

Fiona Allon

Renovation Nation: Our Obsession with Home

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‘It’s the culture, stupid!’, argues Fiona Allon in exploring why Australia has had such a strong orientation toward investment in housing and such vulnerability to property market crises. Culture and political economic interests are not independent, of course. The strong emphasis on ‘home’ may represent a settler society’s insecurity about its relationship to the land but, in practice, the distinctively Australian emphasis on housing investment – including investment properties in particular – results just as much from the way property markets are structured and tax benefits are offered to property owners. Negative gearing for investment properties, owner-occupiers’ exemptions from capital gains and land taxes and deplorably deficient public housing provision are key contributory factors. The book explores these issues, and more, in probing what has happened to Australia’s housing.

As Chris Paris noted in his *Housing Australia* a decade and a half ago, the ambition of ‘decent and affordable housing for all’ should be a realisable ambition in Australia. Yet it seems perpetually elusive. The tendency for the ‘great Australian dream’ to degenerate into ‘nightmare’ has been a theme for most writing in this field. Allon’s book is the latest in this tradition. Its strengths are that it links cultural factors with political and economic factors, and that it brings the story up-to-date, even including some discussion of how events stemming from the ‘sub-prime mortgage crisis’ in the USA in 2008 have impacted on the local scene.

Allon recurrently calls for a better ‘understanding of home’, writing that ‘Like the beach itself, it must be seen as open, not closed, and made anew each day with the surge of the swell and the pull of the tide’ (p183). This leads her into personal reflections on why so much is spent on McMansions in new suburbs or on attempts to restore heritage housing in older suburbs, as well as discussion of the problem of racism in Cronulla and other observations on Australian culture. ‘What is to be done?’ in charting new directions for policy remains the practical question.