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by Samantha Sinnayah (/contributor/sinnayah_samantha), 2011

Daceyville

Today, Daceyville is a tiny, often overlooked suburb located six kilometres south of Sydney central business district. In 1912, however, it was a hive of activity as its construction brought about Australia's first public housing scheme. Built by the state's first Labor government, and using the skills of well-known Sydneysiders like architect John Sulman, it is one of Sydney's unique suburbs.

Slumdog Sydney c1880–1910

Daceyville was built in response to the appalling living conditions experienced by the working class in late-nineteenth-century Sydney. The city's dramatic growth in population put a large strain on its inner-city housing. With rents determined by the free market, many families found themselves at the mercy of private landlords who charged ridiculously high rents for poorly serviced spaces. In order to make ends meet, many tenants sublet rooms in their rentals, further worsening the living standards of these areas. During this time, some 35 per cent of inner city homes were considered dilapidated, unsanitary, and unfit for human habitation. [1]

John Rowland Dacey and the Housing Act 1912

The 1909 *Royal Commission for the Improvement of Sydney*

(/event/royal_commission_for_the_improvement_of_the_city_of_sydney_and_its_suburbs_1908)

suggested workmen's housing should be built in the suburbs, but it was not until New South Wales voted in its first Labor Government in October 1910 that words turned into actions. The new government attempted many reforms during its rule, and when it came to housing, Colonial Secretary John Rowland Dacey (/person/dacey_john_rowland) led the way. He stated:

The day is past, when free Australians were content to be herded together in terraces of mere dog-boxes. In some suburbs they are compelled to herd together like flies . . . the time has come when we should create a Garden City and provide houses of an up-to-date character at the lowest possible rental. [2]

There was much opposition to the government intervening in the private rental market. Some thought Dacey's ideas were socialist. For Charles Wade, ([/person/wade_charles](#)) the leader of the opposition, Daceyville was more like 'Audaciousville', 'a mere drop in the ocean' to what was a much bigger problem. [3]

Despite a difficult passage, the *Housing Act* ([/artefact/housing_act_1912](#)), ([/artefact/housing_act_1912](#)) which enabled the government to become both a constructor and landlord of housing, was passed on 24 April 1912. With it the Housing Board ([/organisation/new_south_wales_housing_board](#)) of New South Wales, forerunner to the Housing Commission of New South Wales, and today's Housing NSW, was established to run the project. Dacey unfortunately did not live to see this happen, as he died from chronic nephritis just two weeks before the *Housing Act* was passed.

The grand experiment

Designed to be the opposite of crowded, unhygienic inner-city Sydney, Daceyville's planners looked overseas for ideas. Britain's Garden City Movement was a major source of inspiration, as shown by the suburb's alternative name – Dacey Garden Suburb. Born out of the ills of the nineteenth-century industrial city, the 'garden city' movement was an exercise in 'environmental determinism' that aimed at improving the morality, health and respectability of citizens by providing them with self-contained towns of ordered, visually pleasing streetscapes. They believed in single-family homes and abundant green spaces which together merged the best elements of city and country life.

Richard Stanton's ([/person/stanton_richard](#)) Haberfield ([/place/haberfield](#)) may have been a private development lacking the sense of reform proposed by the British movement, however his well-known phrase, 'slumless, laneless and publess', sums up very well what the planners hoped for with Daceyville.

In total, three street layouts were produced for Daceyville, with each improving on the previous one. The second plan, drawn up by John Sulman ([/person/sulman_john](#)) and John Hennessy ([/person/hennessy_john_francis_\(jack\)](#)) in 1912, provided the basis for much of the suburb as it stands today. Sulman greatly admired Paris's nineteenth-century slum clearance and redesign. View Daceyville from above today, and you will see that Sulman's placement of Cook and Banks avenues looks very much like the beginnings of Parisian boulevards.

Originally envisioned 'to extend to the shores of Botany Bay,' ([/natural_feature/botany_bay](#)) Daceyville was to be a large self-contained suburb, complete with its own tramline, schools and shops. [4] There were even plans for a maternity hospital, and hostels to prevent families taking in lodgers. In making Daceyville a 'model' suburb, the Housing Board hoped private developers and councils would be inspired to build similar settlements.

From sand to suburb

Construction started on 6 June 1912 and, as a series of photographs in State Records New South Wales show, it was a mammoth task. To produce Daceyville's ordered streets, sand dunes had to be demolished and the landscape reconfigured. When the suburb's builders finally turned their energy to house-building, they initially completed two homes a week. But despite this flying start, the suburb's progress was not as straightforward as the suburb's grand avenues. Lack of funds and rising building

costs made a dent, as did criticisms made by Charles Reade, (/person/reade_charles) of the British Garden Cities and Town Planning Association. To him, Daceyville's road layout was 'extravagant and costly'. Furthermore, the suburb lacked 'anything corresponding to a cul-de-sac or narrow town planning road of modern times'. [5]

As a result, government architect William Foggitt (/person/foggitt_william) stepped in and revised Daceyville's blueprint in 1914. If you stand on Cook Avenue today, facing away from the Kingsford roundabout, Sulman and Hennessey's Daceyville lies to your right and Foggitt's revised suburb to your left. These latter streets are smaller, curvier, and 'friendlier' than their predecessors. Explore Foggitt's Daceyville further, and you will come across Colonel Braund Crescent, Australia's first planned cul-de-sac. [6]

Despite these alternations, World War I (/event/world_war_i) had a bigger impact on the suburb's character and future. In 1916, when 50 war widows received housing in the suburb, the scheme slowly changed from a workers' suburb into one associated with returned servicemen. Once the suburb's newly completed streets started to be named after men who served in the Great War (/event/world_war_i), this association grew.

By 1919, the mood of social enlightenment that supported Daceyville as a working-class rental scheme had become less important than the need to house thousands of returned soldiers. With an overall lag in house construction, the Nationalist Party, which now held power in New South Wales, introduced a new housing policy that provided financial assistance to those who wanted to buy an existing home or purchase land on which to build one. Because of this policy, Daceyville's southern end, now part of Pagewood, (</place/pagewood>) was subdivided and offered for private sale.

When Daceyville's last rental property was finished in June 1920, just 315 of the intended 1473 cottages had been built. Of the many amenities once planned, six shops, a baby health clinic, a large community hall, a police station and one public school were built. In 1924, St Michael's Catholic Church (/building/st_michaels_catholic_church_daceyville) and School joined the suburb.

Living the dream

Though Daceyville fell well short of its original plans, there was a unanimous feeling of gratitude among its early residents. Compared to most areas in Sydney, Daceyville was well-serviced, boasting amenities we now consider basic. Sewerage connection, curbed streets and electricity were all part of the suburb's respectable package. With outdoor sleeping then considered the healthier option, large verandas were another important feature of the suburb's housing.

Gardens, however, were the key to Daceyville and its success. It was one of the first suburbs in Sydney to have fenceless front gardens, breaking down the boundaries between public and public space. As a result, the rental agreement for all the suburb's homes stated that the garden must be kept 'in good order to the satisfaction of the Board'. According to reports, some residents raised 'brilliant rose beds and even rose gardens in the sand'; [7] however, in 1915 the Housing Board had to pay the water rates of a few residents who were unable to meet the costs of maintaining their gardens.

Stories such as this highlight the 'lived' experience of Daceyville's highly planned landscape. [8] Together, they provide an interesting and alternative perspective to histories of Daceyville that focus on the suburb's role in urban planning and public housing. Social reform may have fuelled Daceyville's construction, but for most of its residents it was nothing more complicated than 'home'.

Childhood memories of Daceyville are a good example, because so many kids both lived and went to school in the suburb. One example is that of Colonel Braund Crescent, Australia's first cul-de-sac. Foggitt included it as a forward-thinking piece of design, in keeping with modern British town

planning. However, he might have been shocked to know it was a popular place for school fights during the 1930s and 1940s: while the crescent's layout did create a strong sense of community among its inhabitants, its location so close to Daceyville Public School ([/organisation/daceyville_public_school](#)) in Joffre Crescent made it a perfect spot for kids to congregate and watch fights. [9]

Disrepair, threat and renewal

By the 1970s Daceyville was no longer the 'model suburb' it was designed to be. Due to lack of maintenance, many parts of the rental suburb were starting to look their age. Many homes were in need of modernisation both inside and out, while the suburb's once healthy abundance of green space was now often overgrown or casually used for off-street parking. With Daceyville's convenient location, in the eastern suburbs between the city and growing industries like Port Botany, ([/place/port_botany](#)) its redevelopment was imminent.

Daceyville's first major threat came when the state government proposed to extend the eastern suburbs railway from Bondi Junction ([/place/bondi_junction](#)) to Kingsford. ([/place/kingsford](#)) With such a transport link, there was no way Daceyville's low density subdivisions could continue. In 1974, the Housing Commission, which now looked after Daceyville, proposed bulldozing the entire suburb in favour of the walk-up apartments and high-rise buildings that were then in vogue with urban planners.

Residents fiercely protested and created the Daceyville Preservation Society, ([/organisation/daceyville_preservation_society](#)) while the Builders Labourers Federation ([/organisation/builders_labourers_federation](#)) also lent a hand with a 'Green Ban'. ([/event/green_bans](#)) The cancellation of the Kingsford railway extension, however, temporarily halted the Commission's plans.

By the time the commission thought again about ways to redevelop the suburb, new complications arose. First, the Department of Civil Aviation raised concerns about increasing residential numbers under the flight paths for Sydney airport. ([/place/sydney_airport](#)) Then the National Trust ([/organisation/national_trust_of_australia_\(nsw\)](#)) officially recognised Daceyville's historical significance in 1978. In light of the growing conservation movement, the commission produced four plans for the suburb in 1979. These ranged from total demolition of the suburb to total conservation of its houses and streetscapes.

When the suburb's future was finally settled in 1982, the Commission devised a plan that retained Daceyville's character, while simultaneously increasing the suburb's housing stock. One measure to preserve the suburb's unique streetscape was to resubdivide Daceyville's larger back gardens in order to build new infill housing for pensioners. Another was to rehabilitate the suburb's smaller cottages, by constructing rear-facing second story additions that were hidden from the street by long extended sloping roofs. Though the project was of ultimate benefit to the suburb, some longer-term residents disliked being uprooted and resettled within Daceyville. Others moved out of the suburb altogether.

Daceyville today

Compared to the working-class families who originally called Daceyville home, the suburb's current population is considerably older. According to the 2006 census, 37.3 per cent of its population is over 60. The majority of homes are still under the jurisdiction of Housing NSW; ([/organisation/department_of_housing](#)) however, approximately 23 are in private hands, due to an offer the Commission made to tenants in 1965. A few of these residences belong to families who have continually occupied their homes since the 1920s, while many newer residents came after the suburb's redevelopment. Some feel they have 'won the Lotto' when they are placed in Daceyville, while others have their complaints.

Though Daceyville could have become a series of 1970s high-rises, not unlike Waterloo, (/place/waterloo) it is now protected by a strict Development Control Plan. As a historical precinct, the suburb is a perfect illustration of Sydney's changing attitudes to town planning, public housing and heritage.

References

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Notes

[1] Max Kelly, *Plague Sydney*, Doak Press, Sydney, 1981, pp 1–2

[2] NSW Parliamentary Debates, Session 1911–12, vol 44 Series 2, p 3251

[3] Rodney Keg, 'Dacey Garden Suburb: A Study', unpublished thesis, Department of Town Planning, University of New South Wales, 1988, p 68

[4] 'State Model Suburb-Plan of Daceyville', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 August 1912, p 21

[5] Rodney Keg, 'Dacey Garden Suburb: A Study', unpublished thesis, Department of Town Planning, University of New South Wales, 1988, p 100

[6] Robert Freestone, 'Australian Responses to the Garden City Idea', Paper presented to Section 21 51st ANZAAS Conference, Brisbane, May 1981 (Quoted in Rodney Keg, 'Dacey Garden Suburb: A Study', unpublished thesis, Department of Town Planning, University of New South Wales, 1988, p 100)

[7] 'The New Home', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 December 1913, p 8

[8] For more, see Ian Hoskins, 'Constructing Time and Space in the Garden Suburb' in Sarah Ferber, Chris Healy and Chris McAuliffe (eds), *Beasts of Suburbia*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1994, pp 1–17 and Ian Hoskins, 'Cultivating the Citizen: Cultural politics in the parks and gardens of Sydney, 1890–1930', unpublished PhD thesis, Department of History, University of Sydney, 1996

[9] Samantha Sinnayah, *Audaciousville: The Story of Dacey Garden Suburb* (Exhibition), City of Botany Bay, George Hanna Memorial Museum, 2010

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