

WHAT EVERY HOME SHOULD HAVE

When architects, sociologists and other trouble-makers criticise the inadequacies of the ordinary Australian house, and call for more modern design, there is every chance of misunderstanding. Unquestionably the term 'modern house' has a poor public image. To many people it means too much gloss, not enough roof, and some off-beat alphabetic plan shape.

But even if this sort of house is popularly considered outlandish, it is also considered rather smart, in a science-fiction way. And so if Australia were to change her popular house style now - in response to the call of fashion which seems irresistably to demand a change every ten years - then she would be likely bowing towards this popular image of a modern house: all glass and flat roofing and S, O or E-shaped plans.

And if this happened it would confirm the rule which applied earlier this century: that in every ten-yearly change the Australian house remains ten years behind the fashion. For the funny-shaped glassy box - is no longer advocated by those who would reform the obsolete Australian house.

The essential reforms that are necessary have nothing to do with style or taste, and only indiscreetly would affect appearance.

Australians have not given up riding behind horses because the style of these gold lines and floral transfers on the black laquered jinkers were out of fashion. The jinker itself suffered a blow. And any fiddling about today with the style of the ordinary tiled-roof knot of rooms that is the average new Australian house would be like trying to make a horse and cart up-to-date by fixing chromium strips along the sides.

The Australian house needs a radical change, and not of style but of heart. It should provide more and better arranged space, more and better co-ordinated equipment, more comfort and more dignity and more happiness by those who spend their lifetime paying for it.

It should, for instance, provide two bathrooms as a matter of course: one for the children, one for the parents. This seems to be a minimum requirement for maintaining family harmony. The single bathroom belongs to the days of the country pub with a communal bath at the end of a passage/

It is true that some of the more expensive houses now available offer alternative bathrooms or shower rooms, but often in a parsimonious way. One "brand-new" house is advertised "With your own luxury shower room off the master bedroom." This is strictly honest; the bedroom has a

compartment with a shower, but nothing else in it. Australian house buyers accept this sort of thing because they have been intimidated by the aristocracy of the plumbers.

The ordinary house should have provision for living outdoors. When the familiar little knot of rooms with its internal passage were first devised last century, it seems that they did not like to wear slacks and sit outdoors. So today we are not allowed to. Certainly our builders now offer houses that are full of gestures to the idea of outdoor living. Sometimes there are french windows from the livingroom on to a raised front terrace, on which any extroverted intending outdoor-lover would be presented to the passers-by as on a heated tray.

Other builders, more conscious of privacy, erect a concrete-block grille or a corral fence between the terrace and the street. One Melbourne standard house, out to attract the barbecue set, adds a length of about ten feet of open-board fencing at one side of the front of the house. Behind this, it seems "the livin' is easy" and convivial models can enjoy patio parties, and can sunbake "completely private", for the "patio" doubles as "your own boudoir garden". But the advertisements don't show the flies, and if Australian house designers have any challenge that is not shared by their colleagues in California, whose advertisements they study so carefully, it is the fly. Years ago in the country our grandparents answered this challenge directly and simply with a fly-screened veranda. More recently numbers of houses designed by architects for individuals have shown how to make this insect-free pocket of fresh air less prison-like. A wind-screened "outdoor room" is planned into or on to the house somewhere. The timber supports for the fly-screening are part of a garden treatment. The top is open to the sun, but insect-screened. In many parts of Australia in summer some such arrangement is essential to make outdoor living or dining tenable.

The ordinary house should not have a tight, closed plan. Nearly every young owner has the experience of finding that his family gets bigger after a year or two in a new house; and later it contracts again. The house should welcome new rooms, and later on the owners should be able to detach and trade-in their extra unwanted bedrooms on a new airconditioner, or a Drysdale.

But the meanness and the obsolescence of the ordinary house is seen most clearly in the kitchen, the room that should be reflecting the technological

revolution of this age. Certainly this room has lately seen one or two improvements. Since the first Sputniks went up it has gained about two feet of cupboards. Sometimes now it runs to a double-bowl sink, and in the really "luxury" houses it is likely to adopt the most inconsequential of all American kitchen devices of the last 20 years: the wall oven, installed where there is now all but built into some plywood pylon made specially to receive it. The inadequacy of the average modern Australian kitchen is especially obvious and painful because its owners know better. They see better kitchens in the American magazines and in the situation comedies on television. Intimidated still, they believe that such luxury is not their lot and they accept 18-inch narrow benches and ill-assorted equipment floating in open grease pockets between ill-fitting cupboards because nothing is co-ordinated or planned in advance.

This is not necessary and is not good enough. Australia makes good kitchen appliances. But they are only co-ordinated with the cupboards in such a way as to transform the kitchen into an efficient and attractive cooking machine once in a hundred houses. This is largely because of the method of home finance which is official Australian policy.

The Reserve Bank rightly controls booms by limiting house finance. By some ancient folk lore certain objects are approved as being part of a house and therefore subject to the same finance. Built-in wardrobes are, obviously enough, in this category. So is a cooking stove, and, more mysteriously, a hot-water service. But other items of built-in equipment are not accepted. So the home-builder arranges separate finance through various H.P. stores to acquire haphazardly his refrigerator, washing machine, dryers, heaters, and the other pieces of machinery which he, reasonably enough, considers to be part of a modern house.

The triumph of the American house by contrast, is its all-inclusive package deal. It is a complete modern house when offered for sale. This permits the designer to co-ordinate all his equipment with the structure and the cupboards and the plumbing from the beginning of planning.

The ordinary house should have proper temperature control. Big windows certainly, but properly orientated and adequately shaded from the sun. But on top of this, the ordinary house in this day and age should have airconditioning. Not the noisy window units, but silent central heating and cooling.

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All these and numerous other amenities that are familiar outside the home in our push-button technological society should be available in the ordinary house to the ordinary Australian wage-earner.

And this is quite feasible. Houses incorporating many of the above devices and other aids to a civilized life could be manufactured in 1965 at about the same cost as the average unequipped suburban box of brick and tiles.

It could be done by mass-production, by standardisation, and by production-line factory techniques for all the complicated bits - methods that are applied to practically everything else we make in Australia.

This would certainly mean that the low-cost house would lose some of its ancient rights. Large interior parts of it would be standardised, although the overall plan would vary within limits.

Why doesn't this industrial revolution of housing occur? It was first forecast in about 1905. But it is postponed because of a stalemate between cautious potential buyers and hesitant builders or manufacturers. In each case the blockage is largely caused by conservative visual taste. The buyers are looking over their shoulders to Dad-and-Mum's house, and the builders are looking to irrelevant California.

The revolution must come some day, but not this time. Maybe in 1975, at the ten-yearly change in Australian housing taste. This time it looks as if we'll have to be content with a swing away from those violent colours.