

# An Australian Newtown Revisited

1966  
and  
1991

AIFS Senior Research Fellow **IAN WINTER** outlines one of the major new research projects the Institute will conduct through 1995.

The year 1966 in Australia was a watershed for our national identity. Old colonial ties to the United Kingdom were loosened as Prime Minister Menzies retired, and new ones to the United States were tightened as Australian troops were sent to war in Vietnam, and decimal dollars and cents replaced pounds, shillings and pence. The status of women in the national psyche was boosted as Dame Annabelle Rankin became the first woman to head a Commonwealth Government Department and married women were allowed to hold permanent jobs in the Commonwealth Public Service for the first time. The move to a multicultural Australia was advanced with a further loosening of 'White Australia' policies as the number of southern European migrants increased (Year Book, Australia, 1966, 1967).

## Newtown in the sixties

The sixties as a decade of optimism and youthfulness provided fresh starts for 2500 families housed in a new suburb on the fringe of Melbourne. This new community, with many 'new Australians' from Britain and northern Europe, was 'planned' to provide much needed labour for nearby manufacturing plants. Rural until 1955, the Newtown of 1966 was described as 'an attractive place to live: 'The land is hilly, the built-up sections are surrounded by lush open countryside, and most houses have pleasant gardens which show obvious signs of care and attention' (Bryson and Thompson 1972:19).

The 1966 study of Newtown was designed to inform policy and academic debates of the time. A number of key research questions were asked. What happens to old Australians in new suburbs? What happens to new Australians in new suburbs? Can social communities be 'created' by planners? Can communities be fostered by church and social workers whose values may be alien to the residents they serve? Can planning and housing authorities influence the way of life in the areas they develop?

In the terms of the key theoretical debates of the 1960s the study was concerned with the conflicting values held by the majority of professional workers who

In 1966 Lois Bryson and Faith Thompson were invited to carry out a community study in Newtown, a newly planned suburb on the fringe of Melbourne. As part of the Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS), the Australian Institute of Family Studies collected data of a similar nature in Newtown during 1991. Data from these two points in time provide a unique opportunity to revisit Newtown to examine the changes in family and community life over a 25-year period.

influenced the planning process, and the working class residents. Newtown was said to be governed by 'external caretakers' whose value orientation, lifestyle, material expectations and aspirations were very different from the people on whose behalf they worked, and whose interests they represented.

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## Newtown in the nineties

The 1991 study of Newtown, as a part of the Australian Living Standards Study, examined many of the same issues as the 1966 study: access to and satisfaction with local and regional services; attitudes to living in the suburb; the nature of and satisfaction with paid work for both men and women; housing circumstances; health; and family and household composition.

Drawing on these data, the Newtown Revisited Project will explore how family and community life have changed between 1966 and 1991. Significant changes in the nature of the Australian economy and government service provision over the time period suggest that the differences will be stark.

Newtown was established as a residential centre for workers in nearby manufacturing plants. At that time manufacturing dominated the Victorian economy and Victoria was the focus of Australia's manufacturing production. Since then the service sector has risen to a position of pre-eminence in the Victorian economy with significant implications for employment and unemployment.

Newtown, is thus now an *older* industrial suburb with a local economy still focused on manufacturing production, but one that is of decreasing economic significance. The period 1966-1991 also witnessed a systematic reduction in welfare services (common to many Western economies) that rendered the state a lesser role in welfare support and increased pressure on families to support members in times of stress. The Newtown Revisited Project will thus provide an important opportunity to explore the impact of economic restructuring and welfare reduction on the lives of Australian families.

**The Newtown Revisited Project will be conducted throughout 1995 by LOIS BRYSON, University of Newcastle, and IAN WINTER and VIVIANA LAZZARINI, of the Australian Institute of Family Studies.**