

Our segregated cities keep rich and poor as far apart as possible



The rarified view from Wentworth Street, Point Piper, in Sydney.

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“For richer, for poorer” is a popular phrase used in wedding ceremonies to demonstrate commitment. It is intended as a galvanising statement. But in the world of the social geography of Australian cities, the phrase has come to symbolise the reverse. There are rich suburbs and there are poor suburbs

scattered across metropolitan Australia, and each kind represents different tribes.

In fact, so effective are our cities at enforcing segregation that Australia's rich and poor need never meet or even cross paths.

Let me explain how this works.

There are many ways to measure the rich and the poor using the census, but perhaps the simplest method is median personal income. For Australia in 2016 this figure was \$34,000, which meant half the population aged over 15 earned more than this amount and half earned less. The figure is dragged down by the unemployed, pensioners, students and non-working spouses.

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Median personal income typically rises in the well-to-do yuppie suburbs of the inner city. Lots of double-income-no-kids and professional-type households have the effect of injecting buckets of disposable income into a local area. This is a different world to what are effectively welfare suburbs. My point is that Australia's Goldilocks suburbs — places where income levels are astronomically high — are located close to the city centre. The rich do not commute. The poor, on the other hand, have no choice in the matter and are flung out to the city's edge as if propelled by some centrifugal force to the margins of civilisation.

And therein lie the two worlds of metropolitan Australia — each, of course, containing different life forms — that now orbit the central business district at different radiuses and that never, ever connect.

Occasionally someone will shoot from the world of the poor to the world of the rich — Eddie McGuire made the transition from Broadmeadows to Toorak in one generation — but for the most part, and here is the bit that I think we need to change, each world tends to beget and envelop its own. Social mobility should be integral to the story of the Australian people in the 21st century.

The richest community in Sydney, and indeed within Australia, is the harbourside enclave of Point Piper, located 4km from the CBD, where the median personal income reaches \$89,000, or almost three times the national average. The poorest suburb in Sydney by this measure is Yennora, located 22km west of the CBD and 27km west of Point Piper. The median personal income in Yennora was just \$19,200 at the time of the last census. I doubt many Point Piper residents have been to Yennora or many Yennora residents

have been to Point Piper, even for a Sunday drive. How about both suburbs do precisely that this weekend? Go to Yennora. Go to Point Piper. See how the other half lives. And this is my point. The social geography of Sydney is such that the richest and the poorest can live out their lives without bumping into each other. Each group sticks to its own geography. The cross-fertilisation of ideas and of aspiration and maybe even of compassion is constricted by the separation of the richest from the poorest parts of Sydney.

The same is true for Melbourne, where the median personal income peaks at \$70,400 in Cremorne (Richmond). Cremorne (population: 2000) and Point Piper are small residential enclaves, especially when compared with the vastness of the mighty Toorak nation that spills and sprawls its way across 14,000 residents. The injection of aspirational but nevertheless proletarian apartments right into the ribs of Toorak has had the effect of dragging down the suburb's average income. Toorak's rich are there on large garden allotments but they're kinda intermingled with flat dwellers.

Point Piper's poshness is a tad less trammelled than are the tribes of Toorak.

Melbourne's poorest suburb is Meadow Heights, located 21km north of Cremorne; there the median personal income is \$19,800. Cremorne is to the Melbourne CBD as Point Piper is to the Sydney CBD. And Meadow Heights is to Melbourne as Yennora is to Sydney. It is almost as if the narrative of both cities has been scripted to some grand design.

In Brisbane the richest suburb by the same measure of income is Teneriffe whereas the poorest suburb is Inala. Teneriffe is a nifty 3km from the CBD; the public housing estates of Inala are 18km further south.

The bigger the city, the farther the poor are from the rich. In Sydney, the Yennora-Point Piper axis is 6km longer than Melbourne's Cremorne-Meadow Heights axis, which in turn is 3km longer than Brisbane's Teneriffe-Inala axis.

If nothing else, Australian cities are clinically efficient at social segregation. The distance between Adelaide's richest and poorest suburbs — Unley Park and Woodville Gardens — is 12km. Perth also follows the trend with Mirrabooka's poor being positioned 18km from Cottesloe's rich. Even in the smaller capitals the rich and the poor manage to separate themselves. Hobart's richest citizens live barely 1km from the CBD at Battery Point, but even in this smallish capital city the poor are sent 17km up the Derwent River to the province of Gagebrook.

Darwin's smart set bunkers down on the waterfront's Bayview whereas the battlers do the best they can 15km farther to the east in Moulden.

And in Canberra the place to be for aspiring mandarins is Barton, which is 16km from Belconnen's battlers at Charnwood. Although I must say that the idea of rich and poor is differently defined in the nation's capital.

Median personal income in Barton at \$82,000 is second only to Point Piper in this exercise. But the same figure for Charnwood (\$39,000) is not that much lower than the best for Hobart at Battery Point (\$47,000).

We can say the poorest urban communities in Australia are located in the public housing estates of Sydney and Melbourne. We can say Point Piper really is in a league of its own. We can say it is the poor who have shifted across time from the now gentrified suburbs of the old walking city to the creeping edges of the modern car city. And we can say that the bigger the city, the farther from the city centre the poor must live.

By the middle of the 21st century it is likely that Sydney and Melbourne will be approaching the eight million mark. Based on the figures and the ratios cited above, I am pretty sure that Point Piper and Cremorne and Teneriffe and even Battery Point still will be locations prized by the city's rich.

But it is the poor who'll move during the 2020s and the 2030s. Perhaps farther upstream from Gagebrook, perhaps farther north from Meadow Heights and perhaps farther west from Yennora. And if this is the case then the chances of inspiring social mobility will drop as each of the city's bubbles tightens around its kin.

And of course between these hot spots of prosperity and despair there lie broad stretches of middle Australia blossoming on our great suburban savanna.

Our cities are on the move demographically and socially, and perhaps even geographically, as the poor push farther outwards in search of shelter and support. But it doesn't have to be like this. Maybe we can inject enclaves of prosperity into the middle and outer suburbs. Maybe we can create affordable housing for the marginalised within the hipster zone. Maybe we can create a truly diverse society where all ethnicities, all social groups, all income levels at least occasionally get the opportunity to serendipitously bump into each other.

I'm sorry but I find the alternative — the retreat into ever tightening tribal bubbles — not only boring but perhaps even corrosive to our national ideal of social mobility, inclusion and tolerance.

There are better ways to organise the way we live — and with the right town planning responses I think we can deliver even better big cities in the future.

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