

A NEW HOME STYLE DUE THIS YEAR

Behine the latest deflating statistics and the economists' predictions that the housing boom is declining stands the image of a rather complicated box of bricks and windows, capped by a fractured pyramid of roofing tiles, standing in a little allotment of lumpy clay and rank tufts of grass: a new house. To the economists it is one formless unit in about a hundred-thousand which Australia demands and somehow still manages to provide each year. To most Australians it represents the inevitable shape of home. To about 200,000 people annually, many of them migrants, it is a symbol of hope and a happy marriage and a family and their future in the Australian Way of Life. And there are other views of it. To town-planners, the sprawl of these boxes, multiplying like old-time rabbits in the paddocks around all our cities, is a major headache. Some sociologists see it as a sort of matriarchal five-roomed millstone that weighs down the spirit of young Australia.

Many architects and artists and people who like to pride themselves on their visual task deplore the gaudiness of the box itself and the ugliness of it when it gathers in groups around the telephone and electric poles, having first rid the neighborhood of all native growth. To many builders it is uninspiring bread and butter business.

Loved or deplored, the Australian house, or home, rides the waves of the statistics imperturbably. It has hardly changed since the early 'fifties when it was a major political issue. With stolid fortitude it has endured and overcome practically all attempts to make it cheaper, more convenient, more presentable, more Colonial or more American or more modern.

That is the fault of the Australian house (although it is clear that some people don't consider it a fault): an awesome stodginess,

Any such generalisations must exclude the houses that are carefully and individually designed and built for specific owners. But these represent less than one per cent of the total. The ordinary product of the housing industry is the last monument to the old, isolated, anti-expert, back-yard phase of Australian industry.

A rule of the thumb may be applied to the development of the shape and style of the Australian house during the first half of the twentieth century: it changed every ten years. Also it was always ten years behind the model it

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was copying. (This model was at first English, in the so-called 'Queen Anne' period, then American, then in the 'thirties vaguely Continental.) But all the changes were decorative and superficial, and at heart it remained the same little knot of rooms made in the same way with the same materials.

The last attempt to change it was just ten years ago. In 1955 the "Contemporary" style was launched by a few builders. This, of course, was recognised by wide windows, a longer plan and a low, low roof. It was a mortal enemy of the heavy roof tile which Australia had adopted from Marseilles seventy years earlier and now used more than any other place in the world including Marseilles.

Accompanying this style change ten years ago was a much more significant attempt to modernise the ancient habits of building. Several builders embarked on partial prefabrication. They standardised one or two designs, pre-cut the timber in the factory, and gave the results brand names.

But that attempt to change the Australian home seemed to be a little too sudden and too drastic. It was only a qualified success. Certainly some contemporary brand-name houses are still semi-prefabricated and are doing well. But all that happened to the great mass of housing was the acquisition of a new set of marketing gimmicks as meaningless as grandpa's fretwork. The brick and tile -covered knot or rooms remained virtually unaltered, except that it opened its eyes wider and bathed itself in new vivid colours.

However, the spec builder who made it now gave it some rather sumptuous names, like 'The San Fernando', and began calling himself a Developer. In the course of this shuffle some of the smaller spec builders went under, and those that remained found it necessary to be more capitalised than before. But still the obsolete Australian house did not change. It plodded on: nearly a million more in the old style have been built since that last unsuccessful attempt to modernise it ten years ago.

Now, in accordance with the almost infallible rule of the century, another attempt to revise its shape and style is due in 1965. But will this come? There is little or no sign of it just yet.

To be fair to the Australian house it must be said that most new single houses the world over are obsolete. About 1945 prefabrication promised a revolution the equivalent of that sparked by the T-model For. (Remember the Beaufort House? It was tooled up ready for mass-production but was killed

for political reasons.) All over the world prefabrication failed its promise. Partly because the prototype houses were not good enough, cheap enough, soon enough, and partly because of buyer resistance to mass production. Most people still want to house their Holdens in personalised carports.

But still the Australian house has nothing to be proud of in comparison with the American house - and what else would it want to be compared with? The American house, though almost as stodgy as the Australian in style is far more generous in planning and infinitely more adventurous in equipment. It may cost about twice as much, but this only means that it takes an equivalent proportion of the average salary. In any case, one inspection of the kitchen or the second bathroom of an American house indicates where the extra money goes. Again, although it can be as fussy and gaudy as the Australian, the American house is not offered for sale until the lawn and a couple of trees are in. It is just that much more civilised.

The Australian house resists change in the face of overwhelming reasons to change. The average house offered to those 100,000 hopeful couples or young families each year falls tragically short of what it should or could be in this age of advanced technology and mass education. It is the barest, meanest shelter, while there are so many known additional amenities and delights it could be offering.

The minute proportion of houses being specially designed for richer or less-conformist people demonstrate some of the things that all houses could have when the Henry Ford of Australian housing eventually comes to light: carefully planned interiors making the most of every inch of space, kitchens which are efficient little factories, adequate shade, real temperature control, a private bathroom for each section of the family, and so on and so on.

The Australian house is reprehensible for its lack of such amenities: its plain lack of consideration for the people trying to make a happy home inside. What is wrong with the Australian house is not just that it offends some artistic sensibilities. Typically, the Australian house is not at all ugly. With good colour and a garden it can be one of the best looking vernacular houses in the world. Its trouble is that behind the plastic light-shades and the vivid paint on the eaves it has failed utterly to keep up with technology and to adjust to

our less formal ways of living in this half of the 20th Century. It is still a 19th Century concept, a shoddy substitute for a modern house, and a mean deal for Australia's trusting young marrieds.

TOMORROW: What the Australian Home needs.