
In the weeks following the publication of this book, the Australian media splashed headlines across the nation’s screens, newspapers and airwaves. What, they shrieked, no more Hills Hoists? Victa mowers? Backyard cricket? Don Burke and Jamie Durie? This eruption of hysteria, albeit brief, was testimony to the enduring role and place of the suburban backyard in national mythologies of Australianness.

There has been a growing scholarly attention to the historical and cultural significance of the private open spaces of Australia’s suburbs since the mid-1970s. In the past decade or so, sustainability and environmental issues have increased the focus on these areas, particularly in terms of household tastes, behaviours and resource consumption. For example, environmental historian Andrea Gaynor has written extensively on suburban food production; historian Katie Holmes has studied women in the garden as well as the uses of Australian native plants; and geographer Lesley Head has taken an ethnographic approach to interpret the myriad ways that people understand their domestic outdoors. This research has uncovered a multitude of meanings, purposes and uses of Australia’s gardens and yards, all which are subject to significant changes over time and have been reflected in the size and composition of these outdoor spaces.

In *The Life and Death of the Australian Backyard*, Tony Hall builds upon these foundations, to which he adds his extensive experience in urban design and planning. (According to Hall, Jeffrey Mead also made significant contributions to what was originally a joint project.) As the title of this book suggests, Hall laments what he perceives as the demise of private open space in Australia’s suburbs. In its place, residents have built larger homes that represent economic security but leave little room on their blocks for a garden or a yard. This trend, he argues, not only has implications for the environment, but also for the lifestyles, safety and wellbeing of residents. Hall goes further than simply observing trends – he seeks to account for why the Australian backyard is shrinking.

To demonstrate the significance of the changes that have taken place in Australia’s suburbs, Hall provides a brief history of the backyard and the garden suburb from their origins in nineteenth century Britain. He traces their translation in Australia and explores how a particular ratio of block, house and garden came to dominate most suburbs until the 1990s. Hall explains the important roles that spaces outside the home have provided and continue to provide for the household. These have included spaces of work and utility, places of private retreat and entertainment, and areas of biodiversity and climate moderation.

Hall takes a closer look at the usual suspects blamed for Australia’s planning problems, such as urban consolidation and the philosophy of New Urbanism but is unconvinced that these movements can account entirely for smaller yard spaces. In fact, he argues, the underlying causes for the demise of the Australian backyard are not to be found in planning literature at all. Hall considers, instead, that the shift towards smaller outdoor spaces reflects broader socio-economic and cultural changes affecting Australians since the end of the 1980s. He derives this conclusion from a study of data produced to examine family breakdown, which shows that changes to the nation’s working hours over the past twenty years have dramatically affected Australian lifestyles. Around the home, these changes are...
‘not just permitting the building of houses with minimal backyards … but [are] actually driving it’ (p.92). Simply put, the backyard has shrunk because Australians have no time to use it.

The Life and Death of the Australian Backyard is a useful and stimulating contribution to both planning and design, and the field of suburban history. For the sake of narrative and style, the book would have benefited from a reduced dependence on planning terminology. Similarly, the colour plates could have been better assimilated throughout the text to illustrate the arguments. The aerial photographs were, by contrast, more illuminating because they clearly depicted the changes that Hall had documented. Likewise, I appreciated Hall’s efforts to present alternative planning approaches that could preserve the historical character of Australia’s suburban spaces.

Hall’s research into the shrinking backyard frames the research of the past twenty years in a new light, prompting the question: what role has nostalgia played in this swell of scholarly interest? The correlation that Hall identifies between changes to the way Australians live and the character of the nation’s suburbs, and the implications of these changes for quality of life, suggests good reason to reflect fondly on many aspects of a supposedly ‘simpler’ time. Of course, a great deal of recent research has not been historical per se, but has documented the nature of current-day human-environment relationships in the suburbs. In this vein, Hall’s study of Australia’s shrinking backyards is a timely reminder of, and a reflection on, the changing Australian way of life at the turn of the twenty-first century.

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