



A CONFLICT OVER HOW LAND IS IMAGINED AND USED

PLANS TO REDEVELOP REDFERN/WATERLOO ARE UNLIKE ANY OTHER REDEVELOPMENT PLANS IN AUSTRALIA ARGUES **DALLAS ROGERS** BECAUSE THREE VERY DIFFERENT WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT THE LAND ARE CURRENTLY GUIDING HOW THE LAND IS BEING USED.

How we think about the land shapes what we do with the land. This includes, but is certainly not limited to, how we live, build housing, and socialise in the physical environment.

The land mentalities guiding land use in Redfern/Waterloo are: (1) Aboriginal land; (2) land as a communal asset; and (3) land as a private asset. A land mentality is defined as the way a person or group thinks about their relationship to the land.

For example, the traditional owners of Redfern and Waterloo are the *Gadigal* people.

Aboriginal land mentalities shape how the land is used and managed in an area located just north of Redfern station – colloquially known as *The Block*.

A communal land mentality that views public land as a communal public asset has long been used to provide public housing in the area. The public housing towers are a defining feature of the urban landscape and a legacy of this land mentality.

A private property land mentality that views land as an individual private asset has also been a defining feature of the urban landscape. This is evident in the large swaths of private

housing and commercial activities in the area.

ABORIGINAL LAND

As an Australian urban sociologist, I am alarmed by the silence about *whose* land is being traded in large-scale redevelopment projects across the city.

Redevelopment discussions are surprisingly silent on the question of Aboriginal land in the city. It is a discussion that cannot be ignored in the redevelopment of Redfern and Waterloo.

Aboriginal land mentalities are not to be found in history books. Rather, they are complex and very much alive in our cities. They involve multiple ways of thinking about land, place, identity and housing, and they interconnect with dispossession and other land mentalities in the area.

As a white descendent of British colonisers it is not my place to make judgements about Aboriginal land use in Redfern. As an urban sociologist it would be remiss of me, however, to ignore the complex Aboriginal land mentalities that have shaped and are shaping the area.

LAND AS A PUBLIC ASSET

Following the Second World War the government used public land and the construction of public housing as a part of their economic recovery plan. Under this mentality, land was viewed as a public asset that could be used within the broader provision of social welfare. Australia has had a relatively stable public housing population of between 4 and 6 per cent from the 1950s into the early twenty-first century.

In places like Redfern/Waterloo a public land and housing mentality was originally used to house low-income working families. The houses that were built on the public land provided a safety net for low-income citizens as well as a work force for the growing city.

Not so long ago, Redfern had around 1600 public housing properties, about 25% of all housing; and Waterloo had around 2500 public housing properties, about 90% of all housing.

This public housing population was relatively stable too. Over 55% of public housing tenants had lived in Redfern/Waterloo for more than five years and over 30% had lived there for more than 10 years.

Public housing was once seen as part of an affordable housing solution as well as a driver of the urban economy. Much has changed in the intervening years.

Today governments and others are touting public housing as an urban problem. The residualisation of the tenant population, a rise in crime and unemployment, and a lethargic building maintenance program are now synonymous with many peoples' image of public housing.

Despite limited affordable housing options in Sydney, which is further compounded by rising property prices, Australian state housing agencies have sold 2.5 public housing dwellings per day over the last ten years.

They also changed the rules for getting into public housing by increasingly targeting those with complex social, family and health needs.

One driver of this change in reasoning is the different land mentalities that now frame most discussions about land and housing in Sydney. Thinking about land as an individual private asset is the dominant land mentality in public policy and urban planning practice.

This land mentality positions individual private land ownership over collective and public forms of land ownership. The power of imaging the land as an individual private asset is what the residents are up against in their battle to save public housing in Redfern/Waterloo.

LAND AS A PRIVATE ASSET

Following the Second World War, Australian governments used private housing construction and sales as a part of their economic recovery plan. The new real estate citizen was called upon to buy a house and to fill it up with consumer goods, such as white goods, furniture and a new car. The private home was the site through which a new consumer economy was built.

There was a gradual increase in home ownership from around 50 per cent in the early twentieth century up to around 70 per cent by mid-century. This has remained relatively stable into the early twenty-first century.

By treating land as private property, government policy and taxation settings helped to build significant housing wealth in some sections of the citizenry. For example, baby boomer households that were able to become homeowners now "have the greatest holdings of all forms of wealth" according to Andrew Haylen in 2014.

But these statistics obscure a fundamental change, the steady decline of young first homebuyers from the private market from around the mid-1980s. Today, close to 85 per cent of people who are aged 75 or over own their home outright, less than 3 per cent have a mortgage, and less than 10 per cent are renting.

About half of those aged between 25 and 34 are buying a home and 75 per cent of those aged 15-24 are renting. The children of baby boomers are not purchasing housing at the same age or at the same housing-cost-to-income ratio as their parents, and they will not have the same housing fortunes.

LAND IS MORE THAN A PRIVATE ASSET

Redfern/Waterloo is a good demonstration that Aboriginal, public and private land mentalities can co-exist in a city, if they are allowed to.

If the Redfern/Waterloo redevelopment is to be successful in economic, social and cultural terms, the development authorities will need to consider the delicate ways in which these three land mentalities are uniquely shaping the urban environment.

A private property land mentality has become the dominant notion of value in urban planning and redevelopment in Sydney. This suits developers, because they make significant profits from the changing land values that are associated with urban planning, land rezoning and housing density increases.

In other words, public policy increases the economic value in the land (e.g., land value uplift associated with rezoning) and the private developers claim this increased land value through their redevelopments.

This land mentality prioritises 'economy' value over other 'social', 'cultural' and 'heritage' value systems as a basic principle of market economics. However, it is possible to realign these values, and to use the economic value created in private land to achieve more economically, socially and culturally equitable outcomes.

If we are serious about working towards a more just city, then serious thought needs to be given to the costs and benefits of thinking about and using the land in different ways. Rather than a wholly privatised land market in Sydney, there are increasing calls for hybrid models of land ownership that provide a suite of public, private, communal, individualised and other land and housing options.

This should not be read as an argument against private property, but a need for government intervention to make private property work for a more socially and culturally just city. It is a call to integrate the more diverse suite of land and housing thinking that exists in the city to achieve a more equitable urban environment.

For example, value capture models that retain a proportion of the private land 'value uplift' that is created by public policy could be used to fund affordable housing that is provided under different land mentalities.

Far more innovative models would include shared equity or land trust models, which truly 'blend' the land tenure and housing system.

Housing a younger and more culturally diverse future workforce for Sydney, and securing the economic future of the city more broadly, might depend on working with the diverse land and housing thinking that exists in the city.

Dr Dallas Rogers is a research member of the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University. References for this article and the details of his book on *The Geopolitics of Real Estate: Reconfiguring Property, Capital and Rights* can be found with the online version of this article.