The Australian urban consolidation debate:
An exploration of the value judgements and urban imaginaries of academics

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Researcher
Wouter Bervoets – Department of Architecture, University of Leuven

Supervisor
Brendan Gleeson – MSSI, University of Melbourne
Personal background

Academic visitor at the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute
November 2014 – June 2015
EU AUSMIP+ Postdoctoral scholarship

Education
1999-2004/ Master in Architecture – Sint-Lucas School of Architecture, Brussels
2005-2010/ Architect – Arter, Brussels
2008-2010/ Master in Urban Planning – Erasmus University College, Brussels
2010-2014/ PhD in Architecture – University of Leuven, Leuven

Overhoused People / Underused Houses? Towards a Sustainable Reassembling of the Post War Housing Stock in Suburban Flanders, Belgium
1. Introduction
2. Methodology
3. Research findings – Mapping the debate
4. Research findings – Values and research
5. Discussion and critical reflections
Urban consolidation?

Increasing urban density became the dominant planning orthodoxy in the 1980’s

Criticized as an imagined ‘Panacea for urban problems’ resulting from an ‘unholy alliance’ of political antagonists with different expectations

**Economic benefits**
- reduce infrastructure costs
- stimulus for the construction industry

**Social benefits**
- meeting changing patterns of housing demand
- improved social sustainability and cohesion

**Environmental benefits**
- reduce environmental impact of urbanization
- promotion of public transport, cycling and walking

1. Introduction
1. Introduction
The emergence of urban consolidation policies

Strongly tied to important social, economic and political changes

- Keynesian welfare state policies
- Post-war economic boom
- Focus on housing provision
- Housing as accommodation
- Dominance of nuclear families
- Industrial city
- Enchantment suburban ideal
- Local city
- ...etc

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- Neo-liberal state policies
- Public budget constraints
- Focus on infrastructure
- Housing as a financial product
- Diversification of family forms
- Post-industrial city
- Disenchantment suburban ideal
- Global city
- ...etc

1. Introduction
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Much debate about suburbia in Australia
One’s utopia is the other’s dystopia

Binary thinking: tradition of opposing value judgments regarding urban form

Defenders of high density urban form present

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low density as</th>
<th>High density as</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reactionary</td>
<td>Progressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boring</td>
<td>Vibrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socially homogeneous</td>
<td>Socially diverse</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unsustainable</td>
<td>Sustainable</td>
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<td>...etc</td>
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Defenders of low density urban form present

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low density as</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safe</td>
<td>Dangerous</td>
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<tr>
<td>Healthy</td>
<td>Unhealthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family friendly</td>
<td>Family unfriendly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sustainable</td>
<td>Unsustainable</td>
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<td>...etc</td>
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</table>
(sub)urban development and ideology

In the literature on (sub)urbanization, the interaction between ideology and urban form is often discussed

Suburban development presented as the materialization of anti-urban ideology

To foster domesticity, health, beauty, class solidarity,...etc

Urban consolidation presented as the materialization of anti-suburban ideology

To foster cosmopolitanism, social interaction, sustainability,...etc.

1. Introduction
Twofold research goal

1/ To map the academic urban consolidation debate in Australia

   *What are the value-based fault lines that define the academic debate?*

2/ To analyse the dealing with personal values in urban research

   *How does the academic world deal with personal values in urban research?*

1. Introduction
Motivation for the research

Why focus on values?
In technical debates on urban consolidation the value-laden elements are easily lost

→ To contribute to a more informed debate on urban consolidation

Why focus on academics?
Relatively little research on how academics influence urban policymaking

→ To improve the translation of scientific knowledge into policies

1. Introduction
1. Introduction
2. Methodology
3. Research findings – Mapping the debate
4. Research findings – Values and research
5. Discussion and critical reflections
A qualitative research methodology

Data gathering
-exploratory approach
-based on 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews with academics
-conducted between March and June 2015
-HREC 1543678 with guaranteed anonymity to respondents

Selection of the respondents
-(retired) full time academics in fields of urban planning, geography, design and history
-content analysis of Australian Planner and Urban Policy and Research
-snowball sampling during interviews
- caveat: excludes more design oriented researchers and part-time academics

2. Methodology
A qualitative research methodology

Respondents
- 20 academics: 14 men and 6 women
- affiliated to 10 Australian universities
- aged between 35 and 85
- ranging from early career research fellows to Professors Emeriti

Interview topics
- personal view on Australian cities
- personal view on urban consolidation
- personal political values
- personal housing biography
- personal view on the ideal city
- fault lines in the urban consolidation debate
- dealing with values in academic research

2. Methodology
A qualitative research methodology

Data analysis
- 20 audio recordings between 40 and 240 minutes, 80 minutes on average
- verbatim transcript of interviews (in progress)
- coding and inductive thematic analysis in NVIVO (planned)
- exploration of the different positions

Self-reflexivity
- advantages and disadvantages of being an outsider
- I grew up in a suburb of Brussels, currently I live in an apartment in Brussels
- I am concerned about low density, car based urban form
- personal preference for compact cities and public transport

2. Methodology
1. Introduction
2. Methodology
3. Research findings – Mapping the debate
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5. Discussion and critical reflections
Academic disagreements on urban consolidation

Not one clearly delineated debate, but an assembly of multiple smaller debates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basics:</th>
<th>Disciplines:</th>
<th>Topics:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assumed benefits</td>
<td>Urban planning</td>
<td>Urban form</td>
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<td>Implementation</td>
<td>Urban design</td>
<td>Transport</td>
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<td>Deliveries</td>
<td>Transport planning</td>
<td>Housing</td>
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<td>Architecture</td>
<td>Planning</td>
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<td>Housing Studies</td>
<td>Governance</td>
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<td>History</td>
<td>Environment</td>
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<td>Cultural Studies</td>
<td>Built heritage</td>
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3. Research findings – Mapping the debate
Political beliefs of the respondents

Large majority positions itself as ‘progressive’, ‘centre-left’ or ‘social-democrat’

Shared concerns
- neo-liberal state ideology
- dominance of economic interests
- growing social divisions
- unaffordability of housing
- environmental impact of urbanization
- lack of good urban planning
- ....etc

Shared desires
- egalitarian society
- more sustainable cities
- more inclusive cities
- more diverse housing supply
- freedom of housing choice
- better public transport
- better urban planning
- ....etc

The left-right or liberal-conservative ideological opposition seems inappropriate to understand the academic urban consolidation debate in Australia

3. Research findings – Mapping the debate
Personal attitudes to suburbia and urban consolidation

Not always a link between housing situation and position on urban consolidation

A positive attitude towards suburbia does not necessarily mean a negative attitude towards urban consolidation (and vice versa)

“I position myself as a defender of the suburbs, because I also grew up there and I thought it was just fine [...]”

“I am quite happy with consolidation. Massive consolidation is already occurring and that is jolly and good for people who choose that kind of way of living [...]”

“But I don’t think it is appropriate for everybody and I am much more inclined for a range of options and possibilities.”

(Interview AC19)
Mutual accusations in the academic debate

For being driven by ideology, for romanticizing and idealizing (sub)urban housing form

Proponents accuse the opponents....

“But I think that the ideology on the other side is much more intense than it is on the transit oriented development side or if you would like the intensifiers have been much more driven by evidence than the anti-intensifiers.”
(Interview AC8)

...and opponents accuse the proponents

“I would also claim that most of the planners are so ideologically blinkered that they cannot or will not acknowledge the limitations of their arguments [...] They are extreme ideologues, they would be happy to put 5 stories apartments down all major arterial roads which would be just disastrous for those neighbourhoods.”
(Interview AC6)
Scepticism about the ideological nature of the debate

Australia is a pragmatic country

“I am not sure ideology plays a big role in Australian social science, in our era of work [...] I never did get Australia as a hugely ideologically driven country anyway, it is a more pragmatic country”
(Interview AC18)

Conflicting values are not the main determinant

“Proponents and opponents have their own reading of evidence, but the force with which they promulgate their respective scientific standpoints is only strengthened by their personal values, not determined”
(Interview AC13)

The urban consolidation debate is over

“I think maybe the argument is over, in the sense that probably the consolidators have won to some extent”
(interview AC19)
Alternative explanations for the academic disagreements

Characteristic of academia

“It is just part of academia that academics disagree with each other and have different positions.”
(Interview AC14)

Disagreement is necessary to advance knowledge

“As academics we want to find gaps in the research to contribute to. We don’t want to agree with our colleagues, because how does that advance the discussion?”
(Interview AC11)

Lack of data and evidence

“There is a general lack of research, data and evidence which leaves space for interpretation and argument”
(Interview AC 14)
Alternative explanations for the academic disagreements

Small academic field in Australia
“In terms of Australian urban planning we are a small discipline, we are a small group of people and most of us have links. And I think there is just a history of maybe two schools of thought”
(Interview AC14)

Personal conflicts
“I think it has to do with some particular strong personalities of an earlier generation who hate one another and who just got locked in male ego’s.”
(Interview AC12)

Academic vanity and competition
“We are all driven by different things. And we are also driven by making a contribution. And we need to find a small little wedge and once we find it, we try to push it open as wide as much.”
(Interview AC11)
Alternative explanations for the academic disagreements

Different theoretical frameworks

“Everyone is interrogating these questions from a different framework, different bodies of literature informing: Marxism, network planning etc […] planning itself is depending on what body of political or philosophical literature you subscribe to.”
(Interview AC11)

Different research disciplines

“I think there is a big split between the design disciplines and the social science disciplines on this. The design discipline don’t consider the social and economic context.”
(Interview AC17)

Different research topics

“A lot of the disagreement is because they focus on different things. It is not because they fundamentally disagree on the same thing”
(Interview AC16)

3. Research findings – Mapping the debate
Alternative explanations for the academic disagreements

Different generations of researchers

“Some older academics who oppose urban consolidation hold an outdated view on suburban developments. I believe the younger generation of academics is more pragmatic.”
(Interview AC18)

Different housing histories

“Maybe that defensiveness [against urban consolidation] doesn’t just comes from the facts, it also comes from the emotional experiences of the suburb […] their history, where they grew up.”
(Interview AC14)

Different housing preferences

“The debate at the moment tends to be dominated by the kind of people who live in the inner city and for whom it is associated with cosmopolitan lifestyle, with sophistication, with high amenity of various kinds and so on.”
(Interview AC5)

3. Research findings – Mapping the debate
Fault lines on ‘how the city is’

Different views on the nature of the city and its problems

Spatial problem ↔ Social problem

Focus on the product ↔ Focus on the processes

“It is part of a larger problem which is the consumption patterns that Australians and high income societies tend to have [...] I think the urban form is an effect of those desires being unregulated”

(Interview AC1)
Fault lines on ‘how the city ought to be’

Different imaginations of the ideal residential environment

Suburban housing ideal ↔ Urban housing ideal

Low density
Individual dwelling
Mainly private outdoor space

High density
Collective housing
Mainly public outdoor space

“I live in an apartment, I just don’t like big houses […] I am a yuppie, a professionally employed urban childless person […] It influences my view on the ideal city in a sense that there are many people my age who probably have similar desires and aspirations.”

(Interview AC3)
Fault lines on ‘how the city ought to be’

Different imaginations of the desired personal autonomy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Autonomy</th>
<th>Dependence</th>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on self-sufficiency</td>
<td>Focus on community services</td>
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“If all else fails, a house on a block of land can provide something for themselves [...] A lot of the families in Australia who survived the depression did so from their own hands by growing vegetables You are living in a capitalist society; you have to find a way around [...] So that is the ultimate defence mechanism.”

(interview AC2)
Fault lines on ‘how to achieve the desired city’

Different views on the key actors for urban change

Spatial change
Focus on the built environment

Social change
Focus on processes

“Definitely the shape of our cities determines how happy we are in our neighbourhoods, how much we walk and our physical health etc. [...] So I am an environmental determinist as for as planning for wealth and well being [...] urban consolidation is absolutely the first step to a better society.”

(Interview AC12)
Fault lines on ‘how to achieve the desired city’

Different views on the desirability of urban population growth

Unavoidable
Basic fact to deal with

Avoidable
Intervene and stop it

“People of Melbourne were being asked to accommodate all these extra people, but weren’t given any opportunity whether it was a good idea to bring all these extra people here in the first place [...and] to sacrifice their amenity in order to provide for all these additional people.”

(Interview AC6)

3. Research findings – Mapping the debate
Preliminary findings – Mapping the debate

Complex debate with multivalent disagreements

- Not one clear ideological fault line, but multiple smaller fault lines

- Evolution towards a less ideologically driven, but more pragmatic debate

- Misrepresentation and stereotyping of different positions

- Academic disagreements overshadow many shared concerns
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Do personal values influence academic research?

Large majority claims that personal values influence their research

“”There is nothing value free. Your values frame the way in which you collect data, the way in which you use data, the way in which you come to issues [...] I think there is a limit to how much you can claim neutrality.
(IInterview AC9)

Small minority claims that personal values don’t influence their research

“I am totally evidence based, that has been my training as a scientist [...] It is not that I don’t have values, but they have never dominated in my choice of research topic, or how I go about my research or writing.”
(IInterview AC5)

4. Research findings – Values and research
Problematic dealing with values in urban research

Counter-productive for policy impact

There hasn’t been a detached analysis of the findings and they are coming together in policy [...] why do we have such outrageously bad policy in this country? [...] It is a policy failure partly because of this lack of uniform consistent academic response to the evidence.”
(Interview AC10)

Leads to relativism

“It really worries me that people feel like ‘ah you can do this or you can do that’, it is just a matter of opinion. [...] That annoys me because these issues are very important and need to be resolved [...] It is counterproductive in a sense.
(Interview AC9)

It obscures good research

“I think the values and ideologies obscure the very good research that has been done on this kind of stuff. A lot of good research is done in this area, but I think it tends to be obscured by values and ideologies on both sides.”
(Interview AC1)
Need for more openness on personal values in urban research?
Opinions are divided

Pro
“*I think we should be open about it [...] be clear about where you are coming from.*”
(interview AC10)

“I would like to see more clarity on what we are really arguing about. Is it really about the density or is about some fear you have for a dream that you had?”
(Interview AC3)

Contra
“We have enough difficulty sorting out the evidence and the methodologies without worrying about the values. It would reduce the debate to a debate about values”
(interview AC13)

“No, we need better and more research and evidence”
(Interview AC5)

4. Research findings – Values and research
Why is it so difficult for academics to be open about their values?

**Academic tradition**

“Well that is academic tradition, nobody declares. I don’t start my papers with ‘I am a centre left academic’”

(Interview AC14)

**To get research published**

“Academics need to publish and I think to get published to start talking about values is quite difficult. It can make an article less publishable [...] So I think that the publication necessity of academia is meaning that values are kind of a bit subdued.”

(Interview AC17)

**To get research funding**

“I try to be a neutral researcher, probably because my whole career has probably been within the context of right wing governments, so you don’t get money otherwise [...] researchers do research they get money for.”

(Interview AC18)
Why is it so difficult for academics to be open about their values?

To avoid political debates in academia

“When you are more explicit about it, then it leads to questions about what is a better value system. And that becomes a very political issue. And that is an area where we can’t really prove anything either way”

(Interview AC17)

To maintain scientific credibility

“It makes you seen less superior as an academic. The more you start talking about values, the more subjective it becomes. If you come in with a set of objective kind of principles, ideas and knowledge, that makes you seen more expert than if you start talking about values.”

(Interview AC17)

For a larger policy impact

“I think that power operates most effectively when it is hidden. I don’t try to hide my own political situations towards viewpoints, but I am not always sure that announcing them is necessary or most useful, because they can easily be written of.”

(Interview AC8)

4. Research findings – Values and research
Why is it so difficult for academics to be open about their values?

Inadequate training
“Because they are not trained to do it.”
(Interview AC16)

Limited self-knowledge
“I don’t know exactly what my values are.”
(Interview AC11)

To avoid criticism on the personality
“I don’t think people want to put that forward as often because the critique is no longer about the research, but becomes about the person doing the research.”
(Interview AC11)
Preliminary findings – Values and urban research

Personal value judgements influence urban research
More openness about it remains a difficult issue in urban research

Need for more openness on personal values
- Recognition that values play an important role
- More real life and interdisciplinary debate among academics

Need for more urban research
- More evidence on various aspects of urban consolidation
- Adjustment of the financing mechanism of academic research

4. Research findings – Values and research
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Comments? Questions? Recommendations?

To what extent do you see the academic urban consolidation debate as an ideological debate?

To what extent could more openness on personal value judgements in urban research contribute to a more sustainable urban future?
Thanks for listening!

Further contact

Wouter.bevoets@asro.kuleuven.be