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Not just Sprawl: Re-evaluating Australia's Outer Suburbs

It is all but axiomatic in Australian culture that outer suburbs are sites of dull, homogenous, consumption-focussed, uninspiring banality. This “imagined geography” of suburbia is not restricted to Australia: other highly-suburbanised cultures similarly dismiss outer suburbs. This imagined geography has resulted in a globally-tenacious model of the city as a series of concentric rings of productivity, economic importance, and attractiveness which diminish with distance from the centre.

Yet the demographic and material geographies of Australian outer suburbs sit uncomfortably beside this imagined one. More Australians now work in suburbs than in inner cities, outer suburbs are now sites of multicultural heterogeneity, ‘couple-with-children’ households are a minority in outer suburbs, and outer-suburban and inner-city architectural aesthetics are converging.

This paper anatomises the cultural space that is ‘outer suburbia’ by combining statistical data with the imagined geography of outer suburbia, and qualitative data based on over 100 interviews with outer suburban workers.