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The great Australian nightmare? The problem of escalating housing aspirations and climate change

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Abstract

The dominant trend in Australian cities towards large, detached, energy intensive dwellings in poorly serviced, low-density, urban fringe locations, leaves governments, households and communities more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and does little to aid mitigation. Given the multiple and competing objectives of the stakeholders involved, reducing domestic energy consumption is more complex than attempting to change what Shove (2010) refers to as the ABC ('attitudes, behaviours and choices') of individual householders. What is needed is a

better understanding of the dynamic and integrated processes resulting in escalating expectations and aspirations for Australian housing. Along this vein, we suggest the ‘great Australian dream’ is actually becoming a great Australian nightmare. In our critique we investigate what is meant by a ‘normal’ home and how aspirations and expectations for housing have changed over time. Drawing on theories of social practice we look at what goes on inside homes to explore how everyday practices and the design of houses are mutually constitutive. In our analysis we find that seemingly common-place aspirations for housing are the result of changing practices, such as cooking, eating and entertaining, which are resulting in escalating trajectories of consumption. We conclude by suggesting how policy attention could be refocused on transforming the relationship between house design and everyday practice to address climate change.

Keywords: policy, housing design, everyday life, theories of social practice

Introduction

Changing aspirations and expectations for the great Australian dream are creating a great Australian nightmare as households and communities occupy larger, detached, energy-intensive dwellings in poorly serviced outer suburban locations. The ‘great Australian nightmare’ has been used previously to highlight the unattainable nature of home ownership, particularly in regard to affordability (Allon 2008; Croce 2003). We reappropriate the term to draw attention to the environmental consequences of the great Australian dream being realised. Some of the frightening outcomes of this scenario include, but are not limited to, increased frequencies of blackouts, climbing electricity prices, and high household greenhouse gas emissions. Aside from increasing the vulnerability of households to the impacts of climate change, this situation poses a key challenge for policies aimed at reducing domestic energy consumption.

New housing supply is often attributed to consumer expectations and demand. For example, the continued reproduction of detached houses in urban fringe locations is often claimed to meet demand for affordable housing (Gurran 2008; Moloney & Goodman 2012). By arguing that suppliers simply provide what the market demands, the responsibility for change lies with consumers, sidelining the role that urban environments, housing design and infrastructure provision play in shaping everyday lives (Strengers & Maller 2011). In this paper we argue that demand, or the expectations and aspirations that create demand, are intimately bound up with what is being provided. This is a dynamic relationship: everyday practices, or the activities we carry out in homes, also inform housing and neighbourhood form such that ‘things, people and practices interact in ways that are mutually constitutive’ (Shove, Elizabeth & Hand 2005, p. 1).

To unpack this notion further we investigate the ‘normal’ Australian home and explore how it has been moulded by historical and existing socio-technical arrangements. Drawing on theories of social practice described by Reckwitz (2002), Schatzki (1996) and Shove et al. (2012), we explore how everyday practices are both shaped by and shape the design of houses and offer this conceptualisation as an explanation for changing expectations and aspirations for housing. We demonstrate our argument by focusing on the example of changing practices of cooking, eating and entertaining which are co-located in the kitchen. The dynamic relationship between practices and houses has significant impacts for policy making aimed at achieving more sustainable housing: it involves redirecting attention towards everyday practices, such as what it means to cook, eat and entertain—which not only implicates the practices performed by householders but also those of a range of housing and homewares stakeholders, including architects, builders, developers, planners and appliance manufacturers.

Using social practices to understand housing outcomes

Although the materiality of homes participates in, facilitates or constrains how daily life is carried out, householders also actively create, make and re-make homes in conducting their daily lives (Blunt & Dowling 2006). Recognition of the agency of materials in daily life is found in theories of social practice where materials and things are considered part of a practice entity (Shove, E et al. 2012). Although there are various conceptualisations of the elements that make up a practice, a straightforward definition is offered by Shove et al. (2012) who describe practices as comprised of ‘materials’ (the *things* needed to do something), ‘meanings’ (what is *appropriate* to do) and ‘skills’ (*how* to do something).

Theories of social practice are useful for exploring the relationship between people and homes where materiality is a central consideration. More specifically, we view the built environment as a material element of practice to offer new ways of exploring the co-constitutive relationship between supply and demand, or between housing and everyday activities, such as staying cool in the home or entertaining guests.

With these ideas in hand we have the analytical basis to go beyond dominant policy responses that insufficiently address climate change challenges. These responses typically rely on psychological and economic strategies such as rational choice, education and information exchange and emphasise the ‘demand’ side of consumption (Moloney et al. 2010; Strengers 2011). Shove (2010) refers to these types of approaches as the ‘ABC model’ because they draw on the language of attitudes, behaviours and choice and ‘[frame] the problem of climate change as a problem of human behaviour’ (Shove 2010, p.1274). This model generates programs and

policies which are based on the assumption that responsibility for (and the ability to address) climate change lies with individuals who, in this case, are asked to make housing decisions that prioritise reduced energy consumption.

The ‘normal’ home’: The Great Australian Dream

Following on from Blunt and Dowling’s (2006) ‘imaginaries of home’, we use ‘expectations and aspirations’ to refer to the housing most commonly sought after and idealised—usually a detached home with a carport and garden—otherwise known as ‘the great Australian dream.’ This ideal is not the product or actions of any one individual or group of individuals (e.g. householders, policymakers or developers) but instead is the outcome of social practices ordered across time and space (Schatzki 2011). We propose that the history of Australian housing is correlated with changes arising from the trajectories of social practices. One thing that has remained relatively constant however, is the expectation and aspiration for owning a detached or semi-detached home, particularly since the post-war era.

What has fundamentally changed is the materiality of homes, including increases in overall floor size, internal layout, and the number of bathrooms, toilets and appliances. These changes have occurred alongside a decline in the number of average occupants per home. To illustrate, the median size of an outer suburban house grew by 39 per cent between 1990 and 2008 (Goodman et al. 2010) such that the mean house size peaked at 245 square meters (James 2011), larger than anywhere else in the world (Santow 2009).

Around the 1950s and 60s houses were smaller, cheaper to build and replicate and there were more people per house with multiple generations often living together. A single bathroom served

the whole household and there were fewer appliances. In addition, there was a strongly held notion that people lived in the same house for most of their lives, eventually passing it on to future generations. With the number of people per home declining yet the size (and consumption) of homes increasing, such change could be considered a perverse outcome. However, we argue that these trends, while involving changing consumer preferences and methods of housing supply can be more effectively explained by understanding the trajectories of social practices including those constituting everyday life (such as bathing, eating, cooling and entertaining) as well as practices performed by housing and homewares stakeholders. Shifting expectations and aspirations of what a 'normal' home constitutes are therefore an outcome of the assemblage and co-evolution of these multiple practices across time and space. We draw on the example of kitchens to illustrate this point, within which the practices of eating, cooking and entertaining are carried out.

In the past kitchens were often located at the back of houses as a designated work-oriented, food provisioning space. They were the domain of women and separated from living (and dining) areas located at the front of the house. In wealthier homes, these spaces were used to entertain guests whilst sparing them the chaos of the kitchen. However, in working class Australian homes kitchens have most often existed in the form of a kitchen-dining hybrid and were used as a place for socialising with friends and family as well as other domestic activities (Dowling 2008).

Shove and Hand (2005) interviewed members of 40 households living in terraced, semi-detached and new town houses in the UK. They found a frequent cause of dissatisfaction was lack of space in the kitchen, expressed by participants in the form of desire for a kitchen table around which the family could share a meal. In their analysis of the British magazines *Good Housekeeping* and

Ideal Home, Hand and Shove (2004, p. 12) explored how kitchens have changed from 1922 to 2002, observing that ‘by 2002 the kitchen has been ... redefined as a space for living and leisure’. Noting how kitchens had grown to accommodate changes in practices of entertaining and eating, they found that ‘kitchens are expected to be comfortable and convenient as well as efficient and functional’ (Hand & Shove 2004, p. 12). In the UK most people live in older houses ‘designed and built around ideals and practices’ (Hand et al. 2007, p. 669) very different from those that are dominant today. To keep up with changing daily routines, homes are renovated and retrofitted to reflect new and emerging trends in practice.

Maller et al. (2012) explored kitchen renovations as part of their study with renovators undertaking sustainable home improvements in Melbourne, Australia. They found that kitchens were a frequent site of renovation in order to accommodate new ideas and meanings about their purpose:

Offering an explanation for the ‘churn’ of kitchen renewal, in general renovators spoke of dissatisfaction with their old kitchen because it did not accommodate their ideas of what the kitchen was actually for (i.e. a space for socializing) (Maller et al. 2012, p. 15).

Maller et al. (2012, p. 15) found the biggest difference between renovators’ old and new kitchens was ‘the size as well as the variety of connections to other spaces such as outdoor entertaining areas’. Many new kitchens have minimal walls and often open out onto an adjacent formal or informal dining space (i.e. an open plan), uniting the practices of food preparation, cooking, entertaining and eating whereas previously these practices were carried out separately. This not only relates to the changing practices involved in using kitchen spaces, but also to the changing practices of designing and building kitchens and houses more generally. As Hand and Shove

(2004, p. 19) state: ‘now that the kitchen figures as a central part of the home and as a room for living in, it counts as a legitimate target for renovation and renewal on grounds of style and appearance alone’, as well as needing to be changed to accommodate new and emerging social practices.

It is not just kitchens that are subject to modification in response to changing practices. Other spaces in the home are just as frequently modified. For example, the most common home improvements in the UK are rearranging internal living space (16%), extensions to improve amenity (15%) and extensions for increased living space (14%) (EHCS, 2001 in Hand et al. 2007). Although similar figures are not available for Australia, in 1999, 58% of owner occupiers reported renovations had been carried out on their current dwelling over the previous 10 years (ABS 2002). These figures are likely to have remained constant or even increased. Homes are modified to create new spaces for and enable emerging practices such as home theatres and hybrid indoor/outdoor spaces (sometimes called outdoor ‘rooms’) accompanied by new appliances and technologies such as large, flat screen televisions and patio heaters (Hitchings 2007). In summing up, the home is not only a site of changing practices: it also contributes to that change, reflected in escalating aspirations and expectations for the great Australian dream.

Shifting expectations and aspirations for the Great Australian Dream

Deliberate attempts to shift the expectations and aspirations for normal homes to be less energy-intensive are complex. In addition to escalating trajectories of consumption arising from changing household practices, there are multiple stakeholder practices and varying agendas. Developers and builders want to sell houses cost effectively, policy makers want to meet demand for new housing and accommodate population growth, local councils seek to grow their local

population/rate base and ensure provision of services meets current and future demand. Home buyers are looking for a home to fit their budget that will provide for their everyday needs and fulfil their aspirations, while also being mindful of their home as an investment and potential for wealth creation through future resale. This arrangement ignores the ongoing and escalating costs of living in the house in particular, energy costs for heating and cooling (Moloney & Goodman 2012).

It is tempting to focus attention on one or more of these issues and ignore the underlying cause of changing expectations and aspirations: namely the shifting dynamics of everyday practices, and their intersections with the practices of various housing and homewares stakeholders. This would be a mistake. In focusing policy attention on understanding how everyday practices are changing and why, interventions to shift them would more effectively target the elements which constitute those changing practices. In particular government has a key role to play in shaping the material elements of homes including location, proximity to services and transport, design, layout and quality—all of which means shifting the practices of planners, developers and designers. Transforming the materiality of homes alongside attempting to shift the images and meanings associated with what a ‘normal’ home ought to constitute (e.g. smaller, well-designed, more efficient, affordable), while recruiting householders to more sustainable practices would increase the potential to shift aspirations and expectations in more sustainable directions. For example, this effort might involve attempting to circulate and recruit householders into adaptive ways of keeping cool that do not rely on air-conditioning (Strengers & Maller 2011) or working with kitchen and hardware companies to promote new ways to entertain and cook that prioritise comfortable outdoor eating areas within minimal energy requirements. Taking this step might involve making policy that has specific building requirements or regulations to support and

enable more adaptive everyday practices rather than (or as well as) seeking to mitigate the effects of climate change through efficiency performance benefits which are sometimes negated by changing practice (Wilkenfeld 2007).

Conclusion

Climate change adaptation and mitigation necessitates a wide-scale shift towards better designed and planned residential communities through more efficient, less energy intensive and denser housing that are more resilient to the impacts of climate change. We have argued that the best way to bring together these mutually-compatible objectives is by focusing on changing everyday practices, and the material role that housing plays in co-constituting and changing how householders live in and use their homes. The great Australian dream does not have to necessarily result in a nightmare, but to achieve change we need to reconceptualise housing supply and demand and the policy divide it generates, and focus on changing the practices that constitute our everyday lives.

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