

# Boomburbs



**Little boxes** Andrew Merry's Boomburbs series was shot from a low-flying helicopter



**Courtside view** Aerial photography reveals abstract patterns



**Spaghetti highway** Urban sprawl: it's pasta joke

Museums

A new Museum of Sydney exhibition provides a colourful new perspective on urban sprawl in outer Sydney. By *Emily Cheng*

In 2005, on the lookout for ideas for a new photographic project, Andrew Merry took a helicopter flight over the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Opera House. He was left uninspired. But during the flight back to Bankstown Airport he saw something with potential: the new developments in outer suburbia, with their Lego block-shapes, cartoon-bright colours, empty streets and freshly landscaped gardens.

The exhibition that came out of it is *Boomburbs*, an examination of the "liminal space between rural and urban" in Western Sydney. Merry's vibrant photographs capture the eerie calm of new, high-density

housing and McMansion-dominated suburbia from the air. "It was almost like I was doing a documentary of something that didn't feel quite real," Merry says.

Merry and his pilot Martin Bass took three 1.5-hour flights in a doorless helicopter, flying at just 300 metres above ground. Most shots were spontaneous, with luck playing a big part. "The pictures look like they were carefully composed but they weren't," Merry says. "I'll just see something that I'm interested in and take a few shots of it and hopefully one of them will be sharp and framed properly." Merry was also wary of his images looking a little too 'Google Earth'. "I intentionally tried to develop a style that wasn't like a satellite photo. Mine were shot from a much lower angle."

There was at least one hairy moment – a Black Hawk helicopter got a little too close for comfort above the M4-M7 'Spaghetti Western' inter-

change – but Merry insists that the on-ground component of putting the exhibition together was the trickiest. Sifting through thousands of images, Merry says, was not quite as thrilling as being airborne.

*Boomburbs* provides a bird's eye view of Sydney's urban sprawl. It's a visual reminder that the city's population is out of control, set to increase by 1.5 million by 2036. But Merry isn't necessarily commenting on any of that. "The exhibition is exploring the aesthetics of new suburbia," Merry says. "I present all this visual information and then people interpret it. I'm not pushing a particular view except the obvious one: urban sprawl should be done in a way that's sustainable so that there's quality of life and affordability. Those issues need to be addressed."

**Boomburbs** Museum of Sydney, until 13 Feb 2011