

THE RAPE OF NAREEB

This report really should not be written for at least three months. There is a good old sportsmanlike rule that one should not criticise any work until it is finished. And the work I have in mind is not finished, but then in three months it will be a different story altogether.

I refer to the work under way on the old estate called Nareeb, in Kooyond Road, in the quiet heart of the capital of Australian privilege and grace : the high hilltop of Toorak, in Melbourne. You may recall that the old mansion called Nareeb, built in 1888 but hidden from public view for decades behind a high fence and a forest of exotic trees, was thrown open to the public for the first time last December. Miss Gertrude Simmone, the last of the old ladies who had lived as recluses in it had kied earlier in the year, leaving the estate empty and ripe for subdivision. The National Trust made a small fortune from two-shilling admission charges as thousands of visitors satisfied their curiosity, if not their artistic sensibilities in plodding over every inch of the grounds and the mansion and the stables where stood a vintage Rolls-Royce tourer. Inside the house they found the Victorian era preserved as in aspic against the passage of time, complete even to gas lighting.

Most visitors agreed that the house was quaint rather than beautiful. The National Trust was not very interested in it. The consensus was that few tears would be shed if the house had to go before the march of progress, but that some beautiful parts of the big garden, where wide lawns swept under great shady trees, made the pilgrimage worthwhile.

Today the first half of the work of "redevelopment of the Nareeb estate has been finished. Three-quarters of the grounds are denuded. Across the entire frontage of some 500 feet to Kooyong Road, to a depth of about 100 feet, the old garden has been shaved clean to the ground.

With the exception of a rather ragged scatter of old pines and one or two other small trees at the extreme ends, not a single tree or shrub, no blade of grass, has been left by the bulldozers. It is a dusty desert. In the middle of the devastation, backed against one corner of the old garden that is still left crowded with pine trees, the old mansion stands embarrassedly naked to the street. But its agony will be short lived. The wreckers have it half-demolished already.

This report is not only premature; it is also really

a non-report. I have deliberately avoided enquiring for the facts. I do not know who was responsible for the destruction of the trees, nor what will be built in the dust. The piles of cream and red bricks are ~~in~~ uncommunicative as yet. Thus I feel freer to discuss the single fact which assaults the passer-by's eye so violently: the total destruction of the whole of the huge old front garden to make way for some investment building.

There are two kinds of inartistic or irresponsible behaviour^F which contribute to the pretty little mess we are making of this country. One is positive. It is bad building. The other is negative: the needless destruction of natural or historic relics to make way for building. I'm inclined to think that the latter is the worse of the two; the more uncivilized, the more hopeless.

I recall especially, as many visitors to Nareeb will recall, a magnificent Blue Spruce in the front garden, about eighty feet high, looking like the grandfather of all Christmas ~~tree~~ trees with the tips of its huge but delicate blue branches lightly sweeping the lawn. It has gone with the rest.

Two things are worth noting about the practice of tree-destruction. One is ~~ka~~ that the way we do it is almost exclusive to Australia. Certainly an American tract builder working on a thousand-home estate doesn't have much patience with trees that got in his way. But the value of trees - the value, that is, in dollars - is far more generally appreciated by the roughest builders in the U.S.A.

Secondly, it is a cruel practice. It is cruel because it shows no consideration for the people who eventually will live on the redeveloped land. The absence of native trees in outer-suburban estates does not mean that the average Australian dislikes native trees. He is very rarely given a chance to express his likes or dislikes on the subject. The trees usually go even before his builder arrives on the site. Their removal was the first improvement of the land made by its first Developer.

Now, in the case of Nareeb, let us consider who will be living there eventually when the piles of cream and red bricks have formed themselves into home units of some kind. Because of the location and the value and the environment of the land it is pretty safe to say that the average occupier will be well to do, middle-aged or over, comfortably settled and quite cultivated in her or his tastes. Would she or he not appreciate a few of

the missing trees? Do people of this kind prefer a shadeless row of west-facing bald buildings (however beautiful these may turn out to be) to shade and greenery and dignity? Of course they don't, but they will buy what is offered eventually because nothing better is ~~offered~~ offered to them.

I wonder if I can make this point clear to those who resent my criticisms of the Australian suburbia in which we are all happy to live (there being no urban living in Australia). It is good, socially. I could be better : more comfortable, convenient, beautiful. It is stopped from being better mostly by the ignorance or rapacity of some of the manufacturers of the home product, but they get away with this only because of the innocence and undemanding passivity of most of the consumers.