Aboriginal housing in Perth: from camp-life to suburbia

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“research is showing very, very clearly that housing issues and housing funding has a direct impact on the health of Aboriginal people, and particularly on Aboriginal children.”

Michael Moore, CEO of the Public Health Association of Australia
Housing policy

1829–1953

- Aborigines were excluded from any housing policies in the state of Western Australia.
Pre 1953

- Reserves created “for the use and benefit of aboriginal inhabitants” on an ad hoc basis, without systematic provision for facilities or accommodation
  - Only one official Reserve ever set aside in the metro area: it was never used.

- Local Whadjuk continued to camp in the area of Perth – Nyungar from the SW joined them.

- ~200–300 Aborigines continued to camp in the metro area of Perth until the 1970s
Perth metro

1900–1910: West Guildford pop. 210 → 1669

1910:
- Success Hill Reserve → Recreation Reserve “owing to closer settlement the original reserve set apart for aboriginals was unsuitable.”
- South Guildford Reserve 12720 created: closed 1917.

AO Neville 18.8.1915
- “In regard to the health aspect of the question, nobody seems to worry about this, and apparently no nuisance has arisen. I do not therefore see any particular necessity to move the aboriginals at the present time, especially as to do so would entail certain expense in the matter providing accommodation etc.”
Meanwhile ... sw WA

- 1909: 50 million acres ‘released’ to immigrants

- 1911: 1,500 persons of mixed descent working for Europeans and/or living in close proximity (Briscoe 2003: 8).
  - Aboriginal farms ‘reserves’: resumed on the ‘owner’s’ death
  - 1915 – 1936: 3 land grants approved
    - Carrolup River Native Settlement 1915–1922 300 km sw Perth pop. 150
    - Moore River Native Settlement, 1918–1951 130 kms n Perth pop. 200–500

- 1920s:
  - State’s population > 25%
  - indigenous population > 59%

- 1929 > 2000 unemployed Aborigines in the SW
Late 1920s

- Guildford Pop 18 → 78
- The Aborigines Department introduced
  - Employment permit fees
  - Contributions to medical fund
  - Prohibited area 1927–1954
  - Pass card and regular patrols

1936: Guildford Road Board

“... all the Land owners and residents in this portion of the District are so far as we know opposed to any permanent camping ground being declared, for the reason that it is not desirable that outsiders should be encouraged to the camp in the event of others obtaining work. Further it would tend to depreciate the value of the land.”
In principle, the Department does not agree with the existence of the numerous camps about the Metropolitan Area. However...Moore River Native Settlement at present has a population of 380 and although the correct course would be to send indigent natives from the Metropolitan area to the Settlement there is no accommodation for them ...Moreover, it would hardly be fair to tell the natives to get out of the Metropolitan Area and go to the country areas because, as you know, the native position in the country districts is quite bad enough without it being further accentuated by natives from the Metropolitan Area.
1941

- Landowners charged with sanitary rates “...so that the owner would take action himself to remove the natives from his property.”

and

- Sth Guildford reserve rediscovered: “the natives should not prove an inconvenience to anyone.... The area is reasonably isolated from white habitation, it is nearer to the Guildford Police, under whose control they would then be.”
Sth Guildford reserve → MRNS

- a nuisance to a white person,
- refusing to work and applying for rations,
- being denied school admission for not being decently clothed and cared for,
- stealing,
- drunkenness or loitering anywhere other than the reserve

“...It is not feasible or practicable to remove the natives to country districts or settlements. They belong to the Bassendean, Guildford, and Swan areas, and they would not stay in country districts or at Settlements....(and) we have no means of detention in the country, or ways of keeping them away from the Metropolitan Area.”

Commissioner Bray
South Guildford reserve

- May 1941: 20 families – no sanitation, water
- July: proclaimed,
- Nov: appropriated by army
- Jan 1942 150–200 homeless
- Widgee Rd leased and vigneronns prosecuted re work permits
Work permit accommodation policy vs practice

Regulation 81

“If no housing accommodation is available, a single casual worker in the Southern areas is to be provided with a warm and weatherproof 8’ x 8’ camp, with sanitary conveniences, and a married casual native worker with a warm and weatherproof 10’ x 10’ camp…”

Casual workers left each day or

- Occupied “any old shack, stable or implement shed with the open fields as a latrine.”
1944: Press, Communist party and Swan Road Board pressed for compliance → Publicity → inspections Public Health & NWD:

1. Commissioner Bray promised Widgee Road 2 toilets, a water pump, 1 ton galvanised iron and try “to secure twelve discarded Army tents.”

- Further ‘development’ blocked in 1945 as Bray didn’t want to encourage Aborigines to Perth
2. “the Government is not in a position to erect houses for natives who receive wages according to white rates.” 19.5.1944 letter from Bray to Health Dept.

- Councils did not evict wage-earners – alternative was Widgee Road.

- Church of Christ denied permission to build an hostel on the grounds that the hostel would be “too near human habitation” June 1944.
Many blocks of land bought in Eden Hill

- Road board challenged right to own land
- Refused building permits
- Refused water connections
- Evicted landowners for occupying “unauthorised structures”

- Dept declined from “interfering” in the “private arrangements” of these landowners as did not come under the jurisdiction of the Department.
Commissioner Middleton 1948–1961

Assimilation policy put housing on the agenda

1. Closed Moore River and Carrolup,
2. Aborigines could not be kept out of Perth,
3. Could not “get accommodation at hotels, boarding or guest houses”,
4. Would have to be provided for: missions 16→30 1700.
1952: Health Department demands to supply basic health services and address “the effect of over half a century of financial starvation, apathy and neglect” seen as “an impossible burden...likely to become a financial cancer that will sap all life and substance from the welfare activities of the Department.”


Middleton called on other Dept.s to take some responsibility for areas other than welfare.
Transitional housing

- All are utterly inadequate for hygienic family living...The location, design, construction, size, fittings, amenities, and furnishings ...are far below minimal standards of the State Housing Commission, are not conducive to healthy and hygienic living, and are utterly inadequate as the physical micro–environment within which parents could...rear their children to become motivated to achieve success at school and work, and from which children could learn to live in and manage a conventional home.... Schapper (1970: 40–42)
1953: Needed 1000 houses

- Metro area – 4 acres in Eden Hill – “tents on steel frames with wood and iron kitchen annexes; communal laundry, ablution and sanitary facilities” for 20 families...shelved

- State Housing Commission – to build 30,000 homes in 4 years for Commonwealth immigration policy – included 20 acres in Eden Hill
  - 5 for ‘selected natives’
Native Welfare Act 1954

- repealed prohibitions, employer permits, medical funds and penalties for cohabitation.

- Protectors no “power to demolish Aboriginal camps, remove residents and confine them to another area.

- Pop 1954–300
  - 1966 – 1164
1955: “although some natives live permanently or for long periods on reserves, this Department has no intention of promoting permanent segregation by providing cottages or other living accommodation on camping reserves...natives requiring such may apply to SHC”
Late 1950s

~ 300 Aborigines lived and worked in the Guildford district.

- Private rental market largely closed
- No access to public housing
- No reserves
Coolbaroo League

1958: 25 acres South Guildford

- 27x 3 room asbestos and weatherboard, no abultions, working sanitation or window panes

the only reserve in Perth ever fully occupied; the only non-institutionalised community with individual housing in the state

January 1959: 209 residents
Jan 1959: 209
- evict all “unauthorised” and “undesirable persons” to an alternative camping site.

- .... the intense opposition of white residents living in the neighbourhood of places selected by the Department as being suitable for our purposes, Town Planning Schemes in similar locations and the objections raised by Local Authorities.... The decision now is to arrange alternative accommodation for selected families from Allawah Grove in orthodox-type houses located in existing residential areas on an individual family basis. The residue of natives will remain on Allawah Grove until forcibly ejected by the present lessors, the Civil Aviation Department.

Jan 1960:
11 houses gone– “a standing invitation to squatters”
Allawah Grove

“Native camp seen as Health Danger”

“Disease at the Grove”: “The native camp at Allawah Grove was a breeding ground for gastro-enteritis and trachoma”.

Trachoma: 54 of 60 children
DNW argument: “[native] apathy to blame”

Dr Lewis: “[the] huts have not had the basic requirements provided for them initially ie. a wind and waterproof structure, facilities for cooking, washing and sanitation”.

recommended “… a permanent camp, or at least an area with a long lease, on which can be built durable houses of approved design with efficient cooking, washing and sanitation facilities... near transport, shops and schooling” Interview with Margaret Clements1989: 48.
The District Officer: “interminable letters, reports, press publicity, comments and counter-comments... wearisome”

rejected all advice because the Committee had “… yet to demonstrate they [had] achieved any success in educating [the ‘inmates’] to a satisfactory standard of living.”

Allawah Grove – Buildings, Equipment and Sanitation. 1733, 1959/0186
Funding 1948–1968

- 1948  NIL
- 1959  £68,000 = $136,000
- 1968  $870,000
The tenant is a deserted *de facto* wife with 8 children under twelve years of age. She has her mother, who cares for another grandchild from a broken home, living in the house. They are under notice of eviction because no rent has been paid since February. Electricity has been disconnected. In addition to these people authorised as tenants, two other related families are sheltering in the three room hut. One family with five children have come from West Perth where they say their home has been bulldozed for the Mitchell Freeway. The other family has come to the city because employment is easier to obtain here than in Pinjarra, they have four pre-school children. You will see there are eighteen children involved in this one case. There are strong family ties, and separating the children from parents for institutional care does not seem to be the correct answer.... This household I have described is not an isolated case.
Ministerial response:

- “the facilities were substandard ... additional expenditure could not be justified”

- 7 remaining families: “presumably hoping to jump the housing queue.”

1969–1971 WA

Fed funding: $2M
- 1969: 120 conventional metro houses 30 suburbs
- 1971: 329 5% WA pop

- pop 29,000
- shortfall > 1,500 houses WA + 200 new families /year
June 1972

All Aborigines to be housed within 10 years

The Department of Native Welfare dissolved

- Department for Community Welfare (DCW)
- State Housing Commission

- Fed funding: $7M
- Dec ‘72: Aboriginal ‘self-determination’
- Metro housing a federal priority \(\rightarrow\) funding doubled again
Population Perth

- 1969 – 2312
- 1973 – 5510
- 29% → 49% of SW pop. (Howard 1981:23).
- Lists and recommendations but > backlog = neglected reserves. No light sockets/room or 250v power points

- ‘maintained’ appalling conditions which prolonged use. 5296 1974/0188:138 97

- main access to government housing was railways
75% need public housing → backlog 3,000 houses

Ie hundreds of homeless people and nearly 500 families in Perth waiting to be housed
Rural WA 1970s

Mullewa: 19 / 31 SHC houses
  ▸ 16 people / house

Carnarvon: 116 people:
  ▸ 13 reserve houses, 1 tent, 2 caravans, 1 lean-to, 1 car body. Cons 2607 Item A0864 V1.
Perth: 1981

- employment 31% → 8%,
- government benefits 36% → 92% Toussaint, 1987:12–3, 121
- 75% below poverty line
- <25% tenants
- 50% non-tenants

over-crowding a key feature of urban living

Toussaint, 1987:122
1829–1953

- 120 years of Western Australian history Aborigines invisible in terms of any housing policy or funding.
- Aboriginal population routinely treated as a ‘nuisance’.
- Inspections of camps in Guildford area – reconstruction, sanitation, health, employment and living arrangements were intrusive – appraised nuisance value for the rate-paying citizens.
- The South Guildford reserve and Widgee Road camping area established only to confine the population for the purpose of surveillance and control.
1829–1979

The Department did not, at any time, use its surveillance to improve the appalling living conditions: no funds or inclination.

1953: The first Aboriginal housing policy
- Still hopelessly under-funded late 1970s despite state and federal agreement that it was crucially tied to improving Aboriginal health and wellbeing.
15% of tenants: budget: 2.3%

> documentation supplied for priority transfers, but longer wait:
  ◦ for medical reasons - 31 weeks vs 6 weeks
  ◦ family violence 12 vs 3.
  ◦ < likely to be placed in requested areas,
  ◦ > likely placed in older houses
  ◦ > likely in ‘Aboriginal suburbs’ Balga, Girrawheen, Nollamara (Finding a place, 2004: 80–1).