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**'This Suburb Is of Value  
to the Whole of Melbourne':  
Save Our Suburbs and the  
Struggle Against Inappropriate  
Development**

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# **'This Suburb Is of Value to the Whole of Melbourne': Save Our Suburbs and the Struggle Against Inappropriate Development**

## **Abstract**

Struggles around the conservation and development of the built environment can be productively examined through the frameworks provided by Pierre Bourdieu's conceptions of habitus, field and economic, cultural, social and symbolic capitals. In this paper, I examine, firstly, the strategies and resources mobilised in the defence of specific hierarchies of valuations of urban areas. Secondly, I look at the way in which the Melbourne resident action group, Save Our Suburbs, was able to subsume different sources of conflict under the banner of a particular representation of 'a home' in 'the suburbs' of 'Melbourne' – representations which the state government of Victoria attempted to devalue through emphases on global economic imperatives, free markets in urban land, and images of new 'global' workers and residents. Finally, through this examination I suggest the importance of location, place and built form for the Bourdieu-ian concepts of habitus, capitals and distinction.

## **Key words**

Bourdieu  
habitus  
resident action  
urban planning  
middle-class suburbia

## **Introduction**

When more than 1,000 people packed into the Hawthorn Town Hall on Tuesday night [24 February 1998] to rally against planning laws, former broadcaster John Jost, in his capacity as the night's compere, told the gallery there was enormous political interest in their gathering...As many will testify, planning is a political process...

Speaker after speaker voiced a similar message: growing unhappiness in the suburbs as the developments grow; suburban character being lost; heritage under threat; feelings of powerlessness; suburbs no longer feeling like home (Lyon 1998).

At one of the largest public meetings about planning issues in Melbourne since the heady days of the anti-freeway, anti-high-rise protests of the early 1970s, representatives of an unprecedented seventy resident groups, claiming a combined membership of 20,000, gathered together under the banner of Save Our Suburbs (SOS).

In the two years before this meeting, there was hardly a daily or suburban newspaper without reports, editorials and letters to the editor about fights to save local landmarks; complaints about the issuing of demolition permits; and vocal demonstrations against the construction of multi-unit dwellings in detached housing neighbourhoods. The

reports bore titles like: 'Urban rage: residents declare war on developers'; 'For "planning" read "wrecking"'; 'No control over monstrosities'; 'Residents in revolt'; 'In the heart of Melbourne, another house dies'; 'In quiet streets, the battle lines are drawn'; 'The suburbs strike back'; 'Planning will kill suburbs, warns professor'; and 'Wreckers prowl streets of fear'.<sup>1</sup>

The immediate cause of these concerns was the Victorian state government's introduction of a new set of development regulations, officially titled the *Good Design Guide for Medium Density Housing* (DPD 1995), known more colloquially as the *Good Design Guide* or *GDG*. The regulations had the effect of allowing multi-unit dwellings to be constructed in any residential zone in the state as long as certain minimum site and building envelope requirements were met and provided there were no other controls, such as heritage protection, in place.

The development industry took up the opportunities to redevelop in established areas, and especially in the Liberal (conservative) voting heartlands of the salubrious middle-distance eastern suburbs of Melbourne, sparking protest action from individuals and groups who had rarely mobilised in this way. Thus, a hitherto more or less comfortable but unspoken balance of power was destabilised: a broadly tripartite balance between middle-class residential interests in the preservation of neighbourhood character, heritage, amenity and property values; state government planning policies and land-use regulations; and the activities of the development industry.

The status quo centred on valuations of landscapes and built form: important aspects of cultural identities, expressing hierarchies of power and reflecting differential access to resources, as well as the affective connections of history and social networks (Duncan 1992; Duncan and Duncan 1997, 2001; Keith and Pile 1993; Lowe, Murdoch and Cox 1995; Matless 1998). At the same time, these aspects of the physical environment – whether rural, suburban or urban – have increasingly become central nodes of the intersection of globalised and localised economic value and representations of place (Jacobs 1996; Mitchell 1997; Zukin 1995; Smart and Smart 1996).

For example, Duncan (1992) describes how the upper-middle-class Anglo-Canadian landscape of Shaunessy Heights in Vancouver was represented as an area of significance for the whole city. People living in disadvantaged or working-class areas saw its preservation to be important for their own attachments to the city, as much as those of the Shaunessy Heights residents. The taken-for-grantedness of this culturally important status was subsequently breached by the 'inappropriate' and 'un-Canadian' expression of aesthetics and cultural practices reflected in the homes being built by wealthy Hong Kong immigrants encouraged to settle by a Canadian government eager to attract global investment (Mitchell 1997). These studies point to the centrality of place, built forms and the aesthetics of landscape in the construction of social differentiation and hierarchies of power, in ways which parallel Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 1990) conception of the relations between 'habitus' and different forms of capital in the construction of social space.

According to Bourdieu, specific and contingent practices arise within identifiable fields of power relations in which strategic agents struggle to accumulate, preserve and enhance different forms of capital: economic, cultural, social and symbolic. The actions of agents, however, are conditioned by their habitus – the continuous

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<sup>1</sup> These headlines are taken from the following sources: *Age*, 25 Sept. 1997, 15, 23, 28 Oct. 1997; *Sunday Age*, 15, 22 Feb. 1998, 7 June 1998; *Caulfield Southern Cross*, 25 March 1998.

structuring of expectations and world views – which produces dispositions towards certain types of strategies, which in turn modify and reconfigure habitus.

Yet Bourdieu pays only intermittent attention to the importance of place, location, housing markets or urban differentiation in struggles over 'taste', 'distinction' and the expression and maintenance of cultural and economic dominance. Similarly, *Accounting for Tastes* (Bennett, Emmison and Frow 1999) – a large-scale Australian study drawing on Bourdieu's monumental examination of the French middle-class elite, *Distinction* (1984) – explores the meanings of the display of taste and aesthetics associated with the appearance, furnishing and equipment of the home. However, it does not discuss in any depth choices (or lack thereof) of residential area, status of neighbourhoods or 'distinctions' expressed in the wider physical environment. But, arguably, neighbourhood status, environment, services and facilities ('amenity', in planning terms) are crucial factors in creating class habitus and maintaining the hierarchical distinctions that are expressed in both social status and urban form.

In this paper, I suggest that struggles around the regulation of the built environment arise from conceptions of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capitals differentially embedded in places and generated by habitus, which is itself also in part generated through attachment to the continuities of residential neighbourhoods. The state (only latterly considered by Bourdieu 1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Swartz 1997) enters the field of contest over the physical landscape in many ways, but especially in the maintenance of the rules of property ownership and in the regulation of the built environment through the planning system. By altering the 'rates of exchange' between forms of capital and the balance of power between interested groups (Bourdieu 1998, ch. 3), government policy can have the effect of devaluing 'local' capitals in favour, for example, of the apparent imperatives of a globalised economy.

A broadly Bourdieu-ian reading of the story of SOS's rejection of the government's attempts to de/re-regulate development in existing residential areas complicates notions of, on the one hand, conservative NIMBY defence of property values or, on the other, radical community defence of place and neighbourhood, by placing them in a wider field of disjunctions between, and confluences of, the powers of capitals, state and class cultures expressed in the physical environment. The actions and strategies that take place in these fields are contingent and specific to the conditions of particular times and places, and constitute what Bourdieu terms 'practice'.

Practice is central to Bourdieu's sociology: *practice* is the outcome of interrelationships between *habitus*, *capitals* and *field*, concepts he employs in his attempts to free up structure/agency dualisms. Practice arises from the actions of agents in a field of particular power and institutional relations, such as education, religion, the family, housing policy or academic life. In each field, actions are conditioned by dispositions deriving from habitus, and struggles are around access to, or preservation of, different kinds of capital. Bourdieu (1977, pp. 177-83; 1984, ch. 2) outlines four types of capital: economic (money and property), social (acquaintances and networks), cultural (cultural goods and services, including educational credentials) and symbolic (legitimation, the ability to have specific dominant conceptions taken as right and proper) (Swartz 1997, p. 74). The outcomes of actions, strategies and practices in fields and around capitals are never foregone conclusions, but open to the contingent conditions of each specific instance. However, there are continuously recreated inequalities of power and resources which, in the absence of a fundamental shift or crisis, are likely to be perpetuated over time, despite the outcomes of any specific conflict.

In what follows, I attempt to use the relationships between habitus, capitals, field and practice as a loose framework on which to hang my discussion of the actions of SOS. Without minimising the reality of the attachment such groups feel towards place and neighbourhood, or the importance of protecting 'collective memory' embedded in the built environment, I nevertheless want to examine, firstly, the strategies and resources mobilised in the defence of specific hierarchies of valuations of urban areas. Secondly, I examine the way in which SOS was able to subsume different sources of conflict under the banner of a particular representation of 'a home' in 'the suburbs' of 'Melbourne' – representations which the government attempted to devalue with emphasis on global economic imperatives, free markets in urban land, and images of new 'global' workers and residents. Finally, through this examination I want to suggest the importance of location, place and built form for the Bourdieu-ian concepts of habitus, capitals and distinction.

## **Practical Strategies: (1) The State Changes the Rules**

The immediate context for the de/re-regulation of the planning system and the introduction of the *Good Design Guide* was the landslide election in 1992 of a neoliberal-cum-libertarian government which saw its mandate as reducing the scope of state 'intervention' in the economy and the wholesale privatisation of government services.

Because of its enormous parliamentary majority, and legitimised by the spectre of fiscal crisis, the new government was able to institute a series of 'privatising' measures, including school and hospital closures, and public transport and utility sell-offs. It sacked all elected local councillors and temporarily replaced them with appointed commissioners to oversee municipal amalgamations, administrative rationalisations and the cutting of thousands of public sector jobs (Hayward 1998; Webber and Crooks 1996).

The new government also emphasised the urgency of attracting business and commercial investment to the state, and the importance of regaining an international AAA credit rating from New York based ratings agencies such as Moody's (Office of the Premier 1996, p. 13). The state was to become:

an investment priority for firms in the United Kingdom, Europe and Asia – especially those looking to Australia as a stable base on the trade routes into the Tiger economies of the Asia Pacific (Office of the Premier 1996, p. 6).

The urban environment was seen as an integral part of the realignment of state priorities:

The economic development of Victoria depends increasingly on the quality of urban development – on the 'livability' of our cities and their ability to attract investment (Maclellan 1993a, p. 5).

Accordingly, on taking office, the Minister for Planning, Robert Maclellan, immediately instituted far-reaching changes to the system. Early in his term, he announced that there would be:

greater emphasis on development approval rather than on development control: greater concern with saying what can happen rather than what can't and more emphasis on people's rights to do what they want with their land...

[The government's] approach to planning reform will move development approval away from the Council Chamber more towards a technical compliance model and will therefore offer greater certainty and speed in decision-making (Maclellan 1993b, pp. 1-2).

This 'can do' attitude to urban development was linked to the need to counter the parochial concerns of local government:

Because local government is residentially based, it tends to give too much weight to the views of existing residents at a cost to overall planning objectives and, in particular, the facilitation of economic development (Maclellan 1993a, p. 13).

Three years later, Maclellan (1996, p. 9) felt able to announce that:

We have cleaned the rust from the planning system's nuts and bolts and replaced those parts corroded beyond repair. We have also dragged our nineteenth-century local government system into the twenty-first century.

But, in fact, the battle had only just begun.

The *Good Design Guide* was introduced in mid-1995 as part of these reforms. It was justified in terms of urban consolidation (densification) which became linked to the government's attempts to free up the development industry, providing economic arguments with the further legitimacy of environmental sustainability, diversity of housing choice and quality of lifestyles:

Our cities need to be more environmentally efficient and less car-dependent. More use must be made of existing services, as funds are no longer freely available for infrastructure development on the fringe of our major cities. Melbourne needs to be more compact, offering a greater range of housing choices with enhanced amenity, safety and lifestyle (Maclellan 1993a, p. 5).

The crux of the subsequent opposition to the new regulations lay in the fact that they were mandatory in all local government planning schemes. As an information kit on the application of the guide (DPD n.d.) said, 'the question is not "where" but "how"' redevelopment of the existing urban fabric should take place.

The accompanying privatisation of building and demolition permits produced the conditions under which the development industry (including small-scale builders and individual investors, excluded from the production of large residential tracts on 'greenfield' sites and from large-scale inner urban multi-unit redevelopment) was able to take advantage of the amenity values of established neighbourhoods at a time of reduced building activity. This upsurge in small-scale building activity in the middle suburbs (Buxton, Huxley and Tieman 1999) was an opportunistic response to changes in the state's regulatory regime; not all the areas of these suburbs were protected by heritage controls, but had been available for redevelopment as single dwellings under previous regulations (in part, this can be seen as further evidence of the unspoken agreement over their cultural and symbolic status). Although much of the opposition to the new regulations was ostensibly over the construction of multi-unit developments and flats, many of the new buildings were large and expensive single dwellings, albeit 'out of keeping' with the aesthetics of the surrounding area.

Encouraged by the government's energetically proclaimed support for small business and property development, and by its privatisation of building and demolition permits, developers began demolishing houses with increased rapidity and with little



notification to surrounding owners. Many grand mansions were pulled down, and the cleared land sold on at a profit for multi-unit or large modern dwellings. Almost overnight (literally, in some cases), residents were being deprived of elements of their valued landscapes – houses, trees, gardens – that had previously been protected by both building and urban conservation (historic preservation) regulations.

It was this issue of neighbourhood 'amenity' and character – loss of privacy, overloading of local facilities, traffic generation, destruction of heritage and, above all, changing aesthetics of landscape and built form (but also, implicitly expressing antipathy to imagined types of new occupants) – that provoked the widespread opposition to the government's policy of encouraging development activity in previously implicitly sacrosanct residential areas. Thus, the state disrupted a balance of power in the urban field which had been achieved locally over the years between the planning system, the middle classes and the development industry.

## **Practical Strategies: (2) SOS – The Residents Revolt**

The *Good Design Guide* was a uniform control conceiving of housing development and regulation as an aspatial and technical exercise. But upper-middle-class suburbs have the largest lots and the best amenity so, under the new de/re-regulatory regime, developers were particularly attracted to these areas, posing threats not only to their taken-for-granted aesthetic and historical value, but to the 'neighbourhood character' of suburbs across the whole of Melbourne.

Save Our Suburbs was formed in October 1997, at the height of the media commentary and local resident concern about the effects of the regulations. An informal group, based in the eastern suburb of Armadale, had been set up to discuss what were obviously widespread concerns. They decided to call a public meeting at which the issues of medium density housing and suburban amenity could be collectively aired, after which an organising committee was formed.<sup>2</sup>

After this meeting – at which the name Save Our Suburbs was adopted – the group contacted local print and radio media, finding immediate responses to their cause from individuals and from other resident action groups across the metropolitan area (Lewis 1999, ch. 10; interviews, Duck and Quigley). The public meeting of 24 February 1998 and subsequent well attended meetings were the result, with the public rejection of the government's policy becoming increasingly widespread, vocal and – ultimately – electorally damaging.

SOS formed as an incorporated association and held elections for office bearers, thus increasing the legitimacy of its public profile and lending weight to its dealings with the government and the planning system. It also issued a detailed policy document setting out its broad aims, whose preamble begins:

SOS is an organisation devoted to protecting citizens from the destruction of their houses, their streets, and their environment

and ends:

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<sup>2</sup> Information about the formation and aims of Save Our Suburbs is from interviews with Michelle Quigley on 10 Sept. 1998 and Dianne Duck on 11 Sept. 1998, and from SOS Newsletters, the policy document and Lewis (1998a, 1998b).

Decision-making should be in the hands of elected representatives responsive to the wishes of citizens, whether at a local, a state or a federal level (SOS 1998, p. 1).

The policy lists well-thought-out and detailed objectives for rational urban planning to be implemented by state and local government, covering issues of demographic change, urban form and the need for urban consolidation; the preservation of property rights and the amenity of existing residential areas; the operation of the property market and the role of government in it; the control of demolition as well as development; and the functioning of the state planning system.

Despite such specific policy recommendations, the committee always stressed that they did not speak on behalf of the member groups. Rather, SOS offered (and still offers) strategies, information and advice on publicising instances of demolition and inappropriate redevelopment, negotiating the planning and appeals system, raising money to run cases, and the like. Through its organising, coordinating and publicising activities, it came to be seen as the watchdog on issues of residential amenity throughout the state (Lewis 1999; interviews, Duck and Quigley).

The government could draw on the political power of its parliamentary majority and on its definitions of the 'public interest' in promoting development activity in the name of economic prosperity. But SOS also saw itself acting for the 'common good' by voicing the concerns of a diverse array of resident groups. In the face of the state's resources to produce and publicise policy statements, the committee worked hard to ensure media coverage and to foster networks of groups across Melbourne. In its fight to 'protect citizens', SOS sought to include inner areas under threat from large-scale multi-storey redevelopments and (less successfully) new 'amenity deprived' housing tracts on the metropolitan outskirts.

But how was SOS – a middle-class organisation prompted into action by very specific local concerns – strategically able to lay claim to the interests of the whole of Melbourne? One way of considering this question is from the perspective of habitus and relations between different forms of capital.

## **Habitus, Place and Planning**

Men and women are not only themselves; they are also the region in which they were born, the city apartment or farm in which they learnt to walk, the games they played as children, the old wives' tales they overheard, the food they ate, the schools they attended, the sports they followed, the poets they read, and the God they believed in (Somerset Maugham, quoted in County of Cumberland 1948, p. 1).

The house and the neighbourhood are as much a part of the creation of habitus as the institutions of the family or the school emphasised by Bourdieu (1984) and, indeed, are inextricably enmeshed with them in the structuring of class, gender and racial differences.

A city's differentially resourced and differentially valued areas contribute to the continuation of social, economic and symbolic power through the shaping of expectations and taken-for-granted world views of the way things are. Unless challenged in times of crisis, 'doxic' understandings that 'go without saying' accept the hierarchies inscribed in the urban landscape. Conflicts may arise over the distribution of particular goods or resources (such as schools, jobs or transport), but the existence of historically continuous areas of amenity, heritage and locally valued

aesthetics rarely enters the realms of conscious opinion. For example, the perpetual planning conundrum of the creation of 'social mix' to alleviate concentrations of disadvantaged residents is always posed in terms of their dispersal throughout 'better areas', but such a solution is never suggested to break up concentrations of the well-off. The historically stable affluent areas of most cities achieve iconic status and come to stand for the qualities of the city itself (Duncan 1992; Duncan and Duncan 1997, 2001).

The areas of middle Melbourne have acquired just such status, and play just such roles in the creation of class and cultural habitus and the reproduction of distributions of power and resources. Almost from their inception, they have been actively protected from incursions of unwanted development, especially industrial or commercial land uses, by local activism and by local and state government regulations (Davison 1978).

In the fifty years between the 1870s and 1920s, land on the high ground to the east and south of the Yarra River was developed as salubrious middle-class suburbs, well away from the noxious fumes and miasmas of the working-class areas on the flats on the other side of the river (Barrett 1971; Davison 1978, pp. 144-52). The subdivisions and building styles of these areas reflected a 'suburban imagery [which] was derived at second hand from older English patterns' (Davison 1978, p. 137), with names carrying 'rustic overtones – Hawthorn, Burwood, Box Hill, Hawksburn, Armadale, Glen Iris' or echoing the better parts of outer London – Kew, Windsor, Camberwell, Ascot Vale, Surrey Hills (Davison 1978, p. 138; see Mitchell 1997 and Duncan 1992 for similar assessments of the Anglo-imagery of suburban Vancouver).

These areas promised suburbanism as a compromise between the ideals of town and country life. From the start, they were locations for pleasant villas surrounded by gardens, havens for the professional male who worked a short tram, train or, later, car trip away from the central city, but who could travel home in the evening to his pastoral retreat complete with wife and family (Briggs 1968; Davison 1978, ch. 7).

Middle Melbourne survived the Depression, albeit with some areas descending to genteel dilapidation. The Victorian era terraces with their ornate cast-iron balconies, the imposing mansions in established grounds, the turreted and gargoyle redbrick Federation (turn of the century) and Edwardian detached houses in quiet, leafy streets were left largely intact by the postwar emphasis on detached housing at the expanding fringes of the city or high-rise towers in the working-class inner areas. The middle suburbs were never completely abandoned wholesale by the upper and middle classes, but the nature of the middle classes changed (Beed 1981; Smith and Williams 1986).

By the 1970s, a renewed form of professional middle class joined the original 'old money' of the areas, and with them came a renewed appreciation of white Australian heritage and the re-forming of aesthetic taste (Jager 1986). Through the concordance of new money and new taste in the acquisition and renovation of Victorian and Edwardian homes, whole areas underwent restoration of their physical fabric and their social prestige.

As Bourdieu argues, schooling is an important process in producing class habitus, and some of the most exclusive private schools in the country are located in these suburbs, contributing to their desirability for a particular form of middle-class lifestyle (Davidson 2001; King 1989). These processes served to revive and reinforce the taken-for-granted assumptions of the residents that these suburbs, this way of life, represented the quintessential 'Melbourne'. In Bourdieu-ian terms, urban areas exhibit the materiality of the relationship between habitus and forms of capital.

Nevertheless, the status of the middle suburbs was never so 'doxic' or beyond question that threats of redevelopment could be ignored. Rather, work had to be done to maintain 'orthodox' opinion against 'heterodox' debate (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 167-9) coming from both the development industry and the government.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the idea that suburban life could be constantly reproduced by expansion of new housing tracts at the fringes of the metropolitan area began to falter in the face of rising petrol prices, falling housing affordability, the fiscal crisis of infrastructure provision, and the increasing government shift towards neoliberal policy prescriptions. In the 1980s, the Labor government's attempts to regulate the growth of the metropolitan area invoked 'urban consolidation' (densification, intensification, containment) as a solution to the problem of 'urban sprawl', supposedly bringing about savings in infrastructure expenditure, encouraging environmental and energy sustainability, improving housing affordability, and creating conviviality in reaction to the 'soul-less' (postwar) outer suburbs. The inner and middle areas were seen as suitable for redevelopment at higher densities with more environmentally sensitive and diverse forms of housing (MPE 1987).

Driven to engage interstate and international competition for investment in response to slowing economic growth, the government also pursued place-marketing, events-attracting strategies that resulted in the construction of 'mega-projects' and over-supply of office buildings, usually in and around the CBD and inner areas (Berry and Huxley 1992; Winter and Brooke 1993; see Kearns and Philo 1993 for similar strategies in the United Kingdom).

But, by and large, life in the established suburbs went on much as usual. Indeed, life in the affluent bayside and middle-ring eastern suburbs was increasingly protected by urban conservation zonings and heritage controls (e.g. *Historic Buildings Act 1981*, and Amendment 224 to the Melbourne Metropolitan Planning Scheme 1983) which directly contradicted embryonic government policy on urban consolidation. These conservation zones and heritage protection measures were put in place by local and state government largely as a response to expert conservation reports produced by local historical, architectural and residents societies able to call on the professional services of their members (Huxley 1978; McLoughlin 1992, ch. 12). In providing urban conservation measures over whole areas as well as specific buildings, the government gave explicit support to their 'public interest' status for all of Melbourne and, indeed, the state.

Nevertheless, towards the end of the 1980s, a watered-down consolidation policy of 'dual occupancy' (two dwellings on a single lot, often in the form of a second house in the grounds of an existing one) did allow some redevelopment of existing areas and provoked local opposition, mainly objections to individual developments through the statutory appeal provisions of the planning system. Around the same time, the policy discussion document *From Control to Performance* (DPH 1992) signalled the Labor government's intention to rationalise and streamline development control regulations.

Both of these initiatives were hairline cracks in the understandings that had kept the middle areas intact over the previous twenty years and longer. Paradoxically, with the 1992 landslide win by the Liberal-National Coalition – which traditionally had drawn much of its membership from, and found much of its electoral support in, the affluent suburbs – the cracks in the fabric of middle-class habitus and its place in the reproduction of 'Melbourne' threatened to become widening tears which required the mobilisation of resources and power to repair.

## Social and Economic Resources and Strategies

Bourdieu's conceptualisation of different forms of capital provides a framework for examining the resources brought to bear in the oppositional strategies of SOS and its constituent resident action groups. But as Bennett, Emmison and Frow (1999, p. 263) argue, the limits of Bourdieu's class analysis is that different forms of resources and power, no matter how contingent or variable, in the last instance are reduced to a 'singular structure of value' which is either 'homologous with an invariant hierarchy of social power' or directly derived from, or translatable into, economic capital.

Nevertheless, different forms of capital can be identified as they are mobilised in fields of contestation or 'regimes of value' (Bennett, Emmison and Frow 1999, pp. 103, 258-64), and hierarchies of differentiation may be more marked in some regimes than in others. For instance, in Australia in the 1990s, cultural capital – educated 'taste' and markers of 'distinction' – appears to have been less important in social dominance than it may have been in the France of the 1960s, whereas social capital – professional networks, 'old school ties' (in at least two senses), the importance of the right school for children – may play a greater role in social reproduction in contemporary Australia than in 1960s France (Bennett, Emmison and Frow 1999). But this does not mean that the production, maintenance and transmission of economic or symbolic capital are not also important to processes of class and cultural reproduction: forms of capital can be seen as interactive and overlapping, having different significance in different fields or specific regimes of value in which their distribution is at stake.

My purpose here is not to argue for an overall invariant economic and cultural dominance of the upper and middle classes in Melbourne on some unilinear scale, but rather to examine how a particular group mobilised its access to resources and power in conflicts over the valuation of the built environment. Such mobilisation involves practices in defence of a status quo at the boundaries of a field or regime that frames taken-for-granted acceptance of what is valued and what can be said about it.

SOS drew its main membership from localities and occupations where there is a concentration of social capital in the forms of networks and associations, and economic capital in the forms of money, property and the ownership or directorship of firms. Most of the original committee were from the middle-class bayside and middle-ring suburbs of Hawthorn, Canterbury, Camberwell, Armadale, South Yarra, Brighton and Albert Park, where a core of local networks was sustained during the expansion of its activities to encompass the metropolitan area. Local proximity, therefore, played an important part not only in the overall disposition of actions arising from shared habitus, but also in producing and maintaining the social capital enabling particular strategies to be undertaken and reinforcing shared cultural valuations of aesthetics, taste and distinction (see also Duncan and Duncan 1997, 2001).

Of the twenty-three people attending the inaugural committee meetings, fourteen were professionals with employment or backgrounds in law, journalism, architecture, town planning, engineering, management etc.; three were from the arts (film director, actor and artist); one was an automotive technician; one was a local councillor; and several had additional real estate connections or property interests.

These professional connections are a form of social capital that enabled the mobilisation of expertise in strategies of opposition. For instance: experience and contacts in journalism assisted in publicising meetings and getting examples of 'bad planning' into the press; architecture, engineering and town planning knowledge and connections acted as sources of voluntary labour for writing reports and challenging

demolition, building and planning decisions; management and arts experience were useful for influential contacts and the conduct of meetings and 'events'. Important subsequent members had specific expertise in property and town planning law, which enabled SOS to 'go head to head with the minister' (Quigley, interview).

Few original members had formal political party connections; of those who did, there appeared to be no correlation between employment and party affiliation (Lewis 1999, pp. 283-5). This was an important attribute in countering the Liberal government's claims of SOS being a 'Labor Party front'.

Table 1 shows figures for a selection of the areas in question. In 1996 the mean taxable income was higher than for the rest of Victoria and, importantly, average house prices were significantly above those for the Melbourne Statistical Division. The percentage of residents in professional occupations is also markedly higher.

**Table 1: A Snapshot of Middle Melbourne in 1996**

Suburb	Mean Taxable Income 1995-96	Median House Price	Home Ownership Rates	Percentage of Professionals
Surrey Hills	\$39,430	\$253,500	74%	36%
Middle Park	\$43,171	\$298,500	55%	34%
Brighton	\$51,455	\$392,500	71%	32%
Camberwell	\$43,965	\$297,500	73%	36%
Melbourne Statistical Division	\$30,356 (All Victoria)	\$130,300	70%	19%

Sources: ABS (1996) Census; Dunham (2001); Australian Taxation Office (1997)

The economic capital available to the residents of the middle suburbs is quite considerable, as is the economic capital invested by them in the built environment. But this economic capital depends on the maintenance of historically created and culturally specific valuations. By bringing in regulations that specifically sanctioned suburban redevelopment, the state signalled that the 'exchange rate' between different forms of capital was being altered (Bourdieu 1998, pp. 34, 41-2) and the power relations between developers, middle-class residents and the state were about to be unsettled.

A study carried out by a member of SOS pointed to the economic capital lost by the construction of multi-storey units next to a single dwelling (Lewis 1999, pp. 159-64; Resident's Voice 1998, p. 8). This study depends on the calculation of value of the dwelling itself, its style and the amenity of the surrounding neighbourhood: that is, the economic calculations are based on the status quo of cultural and symbolic valuations. It calculates how investment in the distinction and taste of the area was being devalued by 'capital' premised on different axes of evaluation. But a developer's calculations see the possibility of erecting multi-unit dwellings, or even a more modern single large house, as increasing the value of the *land* that can be redeveloped for greater returns *without the existing house*, while taking advantage of the culturally valued and physically attractive amenity of the neighbourhood.

SOS was alert to this issue of 'amenity mining' (Quigley, interview), and mindful of the history of an earlier 1960s 'flats boom' and the indiscriminate construction of 'six-pack' blocks in some inner suburbs which led to the first planning controls of multi-unit developments. The 'blight' of these 1960s flats was implicitly and explicitly invoked: 'Like many parasites, the flats have destroyed the host on which they feed' (Lewis 1998b, p. 29).

Yet SOS rarely commented on the residents who sold their houses for inflated prices and left the neighbourhood, in effect undermining the orthodoxy of what was valuable about the area. Most of its strategies of opposition were directed towards the planning system, the government or the generalised figure of 'the developer'. When the government or pro-development groups pointed out the paradoxical valuations between 'staying' and 'selling', SOS minimised both the implication of individual property owners in 'capitalising' on the altered 'rate of exchange', and the possibility that such sales might be prompted by economic hardship as depicted by the government: 'There may be poverty-stricken widows in mansions, but what about the rights of the people next door?' (Duck, interview).

Instead, SOS emphasised the role of the planning system in mitigating the worst effects of market forces. In response to developers' accusations that they were 'environmental vandals' for opposing the government's attempts to promote urban consolidation and stem urban sprawl by increasing population levels across the inner and middle suburbs, Michelle Quigley, member of the SOS committee and planning barrister, pointed out that SOS policy endorses urban consolidation, but also highlights the need to oppose 'the free market approach which destroys urban fabric and the way we live – it is not sensible or orderly planning to have multi-unit developments throughout all suburbs' (interview).

However, SOS did not go as far as to question the individual property rights which are one of the foundations of the 'free market'. On the contrary, the SOS Policy (1998, pp. 7, 3) states that 'the property rights of existing residents must be respected' and 'SOS seeks to preserve the amenity and rights of existing residents'. One of its prominent legal members continued to act of behalf of developers in planning cases; this apparent conflict of interests was justified on the grounds that being an effective advocate requires being able to see both sides of the argument (Svendson 2001a, p. 13).

The Minister for Planning, in radio and newspaper interviews, consistently refused to acknowledge any validity to residents' concerns and advised the use of 'neighbourhood agreements' or covenants to restrict redevelopment. The government issued a brochure outlining procedures for drawing up such documents (DoI 1998a), thus further unbalancing the status quo by acknowledging that individual rights should be pursued through property law and the law of nuisance rather than through the planning system.

SOS successfully organised local social networks and deployed their access to forms of economic capital and their ability to make economic arguments that challenged property investment while defending home ownership, to take action around issues in their neighbourhoods and immediate built environment. But these strategies alone do not explain their influence on wider political debates and social actions across the whole metropolitan area. The mobilisation of a concerted campaign across the city also depended on strategies invoking forms of cultural and symbolic capitals.

## **The Cultural and Symbolic Mobilisation of the Melbourne Suburb**

One of Melbourne's charms has always been, quite simply, its spacious sprawl. The tree-lined street, the manicured nature strip [street planting] and the backyard shed, clothes line and BBQ. Ahhh... (Editorial, *Sunday Age*, 22 Feb. 1998).

SOS made 'common sense' of what, on the one hand, would seem to be economic irrationality in discounting gains from increased land prices and, on the other, would appear to be NIMBY actions in exclusionary defence of place (and property value). The common-sense notions employed in extending its strategies to include the whole of the metropolitan area revolved around cultural and symbolic meanings of 'home', 'neighbourhood' and 'Melbourne-ness', while staying within the (doxic) boundary of what it is possible to say about property rights and economic values and still be taken seriously.

SOS Policy (1998, p. 1) sought to preserve a particular image of the Melbourne suburb in the name of all Melbourne residents:



Melbourne's suburbs provide some of the most desirable living conditions in the world, and a lifestyle which is quintessentially Australian. Changes will inevitably occur in these suburbs, but these changes must be managed for the benefit of the community. They must cater for the future, rather than for short term demographic pressures, political fads or speculative profits. And they must be brought about with full regard for the established rights and expectations of existing residents and property owners.

We have a positive vision. Melbourne should retain its incomparable suburban environments, but should incorporate within this fabric concentrations of higher density development, clustered around nodes of public transport and provided with retail outlets, job opportunities, and educational and cultural facilities.

This evocation of the Melbourne suburb serves to erase inequalities and differences in the city's population and to enlist tastes and distinctions to the legitimation of a specific hierarchy of desirability and value. Through such representations, SOS countered the accusation that they were middle-class NIMBYs:

We're not just a bunch of stuck up rich people who are jumping up and down because we just care about our own backyard. It is a parochial issue, because we're trying to save our suburbs from total annihilation...But the bigger picture is that this suburb is of value to the whole of Melbourne, of value to the whole state (convenor of Brighton Residents for Urban Protection, quoted in Faulkner 1998, p. 12).

This universalisation and legitimation of specific tastes, distinctions and values is reinforced through a discourse of the built environment as a repository for white Australian history and national identity – the built environment as an element of habitus. Laura Mecca, an Italian-Australian living in the upper-middle-class suburb of Hawthorn, stresses the importance of these aspects of suburban environments for an (assimilationist) Australian history:

How can you instil an identity in Australia and the Australian people if you are depriving them of history? What makes you love and feel for a country, particularly for us migrants, is the immediate environment, and if that is attacked I feel very disturbed by that...It's the very fabric of our society that is being destroyed and it was because of that fabric that we decided to live here...it is such an invasion on your privacy. The look, the bulk of the developments are an invasion (quoted in Fyfe 1997, p. 3).

This particular version of (not just white, but Anglo-Celtic) history is paralleled by the evocation of a colonialist spectre of the 'Otherness' of such developments – of overcrowding and un-Australian lifestyles that will result from increased development in suburban areas: 'We [Melburnians/Australians] simply do not build to Hong Kong levels of density' (Lewis 1999, p. 116). If increased densities were created to the extent required to reduce urban sprawl, it would mean 'that we will reduce our standards of parks, schools and other facilities, and that we must exchange a Melbourne lifestyle for a Calcutta one' (Lewis 2001).

The 'Otherness' of built forms (and, by association, of in-moving residents) is stressed in concerns about the threats posed to home and neighbourhood. SOS argued that it was the speed and extent of change to residential environments throughout the state which had threatened people's understandings of 'home', 'neighbourhood' and 'community':

In Australia, a suburban house is something to aspire to and represents so much. When your tranquillity is threatened, you feel like your life is threatened. No-one likes to have large numbers of small units next door (Rohan Storey of the National Trust, quoted in Fyfe 1997, p. 3).

Home is a sanctuary against current rapid change. Old people see their home as their life's work...The issue goes beyond planning and politics: it joins with [cuts to] transport and [the closure of] hospitals as being threats to 'home' (Duck, interview).

SOS strategies performed an elision between cultural advantages of the middle-ring suburbs such as proximity to schools, parks and inner city cultural activities and a universalised white Anglo history reflected in hierarchies of taste in the built environment. This elision was further legitimated by calling on the (debatable) orthodoxies and (inviolable) doxa of home and community to extend the significance of particular neighbourhoods to encompass a defence of a 'Melbourne-ness' of value to the city, the state, the nation as a whole – or, indeed, the world, as the sub-title of a book (Lewis 1999) describing the campaign has it: 'the battle for the world's most liveable city'.

The government promoted a different understanding of the issue, but one which also glossed over inequalities and differences. Economic policy documents and programs for the creation of urban areas as magnets for international IT/high-tech investment and tourism fostered an image of 'technological advance and...increasing globalisation of businesses'. The government's role was to manage the fortunes of the state 'in a way that ensures all Victorians can keep pace of [sic] change and gain advantage from it' (Office of the Premier 1996, p. 3).

The multi-unit residences that the regulations allowed are claimed in policy statements to fulfil the aims of urban consolidation and to provide freedom of market choice, at once environmentally prudent and economically desirable (see, for example, DoI 1998b). To object to residential redevelopment is to reject the inevitability of progress – that is, it is to be irrational: 'It is not the government driving medium density housing, but market forces and consumer demand. The people in this city want and need higher density housing' (MacLellan 1998, p. 7). Resident responses in support of neighbourhood protection are characterised as a generalised (irrational) 'fear of change'; the minister points out that those moving into the new developments 'are not people from some distant, remote or alien place', but likely to come from the same or neighbouring suburbs (MacLellan, quoted in Millar 1998).

Yet, multi-unit developments are also seen to bring 'diversity' to suburbs of detached housing. The diversity of neo-Georgian townhouses and 'New York' warehouse apartments is not only related to aesthetic variety or changing needs of smaller households, but is also based in representations of the occupiers as up-to-date, affluent and creating a vibrant cafe society reflecting the internationalised urbanity of the worlds of finance, IT, advertising and arts/entertainment: 'We want to be international, we want to be multicultural and we want to create rewarding and challenging jobs for people who want to work' (MacLellan 1998; Zukin 1995). In policy texts, the traditional suburb is variously depicted as profligate of environmental resources, inappropriate to demographic trends and out of keeping with international styles; but, at the same time, 'the suburbs' contribute to Melbourne's uniqueness and 'livability' – important qualities in strategies of global place-marketing (DoI 1998b).

The government attempted to appropriate existing 'orthodox' forms of cultural and symbolic capital to attract companies and investment to the city through valuations of

'the suburbs' as, for example, safe and healthy places to bring up and educate children. But these strategies stand in conflict with its attempts to promote new hierarchies of cultural/symbolic valuation in pursuit of new forms of economic investment. This contradictory stance contributed to the Liberal government's 1999 electoral defeat at the hands of its traditional support in the middle-ring suburbs. The subsequent Labor government introduced new regulations that took into account many SOS policy recommendations (Svendsen 2001b).

## Conclusion

In response to the Liberal government's de/re-regulation of the planning system in the 1990s, Melbourne resident action groups engaged in effective and visible strategies of resistance to the homogenisation inherent in the planning and local government reforms. SOS asserted the importance of place, neighbourhood and community, being acutely aware of the widespread effects of the regulations and the need for constituent groups to voice their separate local concerns. This deliberate encouragement of localised independent actions also attempted to overcome the problem of NIMBY exclusionary tactics. To this extent, SOS presented real possibilities to reformulate regulations in accordance with local understandings and to open up alternatives to neoliberal globalisation discourse by asserting local difference and diversity.

In the field of power and institutional relations around 'the urban', SOS emphasised the common affective interests of different suburban areas in protecting their neighbourhood environments. Opposition was focused on the state's strategies for attracting economic investment and positioning the city in the global marketplace, which reduced residential neighbourhoods to the economic form of investment opportunities and challenged both the unspoken habitus of the middle suburbs and the social orthodoxy of the importance of home and neighbourhood.

But the discourse of 'not NIMBY' inclusiveness is conditioned by particular understandings of place and built form: as expressed by SOS, these are structured by a habitus of Anglo-Australian middle-class definitions of taste and symbolic/cultural capital. The public statements of SOS invoke historically mediated Anglocentric valuations of particular built forms and the physical character of neighbourhoods, and equate these with appropriate types of community.

The developers who build 'inappropriate' housing and the people who buy it display 'cultural incompetence' and bad taste (Bourdieu 1984). Taste is defined negatively as being different from, and inappropriate to, dominant valuations (Bourdieu 1984; Branson and Miller 1991; Mitchell 1997). The 'bad taste' of the new built forms is associated with 'others' who, in valuing the 'inappropriate' developments enough to buy and live in them, do not (and do not deserve to) share local understandings of cultural symbolism. Developers and in-moving house purchasers attempt to appropriate to themselves cultural and symbolic capitals (and their translations into economic capital) that have been reproduced in these areas almost unchallenged for 120 years. The new developments and their imagined inhabitants threaten not only the physical fabric of the neighbourhood, but taken-for-granted claims to cultural reproduction. Such claims do not appear overtly exclusionary because they are couched in terms that represent (these) suburbs as being quintessentially 'Melbourne' and their preservation in the interests of all Melburnians.

The 'grief and rage' directed at the minister was a genuine response to the loss of loved and valued landscapes; the government was perceived to have broken an unwritten pact about the sanctity of these middle- and upper-class areas. The

language of government policy promoted the virtues of the global economy and asserted the necessity for uniform regulations in the name of economic and environmental efficiency. It thereby unsettled locally achieved accommodations of symbolic and cultural power, attempting to introduce new scales of values and rates of exchange between capitals through symbols of vibrant cafe societies and exciting high density city forms.

In the oppositions over taste, distinction and capitals in the middle suburbs, various qualities were attributed to the in-movers according to the different positions being promoted. There is very little information publicly available about who is investing in the developments or the kinds of people living in the new townhouses, and what data there is appears contradictory. It appears likely that many 'new residents' have moved quite locally and are 'empty nesters' wishing to stay in familiar surroundings.<sup>3</sup> But in-movers became conveniently blank surfaces on which discourses of otherness and cultural incompetence, or of diversity and environmental/economic virtue, could be inscribed.

Both the government's representations of the desirability of multi-unit dwellings and SOS's objections to them rendered invisible and silent other groups and other symbolic constructions of Melbourne. Whether in inscriptions of 'diversity' or in representations of 'Melbourne-ness', there is silence about the nature of property ownership, legacies of colonial domination, disparities in socioeconomic (and symbolic) status, and inadequate provision of public, social or affordable housing – a form of what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic violence'.

The habitus of the middle class depends on, and creates, a world view that occludes its 'others'; it is also conditioned by access to, and inhabitation of, hierarchically valued locations and the taste and distinctions embodied in the built environment, as much

as it is by socialisation and education. In turn, the actions and investments of these groups shape, perpetuate, defend and reshape both the social and the physical aspects of their habitus. It is important therefore to pay as much attention to the tastes and distinctions expressed and defended in the built environment as to other expressions of social hierarchy such as those given priority in the works of Bourdieu.

Bourdieu's configurations of habitus, distinction and different forms of capital provide a suggestive and fruitful framework for examining (and re-examining) the strategies and resources put into play by resident action groups. From this perspective, it can be argued that this story of conflict over valuations of the built environment and its political outcomes rested on the general acceptance of a hierarchical valuation of a particular urban aesthetic integral to a particular habitus. SOS strategies and practices drew on, and were able to perpetuate, the legitimacy of the middle suburbs' 'value to the rest of Melbourne'.

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<sup>3</sup> It is extremely difficult to find data on characteristics of townhouse purchasers or on relative prices in different areas. Organisations with the most detailed and up-to-date information – development companies and real estate agencies – are reluctant to part with commercially sensitive data. Many thanks to David Hayward and Terry Burke of the Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University, for at least anecdotally supporting my hunches.

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