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# PHOTO ESSAY

## SUBURBAN FRONTIERS

RICHARD GLOVER'S SOPHISTICATED, CAREFULLY FRAMED PHOTOGRAPHS OF SYDNEY'S NEW SUBURBS INVITE US TO THINK ABOUT THE SUBURBAN FRONTIER IN NEW WAYS. TRACEY CLEMENTS CONSIDERS THE IMAGES AND THEIR CONTEXT.

AT FIRST GLANCE, a well-respected architecture journal seems an odd place to publish a photo essay on McMansions. It pretty much goes without saying that, as architects, none of you (and I admit I'm not an architect) think that these are great examples of your trade. In fact, I suspect few, if any, of these buildings have benefited from your specialist knowledge.

The pop culture label McMansions perfectly sums up these mass-produced monoliths. They have all the substance of the fluffy white Big Mac bun. Like their namesake, they may not be nutritious, but people gobble them up. The burger giant relies on a winning combination of lots of sugar and lots of salt. McMansions offer maximum bulk on minimum land: two stories, five bedrooms and nothing less than the great Australian dream.

Big, bland and bloated, these are not beautiful structures. Architects, sociologists, cultural critics and enlightened town planners around the world have already written thousands of pages, millions of words, in books, newspapers, journals and on the web condemning these houses as ecologically unsustainable, socially detrimental, physically excessive and aesthetically just awful.

So why are we looking at them again? Because photographer Richard Glover has seen something that others, perhaps blinded by the fumes of their vitriolic invective, have failed to notice. He has realized that despite, or perhaps because of, being homogenized and ugly, these vast spreading suburbs are deeply intriguing. McMansions are not Glover's usual subject matter. As a photographer of architecture, he spent six years documenting the transformation of the Tate Modern in London and has worked closely with architects John Pawson, Norman Foster and Dale Jones-Evans, to name but a few. Yet he felt compelled to photograph Kellyville, Glenwood and Bella Vista, developments bristling with McMansions. These suburbs are ubiquitous – they are located in Sydney's north-west, but they could be anywhere.

Glover's images masquerade as documentary photography – an attempt to record things just as they are. On the surface, his black-and-white Kellyville photos could be compared to the very formal architectural portraits of Bernd and Hilla Becher, and his colour *New Suburbs* streetscapes seem free from artifice. But as a good citizen of postmodernity, Glover knows as well as anyone that nothing, least of all photography, is ever neutral. He clicks the shutter at carefully chosen moments.



Glover has photographed the Kellyville McMansions at a particular point in time. He presents them poised on the brink of change, at the exact moment when the building is done but none of the personal touches have been added. They are rough, raw, barren, soulless. Absolutely blank and utterly devoid of nostalgia. Nothing has happened here yet, no childhood memories have been formed, no everyday dramas enacted. This is the fleeting moment before a house becomes a home. Glover photographs these structures as temporary occupants of a liminal space. For Scottish anthropologist Victor Turner, who popularized the phrase, this location is ambiguous, neither here nor there; it is a place of transformation marked by a rite of passage.<sup>1</sup> Glover's *Kellyville* series neatly encapsulates this mystery and potential. His photographs mark a point of transition. Anything could happen.

Photographed in the high-noon glare of the midday sun, Glover's *New Suburbs* series captures a soundstage atmosphere. These suburban streets look fake, or so hyper-real that they seem unreal. He presents a perfect, pristine, ultra-clean version of suburbia. There is not one single person. Everything is still, quiet, empty. This absence is slightly eerie, but it also gives the images a subtle sense of drama and anticipation, like a stage minus the actors. The images elicit a tantalizing feeling of suspense – something is going to happen. Glover is not alone in having seen the theatrical potential of suburban streets. From Frank Perry and John Cheever's *The Swimmer* to Tim Burton's *Edward Scissor Hands* and David Caesar's *Idiot Box*, film-makers have known for decades that suburbs are a hotbed of drama. And of course, the 'burbs are the location where most Australians live out the dramas of their daily lives.

Glover is exhibiting his collection of McMansion photos under the title *Suburban Frontier*. The word frontier exerts an irresistible pull towards the edge, a promise of pushing ever outwards, quintessentially westwards. The wild western suburbs, the Wild West. This evocative chain of associations inevitably leads to Hollywood. And while Glover's photographs capture Hollywood's artifice and drama, Hollywood is also a potent symbol of the insidious spread of American culture.

On 1 July 1947, William Levitt began the transformation of a potato field in Long Island into Levittown, a suburb of 17,000 homes. He applied fellow American Henry Ford's assembly line tactics to the construction of houses and became the mythological grandfather of the 'burbs. By 1968 his company had built over 140,000 suburban homes worldwide. Levitt clearly linked suburban living with a certain brand of American culture. He famously advocated suburbia as a guerrilla strategy in the Cold War, saying, "No man who owns his own house and lot can be a communist. He has too much to do."<sup>2</sup> Levittown and its descendants are what American cultural critic James Howard Kunstler calls the "geography of nowhere".<sup>3</sup> On the surface Glover does seem to have photographed this nowhere, or perhaps more accurately anywhere or everywhere. The clean suburban streets in his colour images seem generic, they sprawl beyond the border of the photograph with no apparent end in sight. The images can easily be read as just another example of the inexorable grinding down of local idiosyncrasies by the American cultural juggernaut. But this simple reading is deceptive.

Levitt may get credit for pioneering the modern suburb, but in 1942, five years before Levittown, Robert Menzies began actively supporting government policy that encouraged the growth of suburbs. Like Levitt, Menzies advocated home ownership as an ideological weapon. He argued that the average Aussie would be more patriotic with a "stake in the country".<sup>4</sup> By 1961, his policies had



been spectacularly successful. At 70 per cent, Australians had the highest proportion of owner occupation in the world.<sup>5</sup> This rate has remained remarkably steady, and most Australian homes are still in the suburbs.<sup>6</sup> Suburbia is as Australian as it is American, perhaps even more so.

Members of the inner-city, black-clad cultural intelligentsia dismiss the suburbs as conservative, right-wing and dull, and not without some cause. But ironically, despite their dreadful sameness, many of the McMansions themselves seem distinctly “Australian”. In one of Glover’s photographs a pseudo-Federation villa sits next to a double-story box in unapologetic exposed red brick. Could this really be anywhere else? These McMansions seem to represent a subtle regional resistance to American homogenization. They are crass, inefficient and unsustainable, but maybe they are also physical manifestations of local culture, a kind of much-maligned folk art.

TRACEY CLEMENT IS AN ARTIST AND WRITER WHO LIVES IN AN EXPOSED RED BRICK FLAT IN INNER SYDNEY. RICHARD GLOVER’S SUBURBAN FRONTIERSHows AT TIN SHEDS GALLERY, UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY, 16 SEPTEMBER – 8 OCTOBER.



## ENDNOTES

1. Victor Turner, *Drama, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Societies*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1974.
2. Richard Lacayo, “Suburban Legend: William Levitt” in *Time*, 7 Dec, 1998, v152 i23, 148.
3. James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of American’s Man-Made Landscape*. Simon and Schuster, NY, 1993.
4. Patrick Troy, “Suburbs of Acquiescence, Suburbs of Protest” in *Housing Studies*, Sep 2000, v15 i5, 717.
5. Patrick Troy, “Suburbs of Acquiescence, Suburbs of Protest”, 719.
6. *Year Book Australia: Housing, Homeownership and Renting*, (2000–1 Census Data). Australian Bureau of Statistics, 7 July, 2005.

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