

## BACK DOORS TO TOORAK

Not so many years ago Australia was all suburb and it seemed that there was only one kind of residence : a suburban villa with five rooms. It used to be said that flats were for foreigners: the Australian demanded his garden, and his privacy. Whatever changed this attitude - New Australians or counter-attractions to the gardening hobby - flats have now won a place in The Australian Way. Flat building is booming, racing ahead of all past statistics, while the villa construction program seems almost bogged down in the unmade streets of the outer suburbs

In the busiest, smartest areas of the bigger cities hardly anyone builds houses any more. This is obvious to anyone. What is less obvious is the extent to which the flats are creeping away from inner areas to comparatively remote and once-cosy backwaters of the suburbs.

Nearly one in three dwellings now under construction in Melbourne is a flat, many of them in suburbs six or eight miles from Collins Street. In Sydney, which still has more flats than all the rest of Australia put together, the proportion is higher. Nearly 10,000 flats started building in Sydney last year.

The flat growth has been creeping up steadily for some years, but the present remarkable boom is quite new. Melbourne, for instance, built about a thousand flat units a year in the 1950s. In 1960 she doubled that figure, and in 1961 doubled it again. This year she will step up the rate again by some 3,000 units, making a total of about 7,000 under construction. In the same period of five years the rate of ordinary house building hardly changed in Melbourne.

Perth is the most flat-conscious of the other cities. She is actually building fewer separate houses now than she was ten years ago, but four times as many flats.

I know that statistics can be twisted to prove almost anything and I have not tried to minimise the drama of this spectacular change in our housing habits in the above selection of figures from Federal and State statistics. Nevertheless the key basic fact is crystal clear : in the whole of Australia today, including country towns that have never seen a flat, nearly one in every four dwellings being built is a flat, not to mention the old houses that are being subdivided into more flats. Ten years ago only about one dwelling in forty was a flat.

The legal devices which permit occupiers to own their own units pushed the swing to flats, but this practice is waning now. Most flats being built are for renting. Housing Commissions have built up the figures and have given official status to Australia's swing to flats in their big blocks, typified by the Victorian Commission's impressive ventures in pre-cast concrete - 20 and even 25 storeys high.

One of the greatest attractions of the flat, however, is that it can give a "good address" to an economical home, a back door into the best suburbs.

Town-planners and architectural reformers used to plead for flats. The public opposition to them was considered the biggest stumbling block to better development of our cities, the main reason for the

continuing sprawl out into the backblocks. Propagandists showed pictures of beautiful Swedish cities with neat, tall white blocks well spaced out on rolling lawns and rising a storey or two above the tops of the copses of birch trees.

But now that the brave new world of community apartments is here, it seems to have changed. Where are those white walls, the lawns, the trees? Where, for that matter, is a single bush around the base of the new private Australian flats? It would be hard to find. Practically all the open ground around each new block is concrete. It is required for cars, to comply with regulations covering parking.

Somehow the reformers of ten years ago always pictured that the flats, if and when they came, would be impressive major constructions controlled by architects, and would be internally planned for comfort and externally designed for the enhancement of the community.

It didn't turn out like that at all. The great majority of buildings represented in the expanding statistics are small blocks of a dozen or so units closely fitted on to allotments which would not have been considered very big for a single house a few years ago.

In many cases they are not designed by an architect or anyone in the building industry, but in effect by the building regulations - translated by a member of a new profession or craft, known as the Developer. He plans to the edge of the regulations. He takes the building Code's minimum health standards as his own maximum economic limits. He has taken the place in society of the old spec builder of houses

For instance, in Melbourne the State's "Uniform Building Regulations" permit a bedroom to be as narrow as 7 feet 6 inches and allow a shower in a flat, in lieu of a bath. Thus, in many flats, planning begins with these axioms : a bedroom is 7 feet 6 inches wide and a bathroom has no bath.

It follows that any flat with a bedroom 8 feet wide is known as a Luxury Flat, and one with an actual bath is called a Home Unit.

Other regulations determine the construction and even the shape of the building. For instance, a three storey building may have a light, economical steel roof, but a four storey one must by law have a concrete roof. Thus nearly all blocks are not two or four but three storeys. Again, regulations do not demand eaves or any other sunshades; thus the box of huge windows (windows are cheaper than brick walls) is as unprotected from the sun as a hatless bald man.

Then the regulations restrict the building to occupying no more than half the land. Thus nearly every block occupies half its land to the nearest square foot.

The regulations also require 300 square feet of open ground per flat. This determines the number of units that will be permitted on any block. A rule of thumb in the business has accepted for some time that the economic rental or selling-price of any flat can carry up to £1,000 as its share of the land cost - but no more. Thus the value of land offered for sale in a Desirable Residential Area is simply calculated mathematically : the number of units it will hold plus three noughts.

Following similar minimum rules, an almost scientific design formula runs through every detail. Thus Developers are able to get net building costs per square of these three-storey blocks down to about the level of the cheapest cottages. By these means the flat boom is making some satisfactory livelihoods, but no spectacular fortunes, and some unhappy losses. It is a tough game. Tenants are choosy, even if you are offering them a home in Toorak, S. E. 2 , for only £8. 10. 0 a week.

The bald box which the formula leads to is not in itself conducive of civic ugliness. Sometimes the face it turns to the street is made up with hideous contrasted panels of coloured bricks, pierced blocks and wriggles of wrought iron. But in the hands of a builder with taste, who selects good colours for his bricks and paintwork, and allows a tree or two of the old garden to remain, it can be thoroughly attractive.

One pity is that there are so few like this. And a greater pity is that there are even fewer people prepared to go a little further and break the formula, to produce not just the cheapest flat possible but one with some contribution through imaginative planning to the improvement of urban living.

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