

Cultural DNA and Urbanisation

Keith Rankin, 31 August 2013

The issues around housing in New Zealand are intractable in large part because two components of our cultural DNA clash with each other, and because both clash with the inexorable process of urbanisation.

If Auckland is to become a genuine world city, it will need to embrace the process of urbanisation. Urban living is radically different from the semi-rural living that our peasant heritage makes us yearn for.

New Zealand's nineteenth century settlers of British stock came largely from small-holding rural backgrounds, or from semi-rural villages and small towns. The yearning that brought them to this farthest place was to live lives as freeholder peasants, owning small to medium sized plots of land. The dairy industry that took off in the 1890s was a perfect answer to these dreams.

Although not all New Zealanders could or should be yeoman dairy farmers, politics 100-120 years ago was nevertheless dominated by the presumption that New Zealanders should possess plots of land, in the growing towns and city fringes if not in the countryside.

Suburbanisation and commuting took off in the 1920s. Lifestyles continued to maintain strong links to the land through most of the last century, with most New Zealanders growing up in suburban back-yards with obligatory vegetable gardens. Chicken runs were commonplace in emergent suburbia. We got through the 1930s' depression in part by falling back on this resource.

The yearning for a patch of suburban land through which we can express our inner-peasant nature continues to run deep; hence the deep passions around the affordability of freehold owner-occupiable suburban land. Although generation by generation the size of the land-plots gets smaller, the Kiwi peasant meme continues to express itself.

In addition to the peasant meme, our cultural DNA contains a squirrel meme. While squirrels are associated with financial prudence, the analogy is misleading. Squirrels hoard rather than invest their acorns, and they do accept losses. The interest rate on actual squirrel saving is generally negative, and is at most zero.

From our point of view, however, squirrels are accumulators. Mammalian squirrels accumulate acorns; people accumulate virtual acorns, otherwise known as 'money'. Money, here, is the wealth – or at least the apparent wealth – that we accumulate.

For Kiwis, our favourite way of accumulating acorns is by buying houses. Unrelated to actual economic wealth, this accounting wealth seems to just keep accumulating. This is the 'property ladder', a central feature of our cultural iconography. It's as if the squirrels' acorns multiply during the night. Easy money.

The peasant meme is satisfied with just one plot of land, preferably mortgage-free. That's the Kiwi castle. The squirrel meme sees no reason to stop at one property. The alchemy of the property ladder, like that of the casino, has no 'stop' sign.

In Auckland, squirrel DNA is flourishing at the expense of unsatisfied peasant DNA. Hence the pain felt by the propertyless, and the prolonged calls for the suburbanisation of fringe rural land.

The sub-text is that, with the unlanded being directed to the outer fringe – much as their great-great-grandparents were directed to the antipodes – the accumulators already on the property ladder acquire appreciating non-fringe land to expand their financial portfolios.

The solution is not to look to government to back our inner-peasant DNA in a war against our inner-squirrel DNA. Too many of us contain both sets of cultural genes.

The answer is to embrace true urbanisation. Clearly, in a New Zealand context, Auckland must lead the way.

An urban lifestyle is about market forces, career flexibility, apartments, convenience, travelling light, living close to work.

Kiwis are in the peasant-habit of associating renting with poverty. Renting is for losers, we think; for the people who have no choice. But when career paths take us from one city to another, renting sure facilitates hassle-free relocation. And it allows us to afford to live close to the places where we live most of our waking lives.

Urbanites may not only rent their abode. They may rent their cars, furniture and appliances as well. People can lead modern comfortable lives without having to own everything they use.

(I wonder if any city-dwellers have yet taken to renting their pets!? Certainly the suburban lifestyle with the dog and cat is part of our peasant make-up that even many who embrace urbanity cannot quite shake off.)

What if most of us lived in urban clusters close to our main places of employment; or quasi-urban clusters such as the new New Lynn, close to rapid transport links? The commuter traffic gridlock that is the reality of suburban peasant life would be significantly diminished. Our roads would revert to being arteries for commercial transport.

Rather than buy cars, young metropolitans would rent cars to enjoy weekends away, or trips "down country". Just think of how much less private and public parking infrastructure Auckland would need.

Generation by generation, the peasant meme (central to our past identity as neo-British Kiwis) diminishes. New Zealanders born this century will gravitate to urban environments, will accumulate less, and can enjoy fulfilling, creative and productive lives.

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