

ROBIN BOYD, THE ARCHITECT, PINPOINTS A DRAMATIC CHANGE IN AUSTRALIA'S WAY OF LIFE

THE FLAT REVOLUTION

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 bobby—flats have now won a place in the Australian Way. Flat-building is booming, racing ahead of all past statistics, while the villa construction programme 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-again 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 3000 units, making a total of about 7000 under construction. In the same period of the 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 sep-

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arate houses now than she was 10 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 40 was a flat.

For rent

The legal devices which permit occupiers to own their own units pushed the swing to flats, but this practice is waning now. Many 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 apart-

ments 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 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.

For comfort

Somehow the reformers of 10 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



Flat-building is booming—even in outer suburbs

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 seven feet six 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 seven feet six inches wide and a bathroom has no bath.

It follows that any flat with a bedroom eight feet wide is known as a "luxury flat," and one with a bath is called a home unit.

Other regulations determine the construction and even the

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 £1000 as its share of 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.

For profit

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 and even if you are offering them home in Torpak for only £8/10 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 colored bricks, pierced blocks and wriggles of wrought iron. But in the hands of a builder with taste, who selects good colors for his bricks and paint-work, 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 create not just the cheapest flat possible, but one with some contribution through imaginative planning to the improvement of urban living.

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 hapless bald man.

Then the regulations restrict the building to occupying no more than half the land. Thus