



SUBURB 4 SALE

A **STUDYGUIDE** BY KATE DIMECH

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INTRODUCING 'SUBURB 4 SALE'

On the very edge of southwest Sydney, where suburban sprawl meets bushland, a number of unusual auctions have begun. The NSW Department of Housing is selling off houses it can no longer afford to maintain, and is making plans to bulldoze others, in an effort to revamp the suburb of Airds.

Suburb 4 Sale is a one-hour observational documentary filmed over two years with three families as they buy into, or try to opt out of, a public housing estate. The documentary is an intimate portrayal of their difficulties, joys and disappointments.

While the backdrop is public housing in Sydney, *Suburb 4 Sale* tells a much bigger, universal story. Establishing a home is a common Australian experience involving significant commitments and decisions. However, it is

not always straightforward or trouble free. The documentary shows the impact that broad social and economic forces can have on personal dreams and aspirations.

Using *Suburb 4 Sale* in the classroom

The documentary contains infrequent coarse language and refers to acts of violence occurring within a community. Previewing is recommended. *Suburb 4 Sale* is suitable for students of upper secondary level. It is of specific inter-

est and relevance to teachers and students of:

- Studies of Society & Environment (SOSE/HSIE)
- English
- Politics
- Economics
- Legal studies

The documentary is also useful for tertiary students in courses such as Urban Planning and Design, Welfare and Counseling.

COVER: SANDY MAY ON THE BACK PORCH WITH HER TWIN DAUGHTERS, PAYDEN AND BRIANNA. ABOVE - L-R TOP ROW: A ROW OF MAIL BOXES LINE SOUTHDOWN PLACE IN AIRDS; ROWS OF PALING FENCE AND TRELIS DIVIDE THESE BACK YARDS IN AIRDS; ROBYN HARRISON GESTURES EMPHATICALLY AS SHE COMMENTS ON THE SYDNEY PROPERTY MARKET; MULTICOLOURED WASHING DRYING SLOWLY ON AN OVERCAST DAY IN AIRDS. BOTTOM: KIM AND DANIEL SUPERVISE THEIR SONS [ALL PHOTOS IN THIS GUIDE BY ALEX BARRY]



BACKGROUND TO THE DOCUMENTARY

The profile of public housing in Australia has changed significantly since its beginning over a century ago. Originally established to provide housing for low-income families or for returned servicemen and women, it now serves a welfare function for unemployed people, single parent families, the elderly and mentally and physically disabled.

The NSW Department of Housing owns approximately 140,000 properties, about 1,500 of which are located in the Airs and Bradbury social housing community.

The NSW Department of Housing is funded by the Commonwealth and State Governments but also receives revenue from rental tenants and from services it provides on behalf of other government departments.

Public housing tenants pay 'market rent' for their properties and eligibility requirements ensure that public housing

assists those in greatest need. These requirements focus on applicants' residency status, age, income level, assets and ability to maintain a tenancy.

Why is there is a certain stigma surrounding public housing and the people who live in it? The filmmakers hope that by watching *Suburb 4 Sale*, viewers will be able to 'see beyond the stereotypes of how people living in public housing are usually portrayed'.

- As a class, discuss your understanding of public housing (commonly known as 'Commis-

sion homes'). Is there any public housing in your local area? Who lives in it? Where did you get your impressions about public housing?

- Make notes of your main ideas about public housing and after viewing the documentary, look back at your notes. Did your thoughts accurately reflect what you saw in the documentary? What similarities or differences did you find?

[Insert location map of Airs and adjoining suburbs showing their proximity to Sydney]



HOPE AND DISAPPOINTMENT

Hope and disappointment are recurrent themes in *Suburb 4 Sale*. As we observe three families attempting to move into or out of Airds, we share many of the hopes and disappointments they experience along the way.

When the Housing Commission of NSW (now the NSW Department of Housing) began construction on the Airds estate in the 1970's, one of their aims was '... to contribute to the building of strong and happy communities'. Although the Commission may have accomplished this aim initially, today Airds is one of the most socially disadvantaged suburbs of Sydney. While watching *Suburb 4 Sale* we should consider how disappointing this outcome must be for the present Department.

Daniel Torr's family is one of three cases followed closely in the documentary. Daniel makes the winning bid at auction and tells of plans to turn his new house into a family home. However this hope is crushed when his work takes the Torrs back to Queensland and they must start renting a house again.

Tracey Brotherstone speaks hopefully of the Department's plans to bulldoze her house because that will mean she, partner Lyn and daughter Braeley will be able to move out of Airds. Then she

hears the plans have been stalled and she becomes 'bloody disheartened'.

Sandy May is hopeful that by moving to a new house and reuniting with her boyfriend Sean, they will become 'one big family' but Sean decides to go back to New Zealand leaving Sandy to raise her three children on her own.

We also witness the hopes and disappointments experienced by some of the minor characters in *Suburb 4 Sale*. After renting a house for twelve years, Gail hoped that the sell off in Airds would provide an opportunity for her to purchase her own home but on auction day the opening bid was larger than her finances would allow.

When we first meet real estate agent Robyn Harrison, she appears to have a lot of confidence in the property market and the Department's plans to redevelop Airds but by the end of the documentary she is disappointed by the lack of interest in the properties she is trying to sell.

Although *Suburb 4 Sale* ends unfor-

tunately for the Torrs and the Airds redevelopment as a whole, things look more promising for Tracey and Sandy.

Through a twist of fate, the compensation payout from Lyn's bashing may provide her and Tracey with the opportunity to get out of Airds. In Sandy's case, even though her reunion with boyfriend Sean was short lived, she was able with the help of her mother, to get her family out of public housing and into a private home.

Activity – Highs and lows

- What do you think were the high and low points for the three families who are the focus of *Suburb 4 Sale*? Write your responses in your workbooks, then as a class discuss your findings.
- Remember a time in your life when you were optimistic, only to be let down either by yourself or someone else. Write a paragraph or two about your experience and how it made you feel.



THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN DREAM ... OR NIGHTMARE

Many Australians dream of one day owning their own home. Yet over the last decade or so, skyrocketing housing prices, a ruthless real estate market and grasping financial institutions have put home ownership out of reach for many people. For some it seems this dream will never become a reality.

In *Suburb 4 Sale*, the sale of properties to private buyers in Airds (a suburb about an hour's drive south of Sydney) is making the dream of home ownership possible for many people who would otherwise be unable to afford property within the Sydney area.

The Torrs are one family who saw the sell-off as an opportunity to secure their own home and get out of the rental market. At the beginning of the documentary we see Daniel Torr bidding at an auction in Airds. Although his winning bid is \$30,000 over the family budget, his concern is eased by real estate agent Robyn Harrison who says 'You think you're paying top dollar now, in six months, you got a bargain'. Daniel replies 'In a year's time I should imagine that it'll be a fair price. Property goes up ...'

However, the property market crash three months later is an unexpected setback and the home the Torrs

had hoped would pay off as a good investment turned out to be just the opposite. The market plunge meant they had paid too much for their house so when Daniel was offered a carpentry job in Queensland, the Torrs were confronted with the news that they would lose \$30,000 by selling up and moving. They decide that putting their Airds home up for rental is their only real option.

Unfortunately for the Torrs and people in similar circumstances, the property market is unpredictable and securing a home with the hope that its value will appreciate, or at least not depreciate, is a gamble not everyone can afford to take. In the Torrs' case, Airds did not prove to be the Great Australian Dream they had hoped for.

Activity – Weighing the risks

Suburb 4 Sale shows us that in making the potentially life-chang-

ing decision to purchase real estate, even after weighing the risks and advantages, we are never in complete control of the outcome.

- What could be some of the risks involved in buying a home in a public housing area such as Airds? What are the advantages? Keeping these risks and advantages in mind, why do you think the Torrs made the decision to buy a home in Airds?
- What impact do you think private ownership will have on the community of Airds? Note the positive and the negative consequences you think this could have on the community.
- Use the internet to investigate the current prices of property in Airds and compare them to the prices mentioned in *Suburb 4 Sale*. Has the real estate market recovered or has it gone backwards?



ESCAPING AIRDS

Suburb 4 Sale focuses on many negative aspects of Airds that explain Tracey's and Sandy's desperation to leave the public housing estate. From our first meeting with Tracey and Lyn, their desire to leave Airds is made clear by some of their comments:

'I know every suburb has its trouble but it can't be as bad as this street that I live in.'

'I want to get out. I just want to move.'

Considering their desperation, why have Tracey and Lyn remained in Airds instead of moving to a private rental? Tracey gives us one explanation for staying '... housing commission's not like private rent ... if you leave housing commission, you've got to start all over again.'

Sandy mentions that since moving to Airds two years earlier, she has lost her friends and her family have only visited her a handful of times. '... What's that saying [about the neighbourhood]?' she asks.

Sandy's mum Karen says '... I don't like going there late at night ... and her sister won't go there either'.

Think about Sandy's living situation in

Airds and the isolation she must have felt without visits from her family and friends. How would you feel living in an area where your own family were too afraid to visit?

Instead of sending her children to a local school, Sandy drives them to a school in Eschol Park which is fifteen minutes away from her home 'but it's worth it ... I didn't want them going into any other school around Airds', she says.

Tracey and Sandy both tell us that they didn't intend to live in Airds for so long. We get the impression that they feel trapped by circumstances beyond their control and that the temporary homes Airds provided for them originally have become desperate situations from which they are now trying to escape.

Activity – Too close to home

The murder in Tracey's street and Lyn

being bashed at the local pub are incidents that give us a sobering insight into the realities facing the residents of Airds. Aside from these two events, the filmmakers subtly show us many other negative features of the neighbourhood.

- In your workbooks, make a list of the things you see in the documentary which imply that Airds is a troubled community.
- Despite negative attitudes towards Airds, it is Robyn Harrison's job to sell the properties the Department has for sale. What positive terms does she use to make Airds appear like an attractive area to buy? How does Robyn's home in Bradbury, a neighbouring suburb of Airds, differ from those you see in Airds?

[Insert comment from Sandy '... some people want to act like 'housos' ... some people don't ...']



COMMUNITY RENEWAL

The NSW Department of Housing describes its vision for public housing as ‘... a healthy housing system that provides sustainable, affordable housing for NSW, and supports individuals and neighbourhoods to create vibrant, sustainable communities’.

When Airs was constructed in the 1970s, it was based on the Radburn principles which focused on separating pedestrian and vehicular traffic by means of an extensive network of footpaths, underpasses and bridges, and constructing the dwellings so that they faced these walkways and areas of open space. Although aimed at creating a safe and community-centred environment, the dwellings and walkways were not viewable from the road and this created problems with personal security, surveillance and vandalism.

As well as problems with the design, Airs’ location limited the residents’ access to employment, transport and health and family services.

The NSW Department of Housing commenced a community renewal program in the 1990s in an effort to make Airs a safer and more appealing environment and improve the quality of life for its residents. As well



as maintaining and refurbishing the homes and improving the physical surroundings, the term ‘community renewal’ encompasses training programs for residents, upgrading local services and encouraging a broader social mix – hence the selling of homes to private buyers. This seems to be an acknowledgement that putting single parent, low-income families all together in the one area can create urban ghettos with associated problems of crime and unemployment.

Community renewal also aims to develop a sense of neighbourhood pride among the residents through community activities such as clean up

days, fundraising events and youth programs. According to the Department, ‘community renewal is all about building on local strengths’.

Activity – Safer and stronger communities

The NSW Department of Housing explains community renewal this way:

‘The process of community renewal is ultimately about community re-engagement of disadvantaged communities with each other, with services and employment, and with the broader community.’

- Imagine you are a resident of Airs and write a letter to the Department of Housing to point out the main problems in your neighbourhood. Make some suggestions about ways you and other residents could take an active role in improving your community.

DOCUMENTARY TECHNIQUES

The filmmakers describe *Suburb 4 Sale* as an 'observational documentary' so this term deserves discussion. Many professional film courses and academic papers refer to the work of Bill Nichols, a Professor of Cinema Studies at San Francisco State University who describes documentary films under a number of different categories: interactive, expository, reflexive, performative and observational.

In practice, filmmakers often combine several of these modes in the same documentary. They may for example, employ observational elements within sequences of exposition using voice-over.

In general terms, observational documentaries:

- Do not use formal interviews, narration or re-enactments
- Are led along by the subjects and do not follow a script
- Have subjects who engage with each other rather than speak to the camera
- Use synchronous sound rather than voiceover
- Establish a feeling of intimacy and

relationship between viewers and subjects

- Create a final effect that is unstaged, direct and immediate

After viewing *Suburb 4 Sale*, consider the above characteristics. How many of them are apparent in the documentary? Discuss some examples from the film with other members of your class.

Useful websites:

Community Builders: <http://www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au>

Shelter NSW: <http://www.shelternsw.org.au>

NSW Department of Housing: <http://www.housing.nsw.gov.au>

Shooting the Past? Found Footage

Filmmaking and Popular Memory:
<http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/bell041.htm>

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