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Housing Fever in Australia 2020–23: Insights from an Econometric Thermometer

Shuping Shi and Peter C. B. Phillips*

Abstract

Australian housing markets experienced wide-spread and, in some cases, extraordinary growth in prices between 2020 and 2023. Using recently developed methodology that accounts for fundamental economic drivers, we assess the existence and degree of speculative behaviour, as well as the timing of exuberance and downturns in these markets. Our findings indicate that speculative behaviour was indeed present in six of the eight capital cities at some time over the period studied. The sequence of events in this nationwide housing bubble began in the Brisbane market and concluded in Melbourne, Canberra, and Hobart following the interest rate rise implemented by the Reserve Bank of Australia in May 2022. As of March 2023, the housing markets in Sydney, Canberra and Hobart had broadly regained stability, while Melbourne's return to its normal state is more gradual. In addition, over-corrections against fundamentals are evident in the housing markets of Brisbane, Adelaide, Darwin and Perth. For regular updates on the housing markets, readers may visit the authors' website at <https://www.housing-fever.com>.

JEL CLASSIFICATION

C12; C13; E43

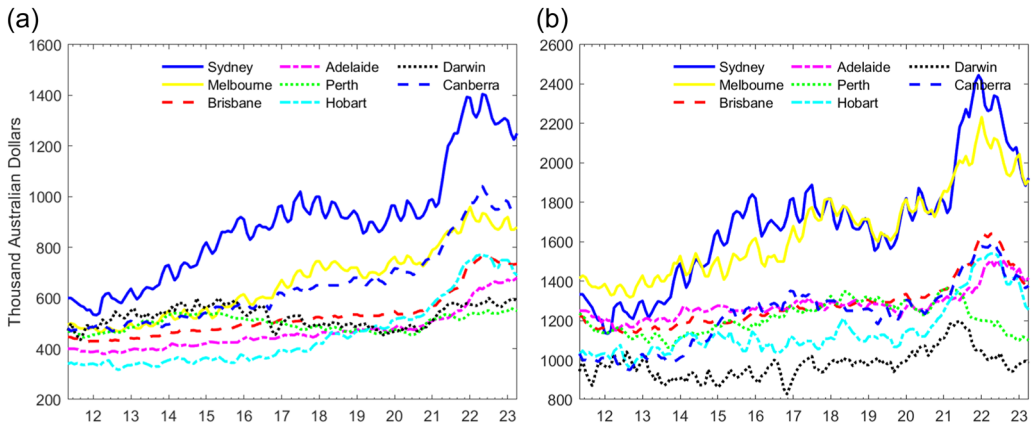
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1. Introduction

When property prices escalate rapidly in a manner that is detached from underlying economic fundamentals of supply and demand, the speculative phase of a real estate bubble occurs. When this speculative phase ends in price collapse and property prices realign with fundamentals, a real estate bubble has taken place. If the realignment is rapid and substantial, such bubbles can have severe consequences for the broader economy, affecting financial stability, consumer spending and overall economic growth (Skinner 1996; Case, Glaeser and Parker 2000; Case, Quigley and Shiller 2005; Caballero and Krishnamurthy 2006; Hirano, Inaba and Yanagawa 2015). When a bubble bursts it can lead to a cascade of negative effects, including a collapse in property values, widespread mortgage defaults and downturns in the construction and real estate sectors. Such cascading economic effects were evident in the aftermath of the US real estate bubble when the subprime mortgage market collapsed, coupled with the subsequent 2008 global financial crisis.

The impact of such events extends beyond housing markets, often affecting banks and financial institutions, leading to credit crunches and broader economic downturns and recessions. By recognising signs of housing market exuberance and impending bubble behaviour, policy-makers, regulators and investors can take proactive measures to mitigate risks and implement appropriate measures to prevent or

Figure 1 Median Housing Prices and Price-to-Rent Ratios: January 2011 to March 2023. (a) House prices and (b) price-to-rent ratios



Note: The monthly median house prices and rent indexes are compiled by CoreLogic.

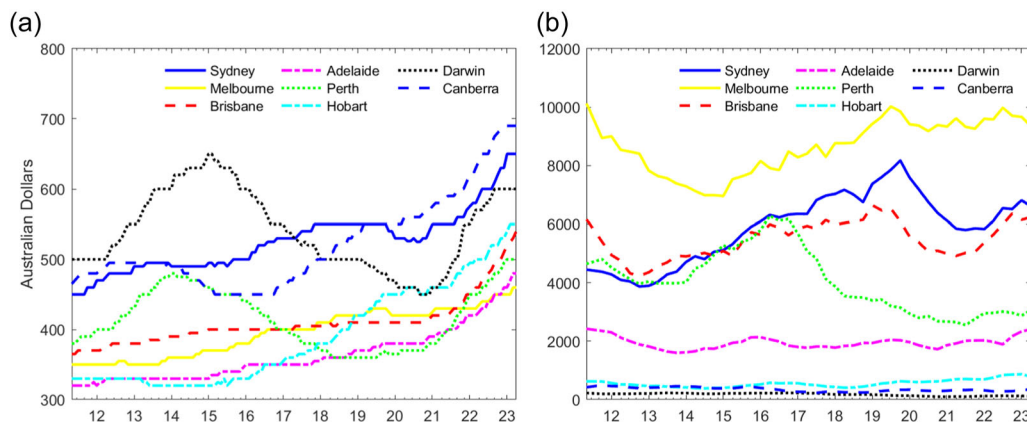
contain an unsustainable surge in property prices. Regular monitoring and analysis of housing markets are crucial to ensure a balanced and stable real estate environment, safeguarding the overall health of the economy and minimising the potential for potentially devastating financial crises. This article outlines methods to assist in diagnostic market monitoring and overviews the empirical evidence of bubbles in leading Australian real estate markets over the period 2020–23. The methodology employed in the analysis makes use of recent developments that take account of fundamental economic and financial drivers in the assessment of evidence for housing market bubble behaviour.

2. Australian Housing Markets

House prices in the Australia capital cities have experienced significant growth over the past decade. Beginning around 2012, there was a notable surge in housing prices across major Australian cities as shown in Figure 1a. This upward trend in Australian housing markets continued until around 2017 when concerns about housing affordability and regulatory measures led to a slowdown in price growth. The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in early 2020, initially raised concerns about a

potential housing market downturn. However, government stimulus measures, including mortgage payment deferrals¹ and various support packages,² cushioned the COVID-19 impact and house prices soared from late 2020, reaching record highs in several cities in early 2022. As a consequence, housing affordability has become a major concern, with many aspiring homeowners struggling to enter the market. This issue has been brought to the forefront in various public discussions, news reporting and formal inquiries. For instance, in November 2021, the Australia Broadcast Corporation (ABC)'s *Four Corners* produced a report entitled 'Going, Going, Gone: Australia's property price frenzy', shedding light on the housing affordability crisis.³ Additionally, the Standing Committee on Tax and Revenue conducted a public inquiry in 2021 focused on Housing Affordability and Supply in Australia.⁴

One important measure of housing affordability is the price-to-rent ratio (PRR), comparing the cost of owning a house to the cost of renting it. A higher PRR indicates that buying a property is relatively more expensive compared to renting, while a lower ratio suggests that buying is relatively more affordable. Figure 1b displays the computed PRR of the eight capital cities, revealing consistent high ratios for Sydney and Melbourne and a comparatively lower ratio for Darwin.⁵ Interestingly, despite Melbourne

Figure 2 Housing Rent and Supply. (a) Rent (CoreLogic) and (b) new housing completion (12-month rolling average)

Note: The quarterly new housing completions (seasonally adjusted) data are from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and converted to monthly frequency by linear interpolation.

and Canberra having similar median house prices throughout the sample period (Figure 1a), the PRR for Melbourne is notably higher than that of Canberra due to a substantially higher nominal rent in Canberra (Figure 2a). As in house prices themselves, varying degrees of expansion in the PRRs are observed across all markets from late 2020.

Furthermore, over the same period there was a clear pattern of substantial rent rises in all capital cities, aligning with the surge in housing prices that began in late 2020 (Figure 2a). The supply of housing, proxied by a 12-month rolling average of new housing completions, experienced a sharp decline in multiple cities between 2019 and 2020, including Sydney, Brisbane and Perth. However, from 2021 onwards, new housing completions either remained relatively stable or started to increase again, as evident in Figure 2b.

3. Sorting Out Speculation and Fundamentals

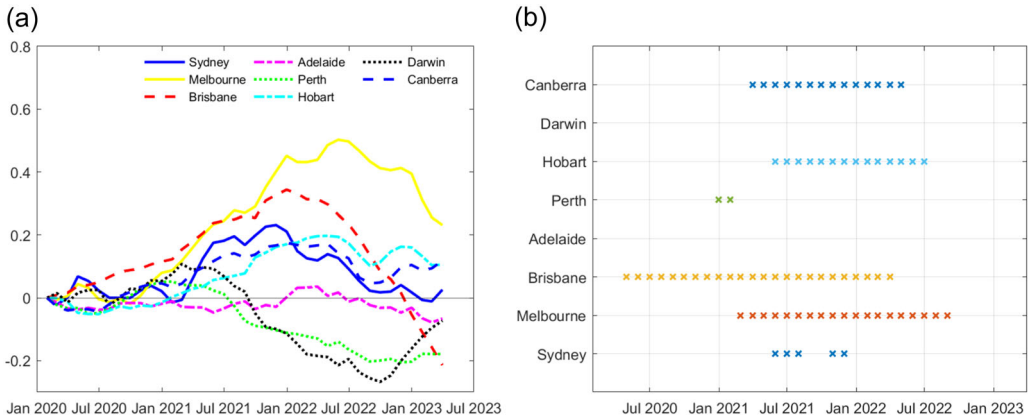
We consider a factor model, as suggested by Shi and Phillips (2023), that decomposes the house PRRs into two components: a fundamental component and a non-fundamental (NF) component. This model takes into account factors related to both demand and

supply, including real rent, real mortgage interest rate (the nominal rate minus inflation expectations), real disposal income (proxied by state final demand) and new housing completion.⁶

The factor model is estimated separately for each city using data from a training period spanning from January 2011 to December 2019. Following the methodology of Shi and Phillips (2023), an instrumental variable estimation method (known as IVX⁷) is employed, which takes into account the complex trends and interdependencies that are evidently present in these data. The monitoring period runs from January 2020 to March 2023. The estimated factor models are used to decompose the PRRs in the monitoring sample into a fundamental and a residual (non-fundamental) component. Shi and Phillips (2023) detail the decomposition approach and its implementation. Figure 3a displays the computed NF components for the monitoring sample. The rapid surge in NF might be attributed to speculative behaviours within the markets. However, when the estimated NF component is negative, we can confidently dismiss the possibility of bubbles or speculations.

We apply the PSY technique (Phillips, Shi and Yu 2015a, 2015b) on the computed NF

Figure 3 The Computed NF Components and Identified Bubble Periods. (a) NF components and (b) bubble periods



component to date stamp bubble episodes as in Shi and Phillips (2023).⁸ The identified bubble periods are displayed in Figure 3b. The 2020–22 housing bubble involved six capital cities (except Darwin and Adelaide). It started first and lasted the longest in Brisbane, spanning from April 2020 to March 2022. The second longest bubble episode occurred in Melbourne, starting from February 2021 and terminating in August 2022. The episodes in Canberra and Hobart have similar durations, with the Canberra episode starting two months earlier than in Hobart. The bubble event in Sydney lasted for five months (from May 2021 to July 2021 and from October 2021 to November 2021), while the one in Perth was the shortest, beginning in December 2020 and ending the following month.

4. The Impact of Interest Rate rises

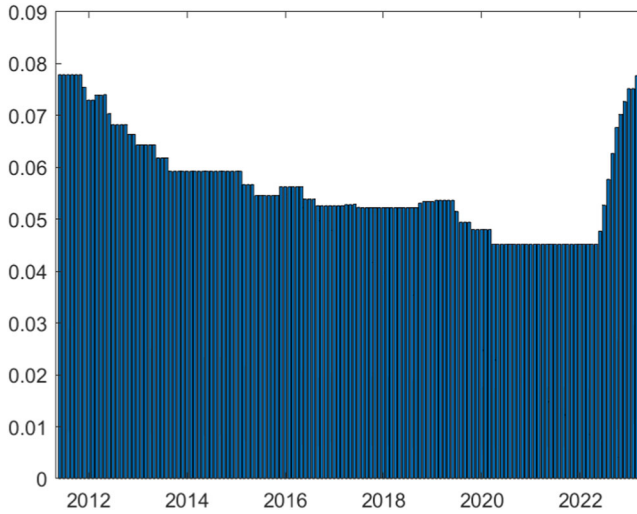
In response to surging inflation rates, the RBA adopted a course of action to tighten monetary policy, commencing in May 2022. This tightening resulted in an increase in the mortgage interest rate from 4.52 per cent in April 2022 to 8.02 per cent in March 2023, as depicted in Figure 4.

To visualise how these interest rate rises dampen housing bubbles, in Figure 5, we separate the computed NF components into three groups, with the vertical line denoting

the commencement of the rate rises in May 2022. The first group comprises Sydney and Brisbane, where the estimated NF components begin to decrease (or bubble terminates) as the market softens before the rate rises occur. The second group consists of Melbourne, Hobart and Canberra, where the bubble components swiftly change direction and start to decline as soon as the RBA begins to increase interest rates. The last group encompasses Adelaide, Perth and Darwin, where very short or no bubble episodes were identified. The computed NF components in these cities either had very brief expansions or were negative. Moreover, the NF components in these cities continued to decline after the interest rate rises were implemented. The results suggest that the RBA's rate rises had an immediate effect on bursting bubbles in the second group. The impact of the rate rises on the other markets is less apparent, as those markets were already softening and they continued their downward momentum after the interest rate rises.

Finally, as of March 2023, housing markets appear to be in a mix of correction and recovering states. While the Sydney, Hobart and Canberra markets appear to have stabilised, downward corrections are continuing in Brisbane and Melbourne. The Melbourne market NF component is still positive, manifesting some ongoing deviation from fundamentals. The NF

Figure 4 Monthly Mortgage Interest Rate



Source: RBA.

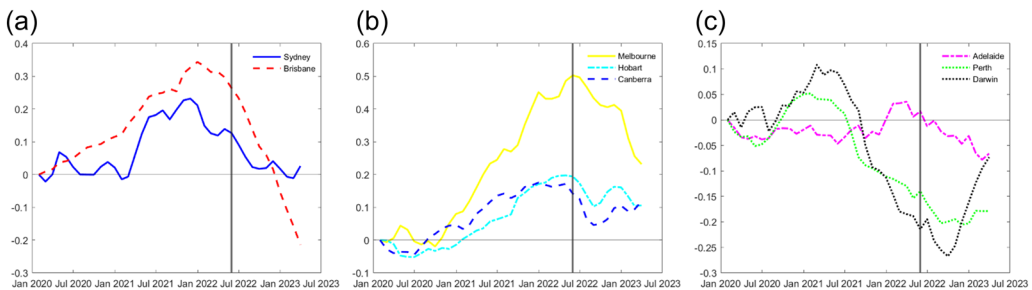
components in Brisbane, Perth and Darwin have experienced significant declines, falling well below their average levels. A similar pattern, although less pronounced, was observed in Adelaide, indicating potential over-corrections in these markets. Notably, the Darwin market seems to be on a recovering trajectory, which is yet to be observed in the other three markets.

5. Conclusion

In response to exceptional price growth observed in the Australian and New Zealand

housing markets over 2020–21, we launched a new housing fever website to report on this phenomena in May 2021: www.housing-fever.com. This website provides real-time bubble indicators for housing markets in the eight Australian capital cities and six primary New Zealand regions. The measures are benchmarked against housing and macroeconomic fundamentals to provide a statistical mechanism for assessing the existence and the degree of speculative behaviour in these housing markets. At the time of writing, and based on the use of real-time data up to March

Figure 5 The Computed Non-Fundamental Components



Note: The vertical line indicates the onset of interest rate rises (May 2022).

2023, the website presents a detailed analysis and discussion regarding evidence of speculation in the housing markets over the past three years, as well as the impact of interest rate rises in curbing the house price bubbles in both countries.

Endnotes

1. <https://www.apra.gov.au/temporary-loan-repayment-deferrals-due-to-covid-19-july-2020>.
2. <https://treasury.gov.au/coronavirus>.
3. <https://iview.abc.net.au/video/NC2103H038S00>.
4. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Former_Committees/Tax_and_Revenue/Housingaffordability.
5. Due to a one-quarter delay in rent data release, the price-to-rent ratio is calculated by dividing house prices at period t by rents at period $t - 3$. We anticipate minimal influence on the results since rents tend to exhibit a certain degree of stability as seen in Figure 2a and are less prone to immediate fluctuations.
6. Rent data, state final demand and new housing completion data have a one-quarter delay in their release. To ensure timely market updates, we utilise observations from period $t - 3$ for the decomposition of the price-to-rent ratio at period t . The nominal mortgage rate and inflation expectations are sourced from the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA). The nominal rent and state final demand data (ABS) are adjusted to real terms using the Consumer Price Index (excluding housing) from ABS.
7. This method was originally developed in Phillips and Magdalinos (2009) and has since been extensively used in empirical work with trending time series that are stochastic and interdependent.
8. The minimum window size is set as $T_{\min} = 0.01T_0 + 1.8\sqrt{T_0}$ where T_0 is the number of observations in the training sample. The lag order of the regression model is selected by BIC with a maximum lag of four. Critical values of the test statistic are obtained from the composite bootstrapping procedure, with the control window being a quarter and the significance level being 90 per cent.

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