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# TRAM-CARS, TENTS, "IGLOOS" AND GARAGES: AN INSTITUTIONAL- THEORETICAL LENS ON TEMPORARY DWELLINGS IN SYDNEY

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Following World War II, Australia was confronted by a severe shortage of dwellings. One relief valve for some cities was a stock of un-serviced building lots situated on the suburban fringe. In Sydney, Australia's largest city, thousands of aspiring home-owners purchased such allotments but, affected by shortages of money and materials, could only construct a temporary dwelling. These homes ranged from shacks and garages to tram-cars, ex-army Nissen-huts and tents. The post-war phenomenon of such housing in Australia has been neglected both empirically and theoretically. This paper draws upon Sorensen's suggestion of Historical Institutionalism in an attempt to pursue the theoretical challenge. The proposition explored is that the existence of temporary dwellings in Sydney was evidence of a critical juncture in the institutionalised regulation of housing, creating opportunities for policy change. Firstly, local authorities were forced to permit the occupation of dwellings which did not comply with existing ordinances, and secondly, they adapted their regulations to give permanent approval to sub-standard accommodation. The paper concludes by suggesting that these policy changes reverted to the institutionalised model for two reasons: path dependency and positive feedback mechanisms privileged those committed to an unchanged institution, while the permanent housing converged with adapted regulations.

## **Keywords**

temporary dwellings, Sydney, housing institution, critical juncture, path dependency

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## INTRODUCTION

In September 1952, an amendment to Ordinance 71 of the Local Government Act, 1919 was passed by the legislature of the state of New South Wales in Australia. The new clause prohibited the use of temporary structures for residential purposes in the urban areas of all Shires and Municipalities in metropolitan Sydney.<sup>1</sup> This amendment was intended by its supporters to be the definitive action which made it impossible for aspiring homeowners on Sydney's suburban fringe to continue to build and occupy temporary dwellings.<sup>2</sup>

The extensive construction of temporary dwellings on the developing fringes of Sydney was an unforeseen response to the housing situation following World War II, where the cumulative effects of twenty years of economic depression and wartime restrictions had left Australia confronted by a severe shortage of dwellings, whether for lease or purchase.<sup>3</sup> Desperate for secure shelter, many low-income earners in Sydney took advantage of the eventual sale of thousands of prematurely-developed residential allotments which had been held by investors for up to sixty years, and bought land on the fringes of the metropolitan area but could not obtain or afford the materials and labour needed to realise a conventional house. Their solution was to build a temporary dwelling for themselves and their families while they worked to achieve their long-term goal of a permanent home.

The phenomenon of such temporary dwellings can be understood as a widespread response to a social need which was enabled by the prevailing economic and political context. A comprehensive interpretation therefore requires three interwoven analytic frameworks. In attempting such an interpretation, I have relied on psychologist Abraham Maslow's theory of human motivation, political-economist Giovanni Arrighi's theory of systemic cycles of accumulation, and urban geographer Andre Sorensen's recent suggestion of Historical Institutionalism.<sup>4</sup>

This paper focusses on the political environment and proposes that the emergence, existence and eventual exclusion of these dwellings can be understood through the theoretical lens of Historical Institutionalism, an analytic tool which can be used to interpret institutional continuity and change in the urban context. The paper proposes that temporary dwellings were evidence of a critical juncture in the regulation of institutionalised housing standards which initiated changes in the control of Sydney's housing. It commences with an exposition of the historical context for temporary dwellings, their construction, and the facilities available to occupants. The suggested theoretical framework is then explored in relation to an observed change in established policies which regulated housing standards. It concludes with a discussion of the concepts of path dependency, positive feedback and incremental change processes within the regulatory institution, and the roles these played in shaping the temporary nature of this policy change in suburban Sydney.

The paper has developed from ongoing doctoral research into the phenomenon of temporary dwellings built during the 1940s and 1950s in the Shires of Warringah and Hornsby and the Municipality of Fairfield, three local government areas located respectively on the northern, north-western and south-western borders of Sydney and overlapping the 'Green Belt', a designated band of open space which circumscribed the metropolitan residential boundaries between 1945 and 1962. A range of primary and secondary sources are used, including state and local government records, published articles and histories, oral accounts from residents, and the buildings themselves.

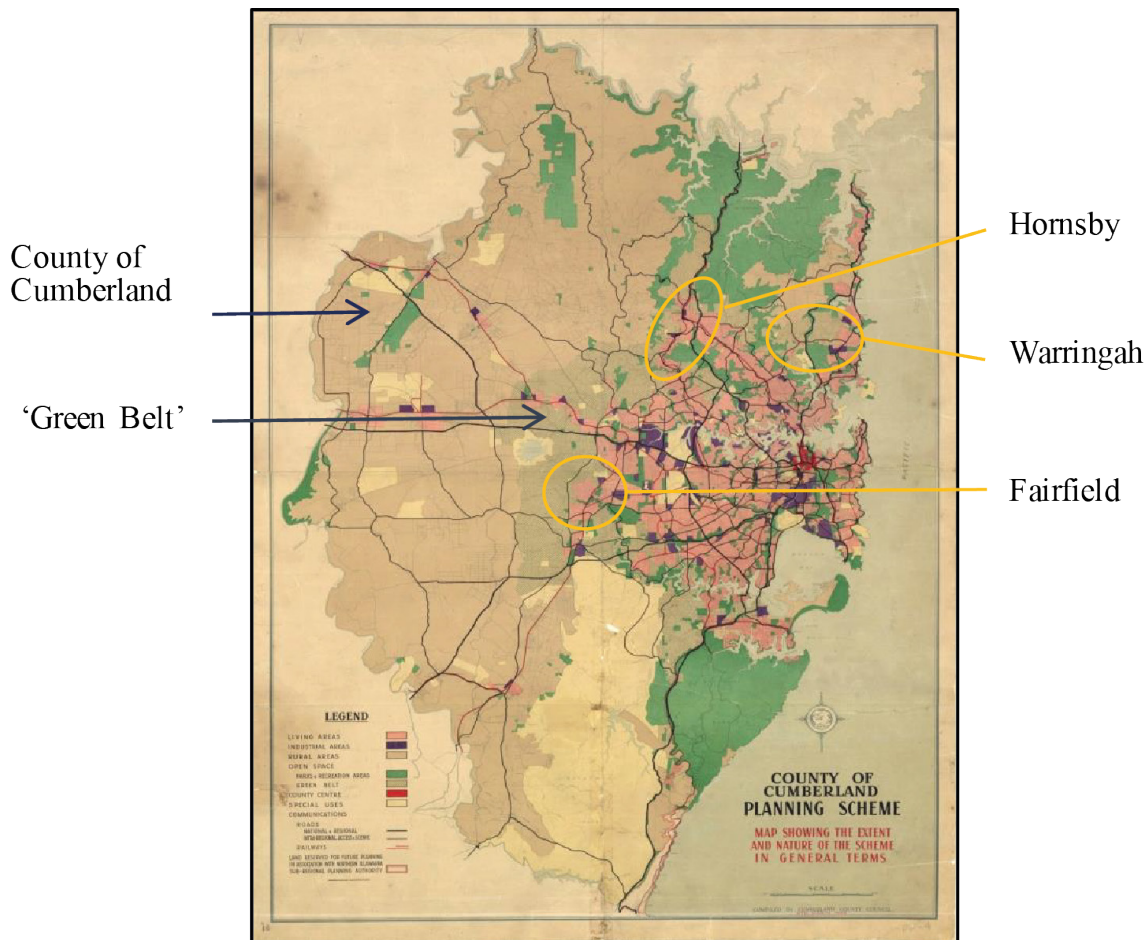


FIGURE 1 Map showing the locations of the case study sites within the County of Cumberland relative to the borders of the 1945 'Green Belt' which circumscribed suburban Sydney during the study period.

## THE HOUSING SHORTAGE AND TEMPORARY DWELLINGS IN SYDNEY

Following World War II, a long-term housing shortage in Australia reached crisis point. The deficiency dated from the 1920s and extended through the depression years of the early 1930s, during which investment in residential building for both rental and owner-occupation was greatly reduced.<sup>5</sup> The resulting shortfall was further exacerbated by the marked contraction of State Housing authorities during the war, control of rental charges, thereby reducing private investment in rental property, and the enactment of wartime legislation which curtailed the supply of building materials for non-defence purposes.<sup>6</sup> At the end of 1944, it was estimated the nation needed between 300,000 and 365,000 homes.<sup>7</sup> The later inclusion of sub-standard housing requiring replacement, housing need in the various Commonwealth territories, and the accommodation of post-war migrants brought the shortfall closer to 400,000 units.<sup>8</sup>

By 1946, the government of the state of New South Wales (NSW) anticipated that 160,000 new dwellings were necessary for that state alone.<sup>9</sup> The same report noted that of this number, Sydney and its surrounding suburbs required close to 90,000 homes, approximately 25% more dwellings than existed in the metropolitan area at the time.<sup>10</sup> Concurrently, it was noted in the County of Cumberland Planning Scheme, the first comprehensive planning scheme for Sydney and its immediate environs, that there were almost 250,000 subdivided but still vacant residential allotments in the County. Half of these were judged to be viable building sites in terms of future utility and infrastructure provision while the other half, comprising close to 120,000 lots, were located on the

outer edges of the metropolitan area with no realistic prospect of utility installation for many years.<sup>11</sup> The majority of this vacant land was held by investors who would not sell while prices were still controlled by wartime profit-limiting legislation.<sup>12</sup>

Immediately after the war, the needed increase in residential building was severely limited by continued shortages of labour and building materials. Building materials were still tightly rationed with each approved application in NSW permitted around 800 bricks and enough timber, cladding, lining and roof tiles to construct a new house of 93sq m, increased a few years later to 111sq m, but even these amounts were frequently unobtainable.<sup>13</sup> The newly-established New South Wales Housing Commission was allocated 50% of available materials but barely managed to achieve 30% of its yearly targets for public rental housing and, by December 1948, was providing limited emergency accommodation in converted defence force barracks within the metropolitan area for more than 3,500 otherwise-homeless families.<sup>14</sup> Newly arrived migrants were also accommodated in barracks and government agencies built tent-encampments for labourers working on infrastructure projects.<sup>15</sup> With housing in such short supply, the vast majority of desperate households were forced to make independent lodging arrangements. Many thousands of people took advantage of the eventual sale of un-serviced building land on the metropolitan fringes of Sydney to buy an inexpensive allotment and acquire some form of temporary shelter while they saved the money needed, and waited for materials and labour to become available, to build their permanent house.

Temporary dwellings within the three study areas of Hornsby, Fairfield and Warringah took a variety of forms. The majority were described on the triennial property Valuation Lists as garages, workshops, sheds or 'sleep-outs'.<sup>16</sup> Such homes comprised a concrete-slab or raised timber floor; timber-frame walls clad in fibrous-cement sheets, and a hipped roof of tiles if obtainable, otherwise of corrugated iron, fibrous-cement sheet, or sheet rubber. Some dwellings were lined with fibrous-cement sheet or 'caneite', compressed fibreboard made from sugarcane waste. Most homes provided floor areas between 10 and 18sq m, as either single-room dwellings with a kitchen area or partitioned into separate cooking/living and sleeping spaces. The Lists also reveal that a significant number of families managed to source less conventional accommodation such as NSW Railways labourers' tents, former army Nissen-huts called 'igloos', old tram-cars or railway freight-trucks, caravans, or 'transportable' single-room houses placed on small iron wheels.<sup>17</sup>

Services available to the occupants were limited. Dwellings were mostly located on estates where utilities had never been provided or, if available, were rarely connected to the temporary homes.<sup>18</sup> For drinking water, cooking, light and heating many occupants relied on rainwater tanks; kerosene Primus stoves, lanterns and heaters; and water heated in wood-fired coppers or open fires in the yard.<sup>19</sup> Sanitary services were provided by a weekly pan-exchange service or occasionally a home-built septic system was installed.<sup>20</sup> Roads were also unmade and comprised a dirt or gravel surface without drainage or footpaths.<sup>21</sup>

The NSW government controlled and regulated the erection of buildings in urban areas through the NSW Local Government Act, administered by the Department of Local Government via the local Shire and Municipal Councils, representative bodies with delegated powers to enforce the various Ordinances. Under Ordinance 71, Building, the requirements for habitable structures relevant for temporary dwellings addressed structural and health concerns and included the design of foundations and sub-floor structure, minimum sizes of rooms and windows, provision for optimal ventilation, the presence and placement of amenities, and availability of a completely enclosed bathroom or bathroom/laundry with water and clothes-washing facilities. Tent occupation required Council approval and compliance with conditions governing the tent's position, construction and sanitation.<sup>22</sup> There was no clause which regulated the more esoteric forms of dwellings used in this period.

Of the temporary dwellings already investigated, none satisfied all the requirements for habitable buildings. The window and ventilation dimensions were usually met, but only half the dwellings satisfied sub-floor space requirements. The required ceiling height was only achieved by dwellings designed as part of a conventional house

and garage homes built in the late-1950s, while the reduced ceiling heights of others made it impossible to satisfy the minimum volume requirement. None of the dwellings reached the 93sq m minimum site coverage.<sup>23</sup> Instead, they commonly covered between 24 and 33sq m. Although water was the first utility installed, the regulation insisting on the presence of a bathroom and laundry was rarely met by any dwellings until after 1952 when many were extended with an external laundry which also included bathing facilities. Sanitary amenities were only available if the dwelling was within the scavenging area agreed between the Council and the waste contractors, otherwise disposal was privately organised.

Calculating the true numbers of temporary dwellings at any one time is difficult. Almost 4,000 temporary dwellings appear to have been built in Hornsby Shire between 1945 and 1960, Fairfield had close to 6,000 over the same period, and the two suburbs in the Warringah sample yielded 600. Records indicate that the incidence varied across the years covered by the study and also between study areas. Dwellings appeared in small numbers in Hornsby and Fairfield during the final two years of the war, slowly increased until 1948, after which the numbers grew rapidly until by 1954 there were more than 3,000 in each local government area. From 1954, the incidence then reduced until fewer than 400 remained by 1960. Development started later in Warringah, yet showed a similar pattern. Close to 60 dwellings were recorded before 1950, with a rapid increase to more than 400 new dwellings by 1954, dropping to around 250 by 1957, and below 100 by 1960.<sup>24</sup>

## HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM

In an attempt to analyse and interpret the emergence, entrenchment and decline of temporary dwellings in the context of post-war Sydney, this paper draws on the theoretical framework of Historical Institutionalism suggested recently by Sorensen as an analytic tool for urban studies.<sup>25</sup> Sorensen describes Historical Institutionalism (HI) as ‘a social science research method that focusses on the creation, persistence and change of institutions over time’. In defining institutions, he draws on political-economist Peter A. Hall’s definition as ‘the formal rules, compliance procedures and standard operating practices that structure the relationships between individuals in various units of the polity and economy’, and on sociologist, Wolfgang Streeck and political-scientist, Kathleen Thelen’s description, which includes concepts such as the collective enforcement of expectations, the performance of various activities, and inherent relations of power. Thus, Sorensen arrives at a planning specific definition of institutions as ‘collectively enforced expectations with respect to the creation, management, and use of urban space’, where collective enforcement involves state coercion of the individual to comply with enacted laws and by-laws.<sup>26</sup> In a listing of urban institutions, Sorensen includes land development rules and building standards, the instances with which this paper is particularly concerned.

Integral to HI analysis are the related concepts of critical junctures, incremental adaptive processes, path dependence, and positive feedback, each playing a role in institutional continuity and change. Change in policy can be either rapid or gradual. Critical junctures are described as rare events which create opportunities for rapid change, are points of crisis that cannot be resolved through the prevailing political or institutional structures, involve a loss of governance ability on the part of the institution, and can result in individuals or groups reshaping existing institutions or establishing new institutions and developmental pathways. Sorensen notes that small decisions made in response to a critical juncture can have long-term or lasting impacts and their timing in relation to the prevailing social, political and economic situation can influence the shape of subsequent institutional development. In contrast to the abrupt change inherent in a critical juncture, incremental adaptive processes such as displacement, drift, layering, and conversion are modes of gradual policy change through which political actors can transform institutions by varying the levels of rule implementation and compliance enforcement.<sup>27</sup>

Path dependency and positive reinforcement refer to concepts which support the continuation of existing institutions. Path dependency describes the tendency of a course of action instigated by an initial choice to become increasingly entrenched as the chosen action is adopted more widely over time and so yields increasingly positive, primarily economic, returns. Ongoing investment in the original choice therefore increases the cost to the institution of changing to an alternate path. Related to path dependency but identified by Sorensen as perhaps more relevant to political and urban processes, positive feedback describes how change to an institution is actively discouraged by its members due to an increasing number of participants acquiring an interest in, and directly benefiting from, its unmodified continuation.<sup>28</sup>

## POLICY AND REGULATION IN SYDNEY 1942-1953

This paper proposes that a critical juncture in the institutionalised regulation of housing standards in Australia created the opportunity for institutional change. For the government of NSW, the situation commenced on 24 December 1942 with acceptance of the Commonwealth Powers Bill 1942, enacted into federal law on 30 June 1943.<sup>29</sup> Reflecting the newly-elected federal Labor government's concern that post-war reconstruction should consider 'the whole aspirations of the people for a better way of life' and in an effort to ensure equality in the distribution of limited resources and reduce potential for inflation and unemployment, this Act referred certain State responsibilities to the Parliament of the Commonwealth until five years after the cessation of Australia's involvement in the war.<sup>30</sup> The responsibilities included control of the production, sale, distribution and prices of all materials and commodities, which involved building materials and internal fixtures as well as the sale price of vacant land. Within four weeks of enactment, the Commonwealth Department of Post-war Reconstruction had curtailed access to building materials for non-defence purposes and all residential building virtually ceased.<sup>31</sup>

Combined with the long-term housing shortage, NSW's acceptance of the December 1942 Bill precipitated a crisis of such magnitude in the provision of housing that the NSW government lost governance legitimacy concerning the regulation of housing standards. The loss of governance on the part of the supervisory State entity effectively removed the capability of local Councils to enforce many aspects of Ordinance 71, particularly the requirement that all regulations must be satisfied before a Certificate of Compliance was issued and occupation could commence.

In January 1943, within two weeks of NSW acceptance of the initial Bill, Hornsby Shire councillors found they were unable to refuse permission for the occupation of partial or temporary dwellings and finally approved a small number of previously-rejected requests.<sup>32</sup> In July 1943, Warringah councillors appealed to the Department of Local Government for amendments to the Local Government Act 1919 which would allow them to approve temporary dwellings on condition they were demolished after the war, but the response received from the Department provided no definitive guidance. The Department simply agreed that 'the position which confronts Councils today with regard to the erection of small war-time dwellings is difficult', and suggested that demolition could leave families without shelter. The letter concluded that any decision on the ultimate fate of temporary dwellings should therefore be left for the future.<sup>33</sup> With this response, the Department of Local Government effectively conceded their inability to enforce the state's institutionalised housing regulations and an opportunity opened for change in the concept of acceptable standards for habitable dwellings.

Although now established as an acceptable form of housing, the numbers of temporary dwellings increased only slowly during the five years that the Commonwealth retained its control of materials and land sale prices. A small number of residential allotments were made available at the controlled price of 10% above the 1942 Department of the Valuer-General valuation figure and were purchased by buyers using savings or war-time gratuities, who then applied for permission to build a shack, garage or workshop home or alternatively, built without approval.<sup>34</sup> As Councils had no precedent for dealing with this new housing form, the occupants decided the size, materials and

facilities they could afford or source for their dwelling and permission was granted for a six month period with no building requirements imposed.<sup>35</sup> These early dwellings therefore set the standard for the alternative housing path which became the norm for many aspiring home-owners.

In August 1948 the Commonwealth Powers Act expired and the control of land prices lapsed, thousands of vacant lots were finally put up for sale, and were bought by individuals desperate for shelter with the goal of building a house or to have one built for them.<sup>36</sup> However, in order to maintain control of inflation and to share materials impartially, NSW retained rationing of building materials with the Building Operations and Building Materials Act 1948.<sup>37</sup> The majority of new landowners therefore had little choice but to build what was now the standard form of interim shelter and the use of temporary dwellings became increasingly widespread.<sup>38</sup> The entrenchment of the new housing form can be gathered from the local Council Minutes and contemporary newspapers, popular journals, and collections of housing plans. From the beginning of 1949, the Health and Building Inspectors of all three Councils requested approval of between ten and twenty new temporary dwellings each fortnight and a similar number of extensions of temporary occupancy, all of which received approval without conditions.<sup>39</sup> Newspapers of this period also contained numerous advertisements for garage-kits, portable and 'nucleus' homes, a dwelling on iron wheels, and land sales complete with temporary dwelling.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, popular journals included articles on topics such as garage conversions, packing-case houses, and plans for 'nucleus' homes.<sup>41</sup>

However, the newly-accepted housing standards proved to be only a short-term change of policy as positive feedback mechanisms promoted a return to entrenched principles. Disapproval of the proliferation of non-compliant dwellings was voiced by more-established residents as early as 1946, but it was not until the NSW Building Operations and Building Materials Act expired on 30 September 1952 and Ordinance 71 was simultaneously amended to prohibit the occupation of temporary structures that community concerns began to influence official attitude. Agitation to return to the previously-agreed standards became more organised and pressure continued to be exerted by residents anxious that the value of their complying housing would be compromised by the alternate housing form. In Warringah, District Progress Associations lobbied the local Councillors to enforce the enacted building standards to prevent the formation of 'shanty towns', while, in an exclusive part of Hornsby Shire, applications for a tram-car home and a caravan dwelling were judged to be 'detrimental to the amenity of the area' and were rejected by elected local representatives.<sup>42</sup>

Although the shortage of housing continued, in response to public concerns and recent changes in State government policies each Council resolved that all applications for temporary dwellings from August 1953 were to be refused in favour of investment in a partial house.<sup>43</sup> The Health and Building Inspectors concerned were therefore requested to provide lists of the current status of all existing temporary dwellings and urged to ensure occupants' compliance with the condition requiring continual progress on the permanent house.<sup>44</sup> To be regarded as habitable, all temporary dwellings were now required to include the bathing and washing facilities mandated under Ordinance 71 but previously dispensed with by resolution of the Councils concerned.<sup>45</sup> The requirement for partial-houses was not enforced by the Council officers of Hornsby and Fairfield, but was actively enforced in Warringah where the number of new applications for temporary dwellings rapidly declined.<sup>46</sup>

## DISCUSSION

The emergence of post-war temporary dwellings in Sydney can now be explained as the result of a critical juncture in the institutionalised regulation of housing standards. The critical juncture occurred with the enactment at the federal level of government of wartime legislation which continued into the immediate post-war period. This meant that building material essential for the achievement of housing to institutionally approved standards was no longer available at the same time as the demand for housing began to significantly increase. Governance legitimacy was lost as local Councils were discouraged by the State entity from exercising their delegated powers

to enforce established Ordinances which defined habitable structures, and a non-complying form of shelter emerged almost unchallenged. This nascent standard of housing was accepted and controlled through policy changes at the local level and became a new institutionalised norm for a significant proportion of the metropolitan population.

Although the new housing standards made the acquisition of much-needed shelter possible for many desperate families, this alternate housing path turned out to be transitory due to the combined action of positive feedback responses and incremental adaptive change. Positive feedback effects influenced those residents with an interest in reinstating the previously-established housing policies, who then actively promoted a return to the institutionalised path at the local level. Return to this original path became a policy option with the termination of the Federal legislation instrumental in precipitating the critical juncture and the regaining of legitimacy by the State government, which could now uphold local government enforcement of the established standards.

The continued existence of temporary dwellings was also affected by incremental and adaptive policy changes, where the existing Ordinance and local by-laws were gradually altered through the layering of new policies which reflected both popular desire for modern design and the limited finances of many occupants. The new policies permitted smaller houses than previously, accepted modern housing styles which were less expensive to construct, and allowed use of lighter building materials.<sup>47</sup> Such regulatory changes made it cheaper and easier to build a complying house and therefore more achievable for marginal owners, who could now afford to build to the revised standards or, in certain cases, to extend and improve the existing temporary dwelling to suit the modified regulations.<sup>48</sup> The reinstated policies, combined with latent aspirations for orthodox housing among owner-occupiers, meant the remaining dwellings were gradually removed, repurposed, or adapted to converge with the institutionally-approved housing model.

## CONCLUSION

At a time when both federal and state planning entities in Australia were concerned with large-scale schemes for housing the rapidly-increasing urban population, the construction and occupation of temporary dwellings on purchased land became a widespread autonomous solution to Sydney's post-war housing shortage. Even though this non-compliant housing posed a direct challenge to institutionalised housing standards, the use of such structures became increasingly accepted throughout the metropolitan fringe then gradually declined in volume to essentially disappear as a popular suburban housing form.

Following Sorensen, this paper proposes that a useful analytic tool when interpreting the political context for this phenomenon is the theory of Historical Institutionalism with its inherent concepts of critical junctures, path dependence, positive feedback effects and incremental adaptive change processes. The unexplained emergence and proliferation of temporary dwellings can now be understood as stemming from a critical juncture in the regulation of housing standards. The slow diminution and termination of this new housing path can be partly attributed to positive feedback effects causing concerned residents to push for a return to the original policies. This impetus to resume the institutionalised path was accompanied by the layering of new policies onto the original housing Ordinances in a process of incremental adaptive change.

Although largely abandoned as a viable housing form within fifteen years of construction, many of the temporary dwellings which were constructed and occupied during this period are still visible in the suburban landscape of Sydney and are evidence of a housing path which emerged to satisfy an immediate and urgent social need but was not permitted to continue.



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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

Nicola Pullan is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Built Environment at UNSW Australia, having completed previous post-graduate studies in history and in museum studies. Her PhD research is on the construction and occupation of temporary dwellings in the outer suburbs of Sydney between 1945 and 1960, with particular focus on their significance in enabling wider access to home-ownership in the metropolitan area.

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- 13 Smith, “Making a Modest Beginning”, 15.
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- 18 Patryn, “Recording 16”.
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- 20 Kirby, “Recording 1”.
- 21 Callicott, “Interview 1”.
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Figure 1: Cumberland County Council. Planning Scheme for the County of Cumberland New South Wales, Sydney: Cumberland County Council, 1948.