

LIVING



& PARTLY LIVING

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The first impression is of shrubs and shrubby trees of modest height and of every colour in the botanical spectrum except the wan green of the eucalypt. Behind the shrubbery, in gaps between oleander, prunus and privet, a second spectrum of earthy tertiaries rears. It is made of the tans, salmons, browns and reds of brick walls and tiled roofs. Sprinkled between the two spectra are small spots of brilliant primary colours, on rose-bushes, or flower beds lining a driveway, or an elaborately painted electricity meter box beside a front door. In front of the shrubbery is a long line of low brick fencing unvarying in height but changing every 60 feet or so in colour and ornamental effects. It is too low to create privacy, and that is not its function. It is there to mark the separate property lines by those changes of colour and ornament. Each 60 feet section of it was independently built at the same time as the house behind it, yet by unwritten law these pieces of the long common fence do not vary in physical properties. The barely broken line accentuates the similarity and interdependence of the properties rather than the qualities of separateness and independence which, long years ago, were among the main objectives of this neighbourhood. Similarly the separate houses, though also carefully decorated to look different, were positioned by laws—municipal law and estate-agency economic law—in a row as straight as soldiers, so that they merge behind the shrubs into a continuous, variegated, but formless strip. Two such strips, facing each other behind their respective barricades of low walls and shrubbery, are separated by ribbons of concrete footpath and lawn symmetrically arranged on each side of an expanse of bitumen roadway. More shrubby trees, and tall tree-trunk service poles, grow regularly in the lawn strips, and overhead a thin web of black wires criss-cross the blue sky.

The bitumen strip of roadway, which runs in strong horizontal perspective half a mile or so before it ends against an identical roadway set across its path, is remarkably wide, considering the general shortage of bitumen in proportion to the number of cars in this land. It frequently is wide enough to carry a row of parked cars on either side and two continuous lines of traffic flowing down the centre. Yet often not a single car is in sight. Early in the morning there is

some activity, and sometimes at night when a party is being held cars will cluster as close as possible to one house in the street, like flies around something sticky. But for most of the day and night the bitumen is unoccupied except by an occasional delivery van, or a golden labrador crossing to investigate the other nature strip.

That is about the average condition of the nicest, established Australian neighbourhood. It varies a little in colour and vegetation from state to state. It is cleanest, greenest and neatest in the suburbs of the bigger cities and scruffiest in the residential sections of the smaller towns. The trees and the houses are taller and thicker in the older, richer, inner suburbs and both are lower and lighter in the newer, outer suburbs. In the poorest of these suburbs the houses are so close together and the trees so far apart that in places none at all of the latter can be seen. In all cases the style of the houses and the types of planting have changed, and continue to change, at ten-yearly intervals.

Yet despite all those variables the Australian suburb has remained remarkably consistent in character and influence since the turn of the century; that is, since Australians tacitly approved the principle that a suburban neighbourhood made the most desirable background for living for all Australians. For some seventy years about 95 per cent of the population has lived in suburban neighbourhoods, and about 90 per cent never doubted that it was the kind of neighbourhood best calculated to harbour the best kind of life. Their only residential aspiration was to move to a richer version of the same thing. For the lucky few who already lived in unquestionably the richest version available, such as Toorak or Vaucluse, no higher residential aspiration in this country was possible.

Until very recently the small proportion of Australians who questioned the suburban way of life were artists or rustics or other misfits whose whole lives cut against the grain of Australian society. In the last five to ten years the number of questioners has been greatly increased, as everyone knows, by many of our migrants from Europe. But it has also been



The ideal Australian garden suburb: Northbourne Avenue, Canberra; an impossible dream outside the controlled capital city.

expanded by a higher proportion of doubters than ever before in the native-born generation reaching marriageable age and thus, simultaneously, the housing market.

The questioners are not necessarily anti-suburb. They recognise that the quiet street of shrubs and bricks and two-generation families has much to commend it, especially to people setting out to become two generations. They question only that this Australian dream, this garden anti-city, is best for everyone. They seek the one virtue which the Australian suburb has always denied, the one factor which it most conspicuously lacks: choice. It assumes that every Australian has the same living pattern, much the same aesthetic and emotional responses, approximately the same number of similar children, and precisely the same aspirations in life. These assumptions are perhaps most obviously expressed to us when we look back to the heyday of suburban development, the between-war period—that is between the end of World War II and the start of our involvement in the Vietnam War—and to the middle-income regions of that period. When the architectural and planting styles are out of date it is easier to see social shortcomings. Yet the assumption of uniformity is in fact still tending to grow, and is by no

means confined to the best-selling, drearier, characteristic villa developments. The architecturally enlightened 'project homes' have to make much the same assumptions in order to make sales. Thus, irrespective of architectural style and structural materials and the quality of finishes and equipment supplied, new houses being offered to nearly every level of the Australian public today are likely to have an L-shaped living-dining room, a family room with open serving counter from the kitchen, a main bedroom with attached shower-room, two other bedrooms, bathroom and laundry, and a double carport. In the cheaper versions the rooms are pretty small and sometimes the master bedroom's shower-room has to go. (However, let it be noted that motels have so popularised private toilet facilities for parents that the small room is now known in estate-agent's parlance familiarly and delicately by one word: 'ensuite'.) In costlier versions of the house the *ensuite* becomes quite an elaborate bathroom, and up to three extra rooms may be added, in the following order of priority: first, a separate dining-room (permitting the living-room to revert to a cosier rectangle); second, a 'study'; third, a fourth bedroom. In the costlier version also the land around the house will be more attractive—not much bigger, but better situated, socially and geographically. And the street outside is likely to have bigger trees and neater lamps and fancier street-name pointers. But that is about the extent of variation in the background to living permitted by our system. A cold physical uniformity seems to assume a chilling psychological conformity.

And how correct that assumption is! Great numbers of Australians do live dull conforming lives. Many people in other countries live equally dull, dumb, conforming lives. Some have to because a repressive political system or a depressed economic state demand it. Australians don't have to. In choice of residential surroundings, at least, we are completely free from political direction or paternalism. And our affluence, if not as great as our familiarity with the term suggests, is at least sufficient to buy on mortgage a range which includes virtually any kind of housing known to man. Why then do we choose the kind of suburban neighbourhood that has

gradually become a symbol of dumb, conforming, low-level living throughout the western world?

A century ago, when our cities consisted largely of terrace rows (in a wide range of qualities to suit any pocket from a professional man's to a servant's) with comparatively few detached houses (available in an even wider range), did Australians protest? Can you imagine them lecturing each other at Mechanics' Hall meetings: 'These colonies are getting too much variety, too interesting! What this country needs is uniformity of taste, conformity to mediocrity! Everyone should live the same sort of lives with the same interests! Everyone should have the same number of identical children! Only then can so few of us be secure in this huge land!'

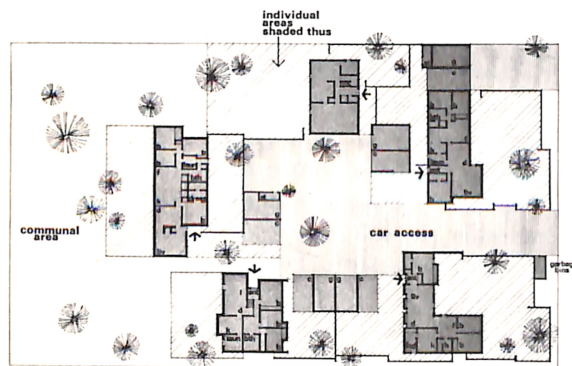
Undoubtedly it was not planned so deliberately. Suburbia just grew; and so gradually that practically no one noticed it or questioned it for some three generations. It was made possible by mechanised public transport. It grew out along the suburban railway and tramway fingers that began reaching out in the 1880s from the compact urban hubs.

Slowly webs were woven between the fingers by threads of roads—straight when possible, reluctantly curved when the ground was

exceptionally hilly. The colour and texture of the houses and plants that were embroidered on the streets might have varied slightly from one side of town to the other and from one end of the country to the other, but it was always the same fabric. And this fabric became the background of most Australian life and from it grew the lack of variety, the soul-threatening uniformity of tastes and conformity to averages which were never demanded in any Mechanics' Hall.

In fact the undemanded conformity of placid Australian society was brought about without design, let alone sinister intent, simply by naive doctrinaire planning and building regulations. Each of these rules or regulations in itself constitutes only a small restriction of private building rights. But added together they effectively rule out most alternatives to the Australian dream villa neighbourhood. Moreover, those alternatives to the villa neighbourhood which *are* permitted are required by the same accumulation of regulations to be segregated. The regulations are made under State laws and administered by local government. They are made in most cases ostensibly to control building practices rather than the planning of neighbourhoods, but they have the latter effect as well, intentionally or unintentionally. For example, they lay down minimum sizes for house allotments and the minimum distances within each allotment between the house and the front and side boundaries. The object obviously is to avoid over-crowding, to allow breathing space between houses and a width of garden space on each side of the street. No maximum sizes for blocks or for distances to boundaries are laid down, so theoretically a good deal of variety in the layout of lots and houses is still possible. And it is true that in the very richest suburbs variety does occur, though rarely even then. Everywhere else economics determine that the minimums laid down are also the maximums. Every house in the street is placed back from its frontage the minimum twenty-five feet—or whatever other minimum distance applies as recorded in the building code. After all, any house which stepped back further would lose some of its usable private backyard in favour of providing more virtually unusable public, weekend-worked showpiece front garden.

Architecturally enlightened 'project homes': Winter Park, near Melbourne, by Merchant Builders; Architect, Graeme C. Gunn



Other regulations, applicable at the discretion of local government, are designed to protect the rows of houses from infiltration by foreign elements. Not only shops and any kind of business activity are banned, but also other kinds of housing: flats, row-houses, cluster-houses, and so on. And always, after the official law releases it, the neighbourhood is caught up again in economic law. Legally similar houses are made more alike by the good estate-agent's rule that it is bad business to build better than your neighbour. Don't waste your money upgrading your neighbours' properties! So materials of a certain level of cost and quality tend to gravitate together. Brick regions grow spontaneously, from which timber and all lighter alternative structural materials are banished, even without the compulsion of the 'brick area' law that obtains in all the places known as 'best'.

The degree of variety within suburbia cannot easily be measured even if it can be seen to be changing over the years. Yet clearly it is diminishing. The size of lots, size of houses, style of gardens, of footpath and nature-strip treatments—all are continuously tending to flatten out to an even mid-level. But though it can't be properly measured, one set of statistics recorded officially brings the authority of numbers to part of the picture: the statistics of materials used for the external walls of houses. It is interesting to note that this information is considered to be an index to the quality of a house, with the result that a costly timber house designed perhaps by an architect who prefers to use timber because of its light freedom is statistically rated as inferior to any brick villa. By the term 'brick', it must be understood, one usually means in Australia 'brick veneer'. And the significance of the following figures is their proof of the steady growth of brick veneer at the expense of all other means of construction for housing. Brick veneer is in fact more than a means of construction; it is the Australian way of life. If it wasn't actually invented here, it was certainly developed independently and with many unique features in its technique. Brick veneer does not demand regular painting for maintenance. That is its one practical advantage over timber, and one which may be countered by use of modern pressurising treatments of

wood which render paint unnecessary, save for cosmetic reasons. But really no one pretends that brick veneer is used for any reason other than appearance. It makes a timber-framed house look like a brick one: as solid, reliable and substantial as a branch bank. In Commonwealth census figures, brick veneer was not differentiated from brick nor from the very few other solid masonic materials, including stone and concrete, until the 1971 census. Yet we know from municipal statistics that a brick exterior wall means a brick veneer wall in ninety-five cases out of a hundred.

A brick look for everyone was, then, unquestionably the great Australian aspiration when home-building resumed after World War II. This is how that aspiration soared:

In 1950 the number of new brick-category houses and the number of new timber ones were almost equal. Nearly 20,000 of each were built (19,996 to 19,917) with fibro-cement running close behind at 14,848. That is, brick represented about 33 per cent of the total number of houses built.

By 1960 brick had moved ahead slightly and represented about 40 per cent of all houses built.

But by 1970 brick had increased to 70 per cent. That year Australia built 71,816 brick-category houses and only 9,967 timber ones. Fibro-cement, that well-meaning but misunderstood material, remained practically as in 1950—a total of 14,919 houses—constant, despite an over-all doubling of construction.

Thus grew the conformity of the background of life to a suburban norm which is so inflexible that it might almost be ordained by law. This background continues to grow, and who could expect a vital race of individualists to grow in its warm shallows?

Now, consider the characteristic Australian neighbourhood, with its wire-strung streets and serried rows of similar houses getting more similar year by year, in comparison with its antithesis. That antithesis is not hard to find; it is the standard domestic condition of Europe and of many other older parts of the world, and

has been so since Roman times. The antithesis to the Australian domestic style is people living inside instead of outside their cities, in multi-storey apartment buildings, often indistinguishable externally from, and intermixed with, shop and office buildings. Lining the streets, this housing rises to various heights. Some Romans used to walk up seven floors to their homes. In Chicago's new John Hancock Building people ride elevators up one hundred floors.

Assume that an equivalent physical standard of comfort (automatic washers, etc.) is available today in each kind of neighbourhood and that the various conveniences and extra equipment of an apartment, such as central air-conditioning, compensate for its loss of floor area in every room. The physical quality of living being kept at a similar high level, which kind of neighbourhood is more likely to cultivate a good life? Consider the advantages of each.

The tight apartment environment puts everyone close to practically everywhere everyone wants to go: shops, cinemas, theatres, libraries, restaurants, as well as to practically everywhere everyone has to but may not want to go: work, schools, dentists, hospitals. What's more, it is so convenient to most of these things that one may actually walk to them.

The suburban environment on the other hand is so loose that nearly everyone has to drive, or use public transport, to go anywhere. To offset this disadvantage it exercises the limbs of its younger inhabitants much better in the many private playing spaces of its back yards, and the slacker muscles of its older inhabitants in obligatory weekend work in the front gardens. But if wealth and health may be about equal in both neighbourhoods, what of happiness?

For sake of this argument perhaps it will be accepted that the temperature of the happiness which suffuses any neighbourhood may be assessed in terms of the degree of opportunity given to the inhabitants to lead a full life. If individuals in the neighbourhood fail to make the most of the opportunities and flop at home in private pursuits that is their own business. They will be happy enough doing that. But a more extroverted neighbour might be unhappy

if asked to do the same thing night after night. He might yearn to get out and talk to people even if he doesn't know them especially well. The opposite poles of urban leisure activities are indicated in the vision, on one hand, of husband and wife watching Homicide and crunching Cadbury's and, on the other, a similar couple sitting at a table on the footpath drinking coffee, watching the world go by, and talking to some of it.

Undoubtedly there is a fundamental human desire for a private domain. We inherited the doctrine of an Englishman's castle, the tradition first proclaimed by Queen Elizabeth I, that every British family should have a private house to itself.

A detached home for every family seems to offer more freedom to each family to pursue esoteric interests and develop private pleasures.

In practice, however, people who live in the less private neighbourhood of apartments live more varied lives than those who are separated in family cells. Competition is virtually non-existent in apartment neighbourhoods where every residence is outwardly identical. But in suburban neighbourhoods, where each unit is ostentatiously separate and ostensibly individual, competition is inevitable. It is an essential part of the system, without which there would be no 'good' streets, no 'exclusive' areas. Everyone, though theoretically private within an invulnerable castle, is obliged by unwritten but unbreakable law to keep up conventional appearances. This rule applies not just to weeding and pruning in the front garden, and painting and repairing of the house facade, but to the seemingly private interior of the house as well. So no housewife would dare, even if she wanted to, not to have at least her hall, lounge, family room and master bedroom—the rooms visitors see—conforming in style and neatness to her neighbours' equivalent rooms. She might as well let the roses run wild and stop reminding her husband to mow the lawn, and be ostracised.

Which, then, is better: the community life of the high-density neighbourhood or the competitive life of the low-density one? The question is a trick one, and not meant now to

be taken seriously. For one thing, the answer may be either, depending on your personality and inclinations. The lesson is that each can be equally bad if it is all that is available to the individual. Each can be a prison, without choice. The question is invalid for another reason: the two extremes are not the only alternatives. It is not a matter of Kings Cross or Thomastown. There are several stages of medium density domestic techniques between. Even now everyone in Australia does not live in a characteristic suburb or in one of the few, but proliferating, inner city flats.

For the rich and childless there are high-rise flats. Some of these rise high for perfectly valid reasons: they do so to overlook better some magnificent view, as on the banks of Sydney Harbour. Some of them, however, climb high for less valid reasons, as along Toorak Road, Toorak, Victoria. In this case there is nothing special to look at. There are no restaurants or theatres nearby to encourage concentrated living. The flats climb up on each other's shoulders only in order to fit as many of them as possible on to the land, because the land is very expensive. And the land is so expensive only because the name Toorak still retains a certain snob value borrowed from the mansions of the rich who once lived there, and in the quieter back streets still do.

Toorak was always a phenomenon in Australia: big mansions on huge blocks, a rich man's alternative to suburbia, a ghetto of wealth celebrated in verse a generation ago by the late Sir John Medley:

Sing a song of Melbourne.
Money by the sack,
Twenty thousand squatters,
Squatting in Toorak.
Heaven all about them,
Hear the angels sing:
'Strictly no admittance here.
God Save the King'.

Yet it was still suburbia, magnificently inflated; and in the green inner streets it retains yet a little of its past glory. But most of the old properties have been decimated, turning it into one more ordinary suburban neighbourhood, only slightly more ostentatious than

usual. Municipal by-laws endeavour to preserve something of the old exclusiveness and ban any building higher than two storeys in some of the secluded streets, but in the main thoroughfare of Toorak Road the ban is lifted. There the new flats are creating an almost continuous wall, ten to twelve storeys high, on either side of the road (other regulations impede more vigorous sky-scraping). Thus one alternative to suburbia is created, but as usual the alternative is not within it; it is virtually outside in an isolated enclave. Toorak Road is a different world from Toorak.

Yet that is benign and literally marginal separation compared with the more ominous kind of segregation which operates inadvertently to isolate many migrants in separate communities. Many New Australians, especially those from central Europe, are used to high-density city living, and prefer it, and seek it here. From early in the 1950s the poorer migrants began buying the nearest thing to urban housing that was available at a price they could afford. They bought thin slices of terrace housing in inner suburbs, and painted them in vivid pastels. Even then it often meant that several people or families had to band together to buy—in places like Fitzroy, Melbourne, and Paddington, Sydney—just one small unit, and then had to use every room as a bedroom.

The more successful European migrant escaped that fate and created a demand for flat buildings near the cities. Regulations and building economics, acting again in unison, decided that the kind of flats which could be constructed within their price range should be no more than three storeys high (plus perhaps car space underneath) and should not be allowed to invade Australian dream areas indiscriminately. Thus cheap walk-up blocks of eavesless flats, made of yellow or orange bricks, according to region, were built in great quantity in areas which tolerated them such as St Kilda, close to the city centre of Melbourne. In block after block they replaced all the old single houses and the trees, and created another separate zone of their own, isolated and insulated from the old Australian suburbia. It is true that the New Australians opened the eyes of many younger Australian-born Aus-

tralian who followed them out of suburbia into the old terrace rows and the walk-up yellowies. Nevertheless many inner areas in all capital cities remain today as exclusively New Australian as if the Federal Government had a policy and plan to create ghettos. On the contrary, of course, the Government policy has always been for total integration of migrants into the existing Australian community.

That policy is frustrated by those doctrinaire planning techniques which operate directly through regulations and indirectly through estate agents. The doctrine at the base is the sacred role in Australian life of the suburban villa neighbourhood. Alternatives can be tolerated, for this is a free enterprising country, but the alternatives may not enter the defined boundaries of villadom, which must also be kept unsullied by buildings such as shops or theatres—buildings of any nature other than the villa.

The concomitant of that situation is the rigid exclusion of residences from Australian cities—that is, the regions known as the central business districts, 'downtown' in American usage, where the shops, theatres and offices thrive by day, and are practically vacated after six. This exclusion is not demanded by governmental decree, but is ordered just as firmly by economic laws. The last of the old voluntary residents of Australian city centres—not counting the reluctant caretakers—left about the end of World War II. A generation later some are creeping back, but one residential skyscraper in Sydney and two smaller, poorer, less successful blocks in Melbourne are about the extent of the movement, at the time of writing, which hardly indicates the regeneration of a vital centripetal force.

The reason is not that central city councils generally are antagonistic to residential buildings. On the contrary, they try to encourage them by relaxing car-parking and open-space requirements. But the land and building costs in the concrete jungles dictate rents or selling prices which, while quite acceptable for tax-deductible office-space, are prohibitive as non-deductible living space to all but the very few lucky people who have much money and little need for space.

Outside the central business districts, the climactic example of segregation is the multi-storey apartment estate built by State government housing authorities for the more fortunate members of the less fortunate segment of society. The Victorian Housing Commission provides the best example because it has built more, and higher, and more segregated apartment estates than any of the other State housing authorities. Its twenty-storey slab apartment blocks form a broken crescent around the north of Melbourne, the most conspicuous ghetto of all in Australia. The buildings are much the same in shape and style as economical housing slabs anywhere else in the world—New York, Singapore or Moscow—and are much better built than most. They represent an extraordinary official repudiation of the Australian dream, but it happened almost accidentally. For the first three decades or so of its life, the Victorian Housing Commission built sadly respectable little villas in outer suburbs as replacements for inner city slums, and in the course of this work developed a pre-casting factory for concrete elements. In the 1960s, however, it became more convenient to reform the inner city slum areas *in situ*. There were acres of land occupied by little houses about a hundred years old, nearly all of them but a single storey high. It made economic sense to apply to these areas an austerity version of Le Corbusier's between-wars vision splendid: that was, to build tall slabs with some token open playing space between. The State Government estimated that it could increase the population of the inner suburbs by half a million people by such redevelopment, thus avoiding the costly extension of services necessary when creating new outer suburbs. The precast concrete factory provided the technical means for skyscraping and the skyscrapers provided a justification for retaining the precast concrete factory. The scheme worked out nicely both ways, until the worst slums were all used up and the Commission had to start cutting into less indisputably slummy streets in order to keep the system going. The technique of complete block-demolition then came in for much criticism. It was seen that the Commission was removing numbers of cottages which could quite easily have been rehabilitated, and should have been, if only for sentimental, historical and humane reasons.



A call for more sensitive, mixed development, which finally moved the Commission to reconsider its operations, came in 1970 from the institutes of architects, and of real estate and stock, and of planners, and of urban studies, and of surveyors; and from the Chamber of Commerce, the Fitzroy Council, the Victorian Council of Social Services, and from several religious bodies as well. There was, in short, a fairly broad, sudden and spontaneous demonstration of a change in community attitude to conventional bulldozer rehousing techniques. At about the same time other moves in other places were attacking conventional Australian housing doctrines at the other end of the scale. Next door to a big Housing Commission development in Carlton a city block was rebuilt for a co-operative formed by Melbourne University staff. It offered quite a variety of accommodation types in low and high flats designed, with romantically random roofs, by Earle, Shaw and Partners. In Canberra, another housing scheme for university staff, this time of the Australian National University, was built by the National Capital Development Commission. It was a tight assemblage of courtyard houses designed by Harry Seidler.

In almost every city and town in Australia, usually far from any university, something of the sort was happening: some assault on the conventional Australian housing pattern of a vast, sparse villadom interrupted only by one or two tight pockets of high density high-rise for migrants and misfits. Some of the assaults were timid enough, but some (which will be examined later) were bold enough to promise a new era in Australian housing. One way or another the 1970s seemed intent on breaking the old, monotonous pattern. What were the main needs and how hopeful were the prospects?

The needs are now fairly well and fairly generally recognised, at least among those who are professionally concerned with housing. The first and most important one is to break down the barriers: the barriers between dwelling types which indirectly create barriers between different social classes.

The second is to end the cotton-wool protec-

tion of the residential zones, the arbitrary isolation which forbids entrance to anything not looking like another brick veneer villa.

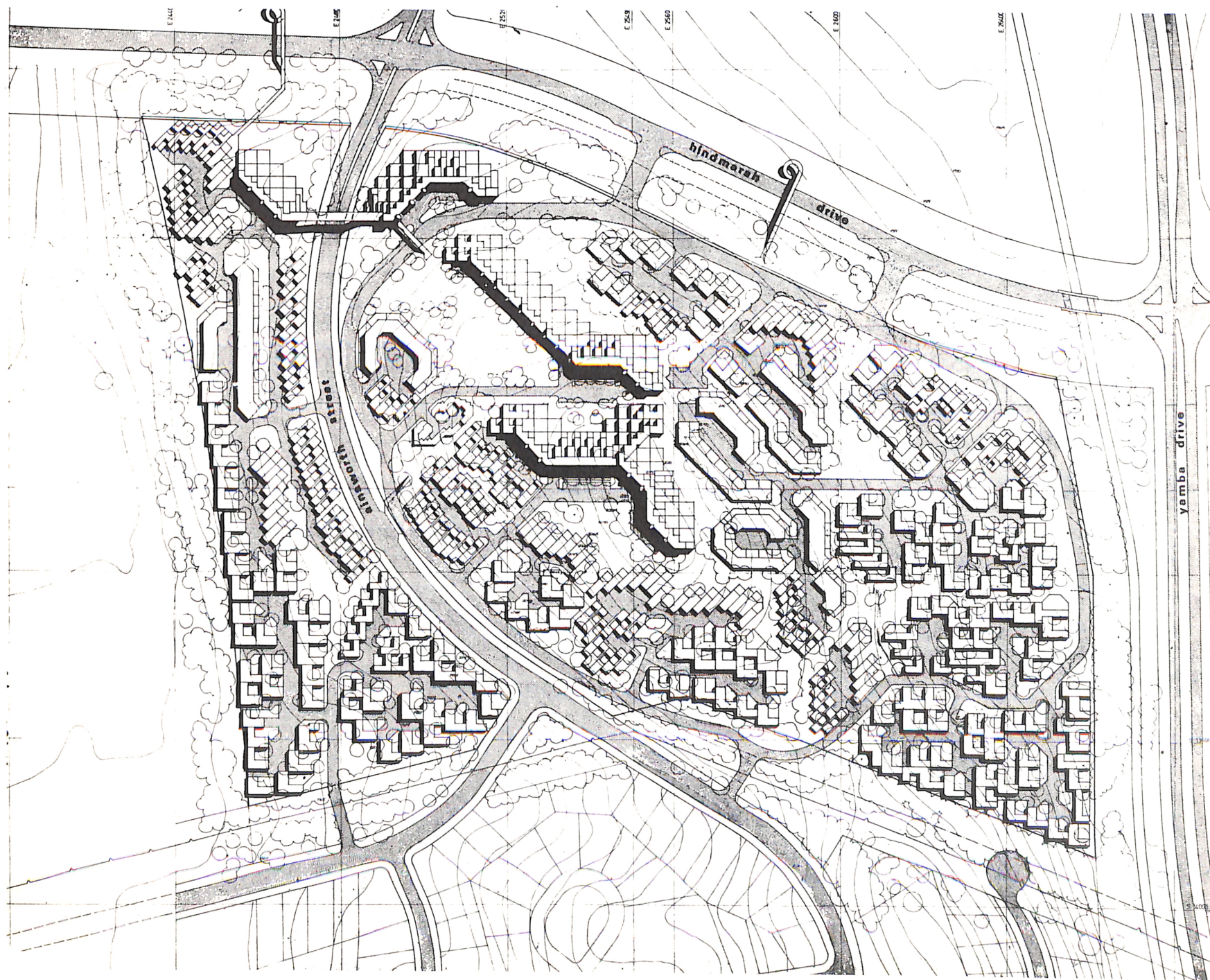
The third is to raise the quality of each element in the new emancipated neighbourhood, so that the houses will not suffer but will only gain by the infiltration of foreign elements.

The fourth is to look ahead, to be flexible, to avoid passing on to future generations unnecessarily rigid patterns based on our own fairly unenlightened lives, which they will find very expensive and difficult to change. Even if one cares nothing for future generations, flexibility has purely selfish advantages for the living.

Fortunately, frustratingly, there is no great mystery about how we can achieve these ends. Examples of what can be done may be found on a large scale in various other parts of the world and some may also be found, if only in miniature, in Australia.

The first need—to break down the barriers—is the hardest one for which to find readymade answers. There are some famous examples, but mainly in Scandinavia, which has about as much relation to Australia in living conditions as has the moon. Nevertheless, a beautiful satellite of Helsinki—the town of Tapiola, which is made of white walls set among birches and lakes—is a shining example of twentieth century planning which cannot be overlooked, and rarely is by planners, anywhere. Tapiola provides a spectacle of visual harmony so pure and subtle that it sends away some non-purists screaming in search of a flashing Coca-Cola sign. Yet into this harmony it weaves dwelling types of every imaginable sort from separate houses and row houses to high apartments.

Reston, near Washington, is a good American copy, but in Australia there is nothing which vaguely approximates the ideas and ideals of Tapiola. However, the immediate future looks promising, if only because of an example being prepared in Canberra. There, near the unexciting early satellite city-centre of Woden, the first major housing development to challenge directly the Australian suburb is now under construction. It is named Swinger



Hill, after a surveyor of the area, and is designed by Ian McKay and Partners for the National Capital Development Commission. It is the boldest plan yet conceived in Australia to create a co-ordinated medium-density neighbourhood, and it is happening on the side of a valley overlooked by hillsides of aggressively conventional suburban housing. Its fate will determine how many more such experiments follow, and how soon.

Swinger Hill covers sixty-three acres with a density of forty people to the acre. It is expected that the final population will be about 2,400. They will live in 700 dwellings of at least fifteen different kinds, including row houses, stepped houses, terraced houses, clustered, courtyard and atrium houses, and flats. All are more or less connected, and certainly strongly disciplined, by an overall geometry of right-angles and diagonals. All are related to common park areas. It has a central community core, with some shops, pre-school and mothercraft facilities. Open pedestrian ways extend from this core in four arms, reaching to different housing groups, and all these are kept free of car traffic. The house-units in themselves do not make a revolutionary assault on conventional house planning. Internally they offer much the same accommodation as will be found on the Woden hills around them. They are mainly single-storey. But the two essential differences are, first, the higher density of people accommodated without loss of personal privacy, and second, the co-ordinated design, which promises to tie the whole thing together as an individual, identifiable whole which a resident might think of broadly as 'home'.

Close to Swinger Hill the same architects are planning a co-ordinated development on a long strip of land designed to contain ultimately nearly 1,500 family and bachelor units, the first 270 of which are to be built by the Government. Also in Canberra, at Kingston, an area of about five acres is being developed by the Commonwealth Department of Works. A unified group of more than 100 flats of quite adventurous design is pleasantly fragmented around pockets of open space.

Nothing so potentially influential as any of

these schemes is planned outside Canberra, but private enterprise is gradually exploring the field of diversified but co-ordinated developments in other capitals. One of the biggest schemes is another design by Ian McKay and Partners on the old Liverpool, NSW, Showground. It will provide 700 dwellings in a square ring of walk-up blocks with three taller blocks, a park and a pool in the centre. One of the hazards of mixing high and low rise blocks—the blocking of views from the latter by the former—is avoided by this elementary device of centering the high ones. The scheme affords a simple example of how different dwelling types can live together without interfering with each other.

In South Melbourne a company which has already pioneered several unconventional housing devices, such as cluster houses—Merchant Builders Pty Ltd—is building a high density estate of 175 diverse units for a private sponsor, Silverton Transport and General Industries. The development will include a range of dwellings from one to three bedrooms in size, from two to five storeys in height, in a variety of plans. The whole estate, as planned by Daryl Jackson and Evan Walker, will be comparatively self-contained, like Swinger Hill, with a children's play area, some shops, a mini-market, and a kindergarten.

The second change in store for the Australian suburban neighbourhood—the opening of its doors to amenities and entertainments—is bound to come sooner or later without the need of leadership from Canberra or even from especially adventurous private enterprisers. The total ban on commerce from the suburban street is integral with the early twentieth century idea of the dormitory garden suburb. It had to be kept free of the activity and the noise of commerce to make a haven for the breadwinner, returning daily from his forays in the city to the peace of a dutiful wife, obedient children and a faithful dog, all shaded by greenery at least six feet high. But the dormitory theory has gone with the pianola and the wind-up gramophone. Its peace was cracked by the first T-model, broken to bits by subsequent Holdens and shattered by later Monaros and by motor mowers and trannies

swung by young pedestrians. And why not? The domestic neighbourhood is not for sleeping only. Without risking its virtue it may permit intruders intent on serving its inhabitants with a more active life.

Now, what form might that more active life take? Only fifteen years or so ago that question would have been easy to answer: shops, cafés, cinemas, restaurants and so on. Now the answer is not quite so clear. Television and big shopping centres have transformed suburban living. Who wants to buy soap powder from a corner store with only one brand on the shelf, when one can go to a supermarket and choose between six different packages all containing the same brand?

If one believes in Soviet economy and the ultimate excellence of the GUM Department Store as a retail outlet, then one must believe in the monopolistic tendencies of the mammoth supermarket and the multi-link chain stores of the shopping centre, and one must accept philosophically the impersonal rudeness and incompetence behind the stylish window dressings. Yet if one believes that personal attention from a shopkeeper who actually knows something about his goods may be a more satisfactory way to buy certain products other than soap powder, then one must suppose that there will always be a demand for some small specialty shops.

Again, it may be asked, who wants to go to the cinema or theatre when they can sit at home with the telly? That question has already been answered by the public and its answer is: plenty of people, including more young ones than you might have expected. Television can or does only provide what is presumed to entertain everybody at once. It has had the unpredicted effect of increasing the demand for small theatres—movie and live—which hope to speak only to some people at a time.

If the redundant, arbitrary, obsolete laws which cotton-wool wrap the suburb were removed, then little shops and little cinemas would not proliferate like silver poplar suckers through suburban neighbourhoods. But some would open, where they were appreciated, and so would some esoteric little restaurants and

theatres and theatre-restaurants and places to drink or dance or meet or talk. When that happened the garden suburb dream would be exploded. And about time.

It was easy to keep the suburb clean and quiet by a blanket ban on practically every activity except sleep. Emancipation of the residential neighbourhood will make for more care by all concerned to ensure that sleep may continue undisturbed when desired. But that is no reason for preserving a system that was invented when theatres were noisy, restaurants were greasy, and sex was dirty. The technological acoustical and sanitary means to make such activities nice and civilised are now readily available. The reasons for excluding them from residential areas are simply emotional.

The third change needed—to raise the quality of every element in the neighbourhood—is a

matter of design; penetrating, over-all, coordinated design of a kind which is as unusual in Australia as a French restaurant in suburbia.

The most important, because biggest, element of design is, of course, the architectural element, and that is the subject of Ian McKay's chapter. It is the most difficult element to improve because domestic architecture, like the garden suburb concept, becomes tangled with emotion. The other media by which design enters a neighbourhood—the landscaping, street furniture, and so on—are much less contentious. In fact it is possible to achieve almost complete unanimity as to the desirable objective in most of these matters. Nobody on earth loves crooked tree-trunks with wobbly cross-bars holding a mat of insulators and crossing wires overhead. Everyone agrees that they *should* be buried, although most electrical authorities argue that burving increases their

maintenance problems, and so they resist it by the subtle stonewall tactics which are their prerogative.

But no emotional or practical hang-ups are involved in the design of light standards. Although some people like antique gas lamps ivy-entwined in their front garden, they would not, or have not yet, advocated such appliances for new street lighting. A trim, efficient reflector held aloft on a neat tapered aluminium tube will be accepted without argument by everyone—antique interior decorator and student activist alike. Litter bins, street names, no-parking signs, park benches and all the other paraphernalia of the public domain likewise are gloriously free from prejudice and dissension. Everyone is happy if just the same old functionalist approach is applied. Similarly, no one argues about the desirability of clearly marked footways separated from traffic ways.



'Swinger Hill' from Yamba Drive

Landscaping is a little more emotionally vulnerable. Fashion afflicts it. Gum-trees and other native plants were banned from metropolitan regions until 1956. Then quite suddenly they became a trendy gimmick for use in the planting pockets between asphalt expanses around shopping centres or bowling alleys or computer programming offices. In residential suburbia gum trees still tend to be the mark of the rebel, the conservationist, the potential trouble-maker. Also, styles apart, there remains a tendency in conventional suburban private gardens to choose planting which never exceeds arm's reach in height, lest the leaves should block the spoutings. Yet out in the open, in park areas, trees are no longer really contentious. A majority favours them. And aside from trees there is practically no argument at all about nicely laid out lawns and shrubbery. Yet all such minor elements of the well-designed neighbourhood cost money, and demand commitments early in the process of planning, so they are rare. They are, however, an implicit part of all designed neighbourhoods mentioned earlier, like Swinger Hill and the others. We need not worry too much for their sake; proper attention to them, and more and more imagination in their design, will follow automatically all and any moves to revitalise the suburb.

The fourth and last of the necessary changes which were listed above was the change of orientation: a turning away from the nostalgia for a lost history of castles and an elusive dream of idyllic garden suburbia to a realistic view of today's conditions and, if it is not too much strain, a consideration of tomorrow.

For we are, at this very moment, committing the next two generations, at least, to a pattern of living for which they may not care one little bit. We commit them when we plan road and public transport systems, and sewerage, telephone and electrical services; when we plan or fail to plan parks and other breathing spaces in our neighbourhoods. At the best we are, inevitably enough, planning to suit our own requirements as best we can. Yet we all know the alarming rate of change that now besets every activity and, to be honest, we know that even in the best of new neighbourhoods now building there is little or no scope for change to

meet a condition that is likely to come about long before the walls we are building begin to crack with age: a condition which will apply when garden city idealism, and family life as we know it, have passed into history.

No one can be so square or so blind as to refuse to admit that fundamental changes are wracking the cosy old wholesome Australian living pattern. Even the most conventional mums and dads have been made to recognise that their sons' and daughters' tastes are not always identical with their own. How many young husbands for how much longer will accept meekly the tyranny of a meticulous front garden? How many young wives for how much longer will bow to the rule of the kitchen? The answer may be that quite a number will, in each case, for quite some time, no doubt; but there is an ever growing number who do not now conform and never will, if they can help it. These people will look for alternatives, and maybe will demand them. Then the economic law against choice in the Australian suburb may melt before the demand, and the official laws may in turn dissolve gracefully. If not, it will explode. For the days are numbered of the dear, drear suburb whose shape we all know so well and which did so much to shape most of us who are old enough to be bothered to read this sort of essay. It is dead, indeed, already, though it is taking its time in lying down.

It was based long centuries ago by the Good Queen Bess on the then seemingly inviolable, permanent institution of the family. Yet we all know that the family is cracking despite heroic efforts by most of us squarer parents to hold it together. The American anthropologist Margaret Mead, who has been to Australia, asks 'Can the family survive?' clearly believing that it can't. She adds: 'Students in rebellion, the young people living in communes, unmarried couples living together, call into question the very meaning and structure of the stable family unit as our society has known it.' Just the same, *Time* magazine editors, who have not been to Australia, write, 'The US is still probably the most marriage-and-home oriented nation in the modern world.' Of course the US is not that. Australia is, along with New Zealand and possibly some other smaller worshippers of the US who cannot yet keep up with her in such sophisticated activities as divorce. One Ameri-

ican marriage in four ends in separation. In Australia in 1970 there was only one divorce for every ten marriages. Nevertheless, that is a slight advance on 1960. Then there was one divorce for every eleven marriages. The trend is clear, though we are puffing as usual to keep in sight of the USA.

Great stuff

Perhaps the Australian two-generation family will resist the present assault on it. After all, close contact between parents and offspring is still good for both of them for ten years or so, and in some cases for up to twenty years, depending entirely on the personalities involved. Yet the changed and still changing nature of the family—this artificial product of society—has been reflected only very dimly in the containers made especially for it by the building and development industries. In the last twenty-five years there was only that addition of one shower-compartment for the parents, and that space off the kitchen called the family-room. Both of these came straight from the USA. Though flats grew greatly in number during the same period, their plans had only the same facilities as the houses, even more tightly planned; and the respective segregated neighbourhoods of houses and flats changed only by the multiplication of cars in the post-lined and pollarded-tree-lined, all-purpose bitumenised streets.

The options for young people on leaving their parents' nest are only a fraction more open than ever they were. And why? Because the hard, highly competitive big new business of 'Development' fears nothing so much as the risk of pioneering? That is about one-third of the answer. Another third is the unorganised and inarticulate nature of the opposition to the conventional domestic neighbourhood. The numerous people who are dissatisfied with it cannot say what they would prefer until they see an alternative, and there is not yet a single sizable demonstration for them to see, not in the whole of Australia. Finally there are the many regulations and by-laws of states and municipalities which are designed, consciously or unconsciously, to preserve forever the Australian neighbourhood, immutably, in the form described in the first two paragraphs of this chapter, as if choice of living style were a dangerous quality to let loose in society.