NSW in the period immediately following that proposed for this thesis. Other contributions (e.g., Robert Freestone and Terry Kass (1987) examine the development of garden suburbs and the rise of home ownership, and some of the difficulties with which these confronted low-income working class people.

From a feminist perspective, Kerreen Reiger (1985) looks at the role of women in Australian society from 1880 to 1940, and in particular the way they were consistently marginalised despite changing patterns of male work and changing technologies in home building and in home furnishing and “labour saving devices”. She sees the era as one in which women’s role was rigidly defined as being within the household, and in which their task was one of home management, child rearing and provision of emotional and material support in the maintenance and reproduction of the male labour force. Innovations in health practices and in domestic technologies largely served to increase
the complexity of domestic management tasks and to reinforce the domestic role of women, while at the same time increasingly isolating them in dormitory suburbs.

Several unpublished theses look at housing history and especially in the ways it has impacted on working class people. The first of these was a Ph.D study by Phillip Briggs (1972), which looked at public housing in Sydney, past, present and future. Inevitably, in a study of this breadth, the work covering the period 1900-1939 was necessarily brief, and dealt with a number of issues on the run. In another Ph.D. thesis, Graeme Bethune (1977) undertook a detailed study of urban home ownership in Australia, which was essentially an examination of government policies affecting housing tenure. It also, however, includes historical data on levels of home ownership, and the ways in which government policy has both produced relatively high levels of home ownership and also increased inequalities in distribution of income and wealth.

The most comprehensive Ph.D. thesis examining a similar area of study to that proposed is that of C.J. Keane (1993), who deals with the history of housing reform "from Darling Harbour to Daceyville". He argues that public housing was never a foregone conclusion as a response to working class housing problems, and that the issue should be seen within the context of continuities with the late nineteenth century in addition to any impetus for change. What policies emerged did so as a consequence of a broad range of factors, and could not be easily predicted or defined in terms of linear development. These included conflict not only between housing reformers and government, but also within the housing reform movement itself. Keane sees this latter principally as a consequence of different and limited visions of society held by such groupings as progressive liberals (e.g., town planners and health and civic reformers), and State Socialists, pre-eminently in the new Labor Party and the labour movement. The former saw government as a neutral arbiter which could set the framework for environmental/cultural interventions rather than itself providing political solutions. For their part, State Socialists saw the State as a means by which they could direct political institutions into effecting improvements for working class people. While there is much truth in Keane's argument, further could be said. It will be one of the themes of this piece of work that in response to the pressures, a range of alternative approaches were attempted -- mostly with a relative lack of success; but that by the end of the period it seemed increasingly apparent that while so far as possible workers should be encouraged into home ownership (this was -- and is -- almost a *sine qua non* of Australian housing policy), State intervention would be necessary to address the housing problems of those who did not have the resources to enter home ownership. Another theme will be the argument that the inter-war period saw a sharp contest for ideological supremacy between laissez-faire liberal and social interventionist theories, with the outcome -- insofar as there was one -- of uneasy and reluctant compromise.

In recent years there has been something of a flowering of metropolitan and suburban histories and planning studies. This was probably sparked by a range of factors. They would include the work of, the Sydney History Group, both in its encouragement of urban studies and in it publications, and also in the related encouragement of urban studies in the universities. Local government has also played a significant role, most obviously through the historical projects of the Council of the City of Sydney. Federal,
State and local government funding have also encouraged this trend, through celebrations such as the bicentennial, the sesquicentennial of municipal government in Sydney, and now, the end of the century and the millennium (indeed, some publishers were so keen to catch the millennium that several books in fact published in 1999 are dated 2000). In addition to the works already mentioned, recent publications have included Paul Ashton's *The Accidental City: Planning Sydney Since 1788* (1993), Stephen Hamnett and Robert Freestone's *The Australian Metropolis: A Planning History* (2000) and John Birmingham's *Leviathan* (1999).

The title of Ashton's work -- *The Accidental City* -- pretty well sums up the argument he wishes to make. His central theme is that Sydney is "an accidental city, a city which emerged from a complex web of power relations without recourse to holistic planning" (p.10). The fundamental reason for this is that Sydney has developed within a capitalist society in which *laissez-faire* individualism has consistently thwarted attempts at planned overall development or control. This is unsurprising, he says, as Sydney is part of a capitalist society within which the dominant powers of profit maximisation, greed and private property compete anarchically for the spoils of power. This is played out in the sphere of the market, and also in the competitive pressures within and between State and local governments, and between the "state" and civic institutions. The consequence has been an almost constant piecemeal redevelopment of Sydney since the second half of the nineteenth century.

While the thrust of the proposed thesis is sympathetic to this analysis, it will be one of its functions to test the analysis against the historical developments in low-income housing policy and practice in the first part of the twentieth century. In terms of low-income housing in the period in question, Ashton essentially traverses the same ground covered by other writers. Like others, he points to the inadequacies of the legislative process, particularly in the way in which, while legislation ultimately gave the Sydney City Council resumption powers, it was only late and partially that the council gained limited power to construct housing. The inevitable consequence was that much more low-income housing was destroyed than was ever constructed. On Ashton's account, the question must be asked whether the situation would have been all that different if there had been earlier and more comprehensive legislation, given commercial interests in and pressures on increasingly-valuable working class areas of the city.

Given Ashton's analytical framework, it is also surprising that he does not reflect more on the middle-class background of the town planning movement, and the ways it was influenced by prevailing ideologies and practices as well as by the ways in which it sought to influence these. The movement's planning priorities were not only not necessarily identical with those of working-class people, but may even have come into direct conflict with them: Classically, this was the case much later, in the era of the green bans and proposed freeway developments through working-class enclaves in the 1970s. The issue of the relationships between the different strands of housing struggles in the period under review is one that remains to be teased out.

Hamnett and Freestone (2000) note the rapidly expanding historiography of urban
studies, and also note that much planning history is unavoidably about "failure" (p.2, quoting Sandercock). However, they -- and the scholars who have written the separate chronologically sequential chapters of the book -- also want to redress the balance and place the failures within a critical planning history which also recognises the achievements. While there are a number of authors, the book maintains an impressive unity of purpose, and identifies several interrelated themes, including

"... the continuity and circularity of much planning thought, the ongoing quest for coordination, the centrality of state governments in metropolitan planning and the difficulties of securing inter-governmental cooperation, the unavoidable politicisation of planning, the influence of global developments on theory and practice, the significance of Canberra as both a unique laboratory and mirror of twentieth-century planning ideas, the primacy of suburbanisation in Australian metropolitan evolution, and the not infrequent failures of planning in relation to both theoretical ideals and community needs." (p.9f.)

In a succession of essays, Robert Freestone, Christine Garnaut and Alan Hutchings survey the development of the town planning movement. Freestone saw only limited gains, and on the whole concluded that in the earlier phase of transition from "city improvement to the city beautiful", high ideals failed to address practical issues such as roads, subdivision planning and housing (Freestone). Garnaut concluded that while the garden city movement had some influence on suburban development and suburban style, overall the larger goals of decentralisation failed both because Australian reformers tried to work within the existing economic and social framework, and because there was no authority in any Australian city to undertake change at the metropolitan level. For the interwar period, Hutchings comes to somewhat more optimistic conclusions, but does so by narrowing the scope of the planning enterprise. He maintains that by the end of the 1930s a workable balance was struck between central and local government, and that the legislative framework established in the period at least was a forerunner to the more complex systems of citizen participation, comment and appeal he sees as characteristic of the present. Unfortunately, this somewhat optimistic outlook is open to challenge both in the past and in the present, especially when the focus is narrowed to working class housing provision.

Birmingham's work is not so much an academic history of Sydney as a carefully-researched reflection on a series of themes and illustrative episodes in the history of Sydney that he sees as having gone into the composition (or, arguably the decomposition) of the spirit and character of the city. Birmingham's tale is essentially one of power and corruption, focussing on the chasm that divides the rich and the poor. He draws parallels and continuities between the corruption of the city by the officers of the Rum Corps at the turn of the nineteenth century and the depredations of the robber-baron property developers of the 1970s; between the desperation of the eviction struggles of the 1930s and the Victoria Street battles of the 1970s; and between the corruption of the nightwatch of the first settlement and the corpse-ratting by city morgue attendants in the 1980s. He sees all of this as systemic corruption and abuse of power throughout the European presence in Sydney. His pessimistic vision of Sydney is of a glittering brilliance with a
moral vacuum at its core. His rambunctious work includes vivid and evocative
descriptions of working-class housing in nineteenth-century Sydney and of the 1900
Plague outbreak.

Recent architectural histories of housing include John Archer's *Building a Nation* (1987)
and Peter Cuffley's *Australian Houses of the Twenties and Thirties* (1993). In the nature
of things, these are primarily studies in the developments of style, form and construction
of housing, and insofar as they enter historical analysis at all, it is essentially to provide a
descriptive background to their main theme. Equally inevitably, the issues faced by
working class people in gaining access to affordable or appropriate housing, receive little
attention, except in passing, and except insofar as mass housing for working-class and
lower-middle class aspirants to home ownership impacted on the design and availability
of housing, e.g., in the case of the Californian bungalow in the 1920s. In the nature of
things, also, architect-designed housing was rare indeed for working class people.
Archer's book is a lively one, filled with apt illustrations and quotations, yet for all his
good intentions his glancing references to low-income housing tend to reinforce
stereotypes and are sometimes plain wrong, e.g., picture captions like: "Darlinghurst,
Sydney, viewed from Victoria Street around 1890, had already begun the long slide from
wealth and 'respectability' to an overcrowded, vice-ridden slum" (p.117); and "Sydney's
Rocks district . . . received a much-needed spring cleaning in 1901, when an outbreak of
bubonic plague was traced to its vermin-infested hovels." (p.142). In fact, the Plague
outbreak was in 1900, its most likely cause was infected rats from the harbour shipping,
and only a handful of the 303 fatalities were in the Millers Point/Rocks area.
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Chapter 1 -- Introduction

The period 1900-1939 is, in some ways, a prehistory of the development of low-income housing policy by Australian governments. The directions policy discussion took in that era combined with a range of historical factors to produce the broad thrust of low-income housing policy and practice as we know them today. Depressingly, the policy failures of that era continue to resonate at the end of the century with which they began.

Before the period under review, the issue of low income housing only infrequently rose to public consciousness in New South Wales. When it did so it was almost solely in terms of concerns about slums and slum denizens, and of the dangers of contagion from overcrowded and rundown inner urban enclaves like The Rocks and Darling Harbour and inner suburbs like Chippendale and Redfern. The political appeal of defining the issue in this way was that it could combine moral fervour with the drive to redevelop metropolitan Sydney as a gleaming new commercial entrepot of the southern seas. After this period, however, we begin to see a more concerted attempt to develop low-income housing policy; although, regrettably, never to a degree where it has made a serious impression on the need for adequate housing provision for low-income earners.

The 1900-1939 period is essentially a time when stumbling and partial attempts were made to deal with the issue through the prism of the perceived problem of the slums, and it was only slowly that the underlying policy issue of ensuring adequate and affordable housing for low-income people generally began to be grasped.

A confluence of interests developed that led to this concentration on one aspect of the problem. Business interests were hungry to redevelop inner urban slum areas for commercial purposes. Health authorities were concerned about the apparent spread of disease from slum areas, most particularly after the outbreak of bubonic plague in The Rocks in 1900. The nascent town planning movement was interested in model projects that would demonstrate the value of town planning in schemes such as garden cities and suburbs. Church and charitable agencies were aware of the hardships and often appalling housing conditions of their clients, even if it was sometimes difficult to disentangle this awareness from moralistic middle-class judgements about the social effects of “slumdom” and the “slum mentality”. Trades unions were concerned both by the living conditions of their members, and no less by the possibilities of increased jobs and memberships through the expansion of the building industry. And working-class people themselves wanted cheap and adequate housing close to their workplaces as a first priority; they were less concerned about the moral judgements of their betters than about where and how they would live if their homes were torn down.

All of these factors and interests combined to exert pressure on governments to do something about the slums. Ideological factors, however, led to significant further
pressures:

- Above all else, private home ownership was considered the natural and desirable preferred option; working class people should be encouraged into it.

- Not only was home ownership the preferred option, but separate cottages on their own blocks of land were also to be encouraged.

This was a tradition present to greater or lesser degree throughout the history of European occupation of Sydney. It was also reinforced by the development of urban conglomerations in England as a result of the Industrial Revolution, and the hitherto unknown experience of large masses of people concentrated in urban "rookeries". Poverty and inadequate housing had always been present in England, but never before on this scale: This led in the mid- and late-nineteenth century to a mixture of fear and fascination as the middle class contemplated the unknown and incomprehensible world of the slums. In the age of empire, fascination with darkest Africa slid over into a like fascination with life in darkest England.

And from thence to the colonies. The colonial bourgeoisie prided themselves on being the pioneers of a young country without all the evils and inequities of the old world. Yet, on the other hand, they believed they had found -- to their horror -- the same diseases of filth, degradation and overcrowding in rotting slum areas.

Their world was one dominated by a laissez-faire liberal philosophy in which social good was best secured by minimal interference in the marketplace, and in which government should stand aside from the market so the latter would not be obstructed in its delicate task of reconciling competing interests and managing competition and the economy. Since the market operated ultimately to the benefit of all, interference was ill-advised and would create only havoc. The corollary was that if large numbers of people were reduced to poverty, it must somehow be their own fault, which could be remedied only by self-help, frugality and discipline.

Further theories fitted under this umbrella. For example that of physical determinism, by which people's character was determined by their physical surroundings -- you could take the man out of the slum, but you could not take the slum out of the man. Slum reformers used slogans such as this as partial justification for their aim of tearing down the slums, in the hope of rearing a new generation in the sunshine and space of the suburbs (blissfully ignoring the fact that low-income housing in the suburbs -- or, for that matter, in the wide, open spaces of the country -- could be just as rundown and poverty stricken as any metropolitan rookery). In addition, at the turn of the century the germ theory of disease causation pioneered by Louis Pasteur was becoming known, but many were still influenced by the older miasma theory, in which diseases were carried by noxious effluvia rising from swamps, cesspits and rotting garbage. This distinction became crucial during the outbreak of bubonic plague in Sydney in 1900. The older theory dictated quarantine, cleansing operations and limewashing of buildings, but these strategies would not have stopped the spread of the disease had not the City Health
Officer indicated that the disease was being spread by infected rats, and insisted on a campaign of eradication.

And finally, the evolution of co-ordinated policy was also at the mercy of changing political trends, and of conflict between political groupings, and between levels of government. Nor could it be relied on that one side of politics would be more socially progressive on housing issues than the other: While it was the Labor Party that initiated the Daceyville housing project in 1912, it was a conservative Nationalist Government that undertook the Erskineville housing project in 1938, and that over the protests of the Labor Party.

One of the consistent threads of political argument throughout the period between 1900 and 1939 was the question of which level of government could be held liable for doing something, anything, about the housing plight of low-income earners. In general, the State Government was reluctant to get involved: Housing, on the whole, was something to be regulated by local government (if any regulation at all was required), though State governments were no less reluctant to hand over real powers or resources to local government to tackle the issue in any meaningful way. For its part, local government -- and especially in the earlier part of the era, the Sydney City Council -- defined its role in much more narrow terms, and was, in any case, much more interested in tearing down the slums for commercial redevelopment than in social experiments with low-income housing.

All of these pressures -- sometimes combining, sometimes in conflict -- both led to a range of small-scale experiments in alternative housing provision for low-income earners, and at the same time stultified any co-ordinated and large-scale assault on the problem.

Chapter 2: An accidental landlord -- the Rocks resumption, 1900

In the first instance of political intervention in the housing market in this era, the State Government became an accidental landlord. It reluctantly resumed the privately-owned jetties, the businesses and the homes of the Rocks. A complex of factors led to this decision, including

- Pre-eminently, the experience of the bubonic plague in 1900;
- As a consequence of this, the need to improve sanitation in the area;
- The need to improve harbour operations in the wake of substantial increases in shipping, while at the same time the wharves were rundown and poorly-managed by private enterprise, which was only too glad to hand them over to the government to avoid the payment of wharfage fees;
- The need to be seen to be doing something about the slums and slum overcrowding;
- The pressure for redevelopment of valuable commercial sites;
• Conflict between State Government and the City Council;

• Political pressure from a developing labour movement.

As a result of its resumption, the government found itself in the position of having become landlord to several hundred existing residents of the Millers Point, Rocks and Darling Harbour area. At first it tried to conduct the housing on a straightforward commercial basis, but then discovered several things:

• Much of the housing was in poor condition, and was, in fact, liable to be condemned by the City Council;

• If rents were raised, they would become unaffordable to the people living in them;

• In addition, as a number of the residents were wharf labourers, not only would they organise protests, but they would also be supported by their union, the Sydney Wharf Labourers' Union, whose President, W.M. Hughes, was also a vocal Labor Member of Parliament.

In fact, over time the government moderated its pressure on rents, and also pulled down several hundred homes. In addition, however, it built a much smaller number of tenements, notably in High Street, Millers Point. It also had plans for even more ambitious tenement construction, but these fell foul of a united outcry for the development of separate cottages in the suburbs, which were less likely to become “the slums of tomorrow”.

There was one other small-scale attempt at addressing the low-income housing issue that is also worthy of note: The introduction of the Blockholders Act in 1900 provided for 99-year leases of Crown land south of Kensington, which also required leaseholders to build substantial houses within a set period and move into them. The costs involved virtually ruled out most working-class people from being able to take out such leases, and only a handful of leases were taken up, at least as the scheme was originally envisaged. This project requires further research, but it is of contemporary interest as those leases are now expiring and Government is currently looking at the question of how to deal with them.

Chapter 3: A garden suburb experiment: Daceyville

In 1912, the first Labor Government in NSW undertook the first co-ordinated experiment in public housing development by a NSW State Government. The 1912 Housing Act established a Housing Board, and took as its opening project the development of a garden suburb at what came to be known as Daceyville, in the sandhills beyond Kensington. Taking note of the agitation over the evils of tenement housing, the Government was clear that the project should comprise of separate cottages on their own blocks of land.
The project was planned to demonstrate to local government (significantly) "how workmen's homes should be built and grouped in order to provide pleasant homes and healthy suburbs and to show how cheaply they could be provided". Nearly 1500 houses were planned in the development of an entire suburb. However, what proved controversial -- at least with the conservative Opposition -- was the fact that the legislation specifically provided that these cottages could be rented out, although the levels of cost virtually ensured that only workers in regular and well-paid employment could afford them.

The scheme was also heavily influenced by the emergent town planning lobby, which saw it as a golden opportunity to experiment along the lines of Ebenezer Howard's "Garden City" which had only recently been published. Accordingly, architects of the calibre of John Sulman, an English expatriate who came to prominence in Australian architecture through the town planning movement, and was joint author of a planning text used until recently in Sydney University, became involved in drawing up an overall plan for Daceyville. While only the first section of the project was completed, it has remained in public hands to the present day, and indeed the Department of Housing has undertaken considerable restoration and refurbishment activities in Daceyville, together with construction of sympathetic infill housing.

The war years intervened and development effectively came to a halt, and in the postwar years the scheme fell foul of an ideological battle between those favouring State intervention, and those strongly opposed to it. Several conservative politicians began stirring the pot, sensing an election issue, and before long scandalous stories began appearing in the press about corruption, theft of materials, and the construction of dubious and inadequate foundations in the sandhills beyond Kensington. A Royal Commission was appointed by the Nationalist Government, but was unable to uncover evidence of criminal conspiracy or corruption sufficient to lay any charges -- and such construction inadequacies as there were could be as much due to inadequate provision of resources in the first place as to criminal conspiracy to siphon off resources and materials.

Nevertheless, it was sufficient for the Government to wind down the scheme, and to turn it into a home purchase project -- thus ensuring working-class people had little opportunity to participate -- rather than one for rental. The Housing Minister of the time, J.C.L. Fitzpatrick, made it entirely clear from the moment of his appointment that he regarded it as his task to work himself out of any housing portfolio. Accordingly, only 315 houses of the planned suburb were constructed before the entire project was shut down in 1924.

Chapter 4: A local government role in housing provision: Strickland Flats and Ways Terrace

When politicians and social reformers of the early twentieth-century looked at all at any models of State-provided housing, it was to the Mother Country -- as in so many other things -- that they looked for inspiration. It was at this very time that Local Authority
housing was beginning its meteoric development in England, with well over a million units of public housing being constructed by Local Authorities between the wars. Accordingly, on the infrequent occasions when scholars like William Irvine, foundation Economics Professor at Sydney University in 1911, or politicians like Bertram Stevens in 1936 undertook overseas study tours, they returned to Australia imbued with the gospel of local government as the appropriate body to undertake any governmental experiment in housing for low-income people. From the reports, there seems to have been little reflection on the considerable differences between local governments in the two societies.

Thus, in England, local government played a far more central role in life. It had its roots deep within the shires and boroughs: so deep, indeed, that it could challenge the authority of the Crown. Thus, one of the consistent threads of English history, has been one of relations between city and country, Crown and the provinces, gentry and aristocracy. Local government was in some ways at the heart of the “slow, organic growth of the community” so beloved of George Eliot and so many other bourgeois commentators of the mid-nineteenth century. In England, local government had authority, power and resources. And in the metropolitan capital, London, the London County Council -- and which was so substantially developed by the work of the Fabians - - commanded vast resources.

Not so in Australia. While a form of democratic self-government came earlier here than in the Mother Country, local government never figured very much in that equation. It did not gain so much as a passing reference in the Constitution that was adopted with such fanfare in 1901. It was no more than the bastard offspring of the colonial and then State Governments -- and often enough an offspring the State Governments preferred to cast off or undernourish, as in the repeated battles for distribution of resources and powers between the Sydney City Council and the State Government.

Nevertheless, if there was to be the provision of public housing, it was best undertaken by local councils, and not State Governments who had no responsibility for it. It was unclear why local councils should, either -- especially as by the late 1930s Sydney was a patchwork of 40 local councils with such vast rating resources as those of Erskineville, Redfern, Newtown and Alexandria. Unsurprisingly, the Sydney City Council was the only council that could consider the issue seriously, although in the late 1930s the Ryde Municipal Council also instituted a housing project. The latter was quite probably as a result of the wish to attract people to the bush of an outer suburb, but awaits further research.

For its part, the Sydney City Council had long expressed concerns about the slums, and the Mayor and City Health Officials made regular forays into the slums to inspect, reprove, and make demolition orders. Indeed, under the City Improvement Act of 1876 (?), it was required to do this before it could order a property demolished. And even then, its powers were ambiguous and the Council was not eager to test them legally -- instead, it relied on moral suasion, which was fine until slum landlords began to seek legal advice.

In particular, the City Council was concerned with the redevelopment of Chippendale.
Indeed, it had ordered the demolition of so many properties, and the cry was beginning to develop of how were these displaced people to be housed, that it initiated its own experiment in publicly-provided housing. As a result, the Strickland Flats were first constructed in Chippendale in 1911, to be followed soon after by flats in Ways Terrace in Pyrmont. These were model projects of their kind, but did not escape the opprobrium regularly attached to flats and tenement development.

Chapter 5: Homes fit for heroes -- postwar experiments

Even before the end of World War I, the Commonwealth had used its defence powers to erect homes for munitions workers at Lithgow in 1918. With the return of the troops after World War I, there was a strong emphasis on ensuring that they had adequate access to affordable housing: They should have "homes fit for heroes". In this lay the genesis of housing schemes for returned soldiers. The Commonwealth War Services Homes Act was passed in 1919, and led to the establishment of the War Service Homes Commission to provide low interest loans for brick cottages for eligible returned servicemen. The Commission concluded agreements with Vic., S.A., W.A. and Tas., to advance funds to State banking institutions for onlending to ex-servicemen. In its first 11 years the Commission assisted in the construction or purchase of 37,000 homes, before it ceased operations in 1931 because of the difficult financial position of the Commonwealth and also on the rationale that the supply of homes was in excess of demand. This last probably masked the fact that as a result of the Depression ex-servicemen were thrown out of work and could not either keep up loan repayments or, for that matter, enter the housing market in the first place.

Chapter 6: The problem of the private rental market

Then, as now, the question of how to ensure the private rental market was responsive to demand, that it would be a viable option for low-income people, and that it would offer a reasonable degree of affordability and security, was a vexed one. New landlord-and-tenant legislation had been enacted in 1899, which at least ensured that contested evictions would have to go to court: other than that, it offered little to either party, but especially not to tenants. Other than legislation, governments could think of no way of addressing private rental housing, as they were fearful of upsetting market relations. And when legislation was proposed, it inevitably ran aground on the rock of landlord opposition. This was pre-eminently the case in the recurring debates over rent control, in which the property lobby invariably argued that any legislative change would inevitably result in a flight of capital and in a bad situation being rendered much worse by the drying up of the supply of rental housing stock. There was an element of truth in this, as the majority of landlords were small-scale landlords often running a marginal operation. This was one of the problems with the eviction battles of the Depression era: In terms of liquid assets landlords could be in as parlous a plight as their unemployed tenants.

Chapter 7: The Depression and its aftermath

Slum housing and the housing crisis faced by the working class came back on to the
political agenda throughout the 1930s. Widespread poverty and unemployment led to large-scale defaulting on rental payments and consequent evictions. This, combined with the lack of any adequate system of social security and an increased level of militancy by the dispossessed led to a backlash which expressed itself in marches of the unemployed and in resistance to eviction led by groups like the Unemployed Workers' Movement. Resistance culminated in pitched battles at the scene of evictions in Bankstown, Newtown and Tighes Hill in Newcastle.

The scale of poverty led some church and charitable agencies to seek to develop a range of housing alternatives for unemployed men and their families. This could range from soup kitchens and hostels to an adventurous experiment in sweat equity with the construction of the eponymous Hammondville on the outskirts of Sydney, under the leadership of charity figures like Anglican Archdeacon R.B.S. Hammond.

At the same time a new generation of town planning experts, church and charity workers, and trade union leaders agitated to clear the slums, with 40,000 houses in Sydney slated for demolition. Consequently this became a political issue, which resulted in moderate legislative amendment while Lang remained Premier in 1932. Yet Lang's legislation did little to solve the problem of inadequate housing for working class people. In addition little was done to clear the slums or to provide alternative housing, with the exception of half-baked schemes like the Homes for the Unemployed Trust to provide workers with small amounts of finance or with basic materials for primitive housing construction.

All of this achieved little, and indeed, it could be argued that the only serious contribution to the problem was undertaken by working class people themselves, with the development of a range of makeshift alternatives by dispossessed and unemployed workers and their families, ranging from camping on the Domain and living in caves around the headlands, to the development of so-called "happy valleys" on the metropolitan outskirts.

Chapter 8: Council or State Housing

The combined -- and sometimes decidedly disparate -- activities of church and charity agencies, town planning enthusiasts, the press and frustrated working class people and the labour movement led to renewed pressure for slum clearance during the era of the conservative Nationalist Government that replaced the sacked Lang Government in 1932.

In 1937 Premier B.S.B. Stevens took the time-hallowed path of undertaking an overseas study tour to discern how overseas communities resolved the problem. His visit to England -- which was in the throes of massive public housing development via local authorities -- persuaded him that this should be the preferred option for New South Wales. It had the added charm that he could shift the responsibility and the political obloquy from the State to local government. The difficulty, however, was that on one hand local authorities in New South Wales differed vastly from their English counterparts both in terms of scale and resources, and of constitutional recognition; and on the other hand, the areas most affected by the slum problem were inevitably -- apart from the City
Council itself -- in the poorest and most resource-strapped areas, and were almost uniformly of a hostile political complexion.

Stevens also came to the conclusion that there was so little profit to be made from housing low-income people, that private enterprise was ill-equipped to do the job, and was in any case uninterested. This is a problem that continues to exercise contemporary governments of all political complexions, as recently as yesterday’s headlines.

With an election coming up in 1938, and little activity to see on the ground, Stevens decided to establish a Housing Improvement Board to identify suitable sites for pilot projects and to negotiate with local authorities to undertake the task. After considerable exploration, the Board settled rather anxiously on Erskineville, and started negotiating with the local council. Unfortunately, not only was the council more interested in its current project of town hall construction, it was also riven by political factions, all of whom, however, were united in their detestation of the Nationalists. It did not help that the eminence grise of the council happened to be a local real estate agent who managed a number of rental properties in the area.

Many months of frustration, led the Government finally to abandon all hope of involving the council, and instead, it decided to mount its own scheme, with the construction of 56 rental flats on the upper half of Erskineville Park. No slums, however, were cleared, and instead of relieving congestion, the flats simply added to it, and did so by the alienation of public open space. In addition, because of anxiety to ensure the scheme worked, only tenants with reasonable and regular incomes and who proved morally and socially acceptable to the English manager, were allowed to enter the scheme. And even then, that was only after rigorous preparation, fumigation of household goods, etc.

With the advent of a new Labor government, William McKell took the public housing issue seriously, and plans for the development of a much more wideranging Housing Commission were well advanced with the outbreak of war.
**Draft work plan**

Supervision sessions to be held on monthly basis. Summaries of reading to be presented at each session.

**2000: First and second semesters**

General reading of secondary material.

Draft of introductory chapters to be presented by end of semester.

**2001: Third and fourth semesters**

Continued reading of general secondary material.

Work on third chapter, the Rocks Resumption Area.

There is little secondary literature available to my knowledge on the Rocks Resumption process, though a fair amount on the effects of the 1900 bubonic plague outbreak and its relation to health issues. Major sources will include Shirley Fitzgerald’s work (*Rising Damp, Sydney, The Rocks*), Christopher Keane’s Ph.D. thesis on *The housing reform movement 1900-1917* and Dan Coward’s *Out of Sight, Sydney’s Environmental History 1851-1981*. This should be completed by mid-semester.

Survey of literature and examination of primary source material for Rocks Resumption Area. Primary sources will include Government reports and Commissions, City Council reports and press survey.

Draft of chapter before end of semester.

Commencement of reading for fourth and fifth chapters.

**2002 Fifth and sixth semesters**

Work on fourth and fifth chapters. Preliminary survey of secondary literature, e.g., Spearritt, Sandercocsk, Briggs thesis on public housing history, A.J.C. Mayne *The Imagined Slum*, Jill Roe (ed.) *Sydney in the Twentieth Century*, Max Kelly (ed.), *Sydney in the Nineteenth Century* and *Sydney, City of Suburbs* etc.

Study of primary sources: City Council minutes, papers and housing reports; NSW Parliamentary Debates; NSW Parliamentary reports (e.g., Irvine’s *Commission of Enquiry into the question of the housing of workingmen, 1912*) and Commissions, parliamentary papers and reports on Daceyville, etc.; press survey.

Study of lives, histories and publications of town planning movement leaders like J.D.
Fitzgerald, Sir John Sulman, George and Florence Taylor, Norman Dick, etc.

Work on charities like Sydney City Mission, Anglican Services, Catholic Services, etc. e.g., study of minutes, reports, etc.

Draft of chapter 4 by end of semester.

2003: Seventh and eighth semesters

Draft of chapter 5 by mid-semester.

Reading of secondary literature for Chapter 6, e.g., on ideological struggle of the time -- e.g., Robert Murray’s *The Twenties*, Connell and Irving’s *Class structure in Australian Society*, etc.

Reading of primary sources, e.g.,

Parliamentary debates on Daceyville and rent control

Parliamentary reports.

Royal Commission of Enquiry into Daceyville.

Press survey.

Journals of planning and church lobbies, etc.

Draft of Chapter 6 by end of semester.

2004: Ninth and tenth semesters

General reading of secondary literature about the Depression and its effects, including work already done on eviction struggles, e.g., at Bankstown, Newtown and Tighes Hill, see, e.g., work of Nadia Wheatley.

An attempt to identify and read primary sources, e.g., minutes and reports of Unemployed Workers Movement, Voluntary Workers Association, Hammondville, Young Presbyterian Men’s Association, etc., and correspondence by key figures like Dr. R.G. Arthur, Archdeacon R.B.S. Hammond, Alan Dalziel, Barnett and Birt, etc.

NSW Parliamentary Debates, commissions and reports -- e.g., Stevens’s report on *Housing, Slum Clearance and Abatement of Overcrowding in England and Europe, 1937*.

Study of journals and minutes of proceedings of town planning groups.

Draft of chapter 7 by end of semester.
Press survey.

2005: Eleventh and twelfth semesters

Study of City Council and Ryde Council minutes and reports.

Study of Erskineville housing scheme, based on work already done.

Draft of chapter 8 by end of semester.

2006 Thirteenth and fourteenth semesters

Preparation of conclusion.

Rewriting and preparation of final draft.
Preliminary select bibliography

I GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS

Annual Reports of the Sydney Harbour Trust Commissioners.

Annual Reports of the Housing Board.

Annual Reports of the Housing Improvement Board.

Census tables and reports.

Housing Act, 1912.


Housing Improvement Board, *Report upon matters outlined in the Housing Improvement Act, 1936*, 1937.

Housing Improvement Act, 1936.


New South Wales Government Gazette.

New South Wales Parliamentary Debates.

New South Wales Year Books, 1900-1939.


Royal Commission of Enquiry into the management and operations of the Dacey Garden Suburb Scheme, *New South Wales Parliamentary Papers* . . .

Stevens, B.S.B., *Housing, Slum Clearance and the Abatement of Overcrowding in England, with brief mention of similar activities in Germany, Scandinavia and Italy*, Sydney, 1937.

Etc. etc.

### 11 CONTEMPORARY NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS

- Australasian Builder and Contractors’ News
- Australian Star
- Australian Worker
- Building
- Catholic Press
- Church Standard
- Daily News
- Daily Telegraph
- Evening News
- Labor Daily
- Lone Hand
- Pix
- People
- Suburban Times
- Sun
- Sunday Sun
- Sydney Morning Herald
- Trade Union Review
- Woman
- Women’s Weekly

### III UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPTS, THESES, ETC.


### III WORKS REFERRED TO IN THIS DRAFT


Draft workplan
Thesis to be concluded by end of 2006

Remainder of first semester 2003
Completion of Chapter 3, An Accidental Landlord
Work to begin on Chapter 4, A Planned Approach
Some interviews to be undertaken
General reading to continue, with work on introductory background chapters

Second semester 2003
Chapter 4, A Planned Approach, to be completed
Work to begin on Chapter 5, A Local Government Solution

First semester 2004
Completion of Chapter 5, A Local Government Solution
Completion of Chapter 6, Legislative approaches

Second semester 2005
Chapter 7, Postwar experiments

First semester 2006
Chapter 8, The Depression and its aftermath
Chapter 9, A reluctant landlord
(For this semester, some of the research has already been done for Chapter 8, and much of the work has already been done for Chapter 9.)

Second semester 2006
Introduction and conclusion completed
Thesis revised and completed