

OF FEATURES, BOOK REVIEWS AND THE ARTS



The old garden, where lawns once swept under shady trees, has been shaved to the ground.

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 Koovong 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 died earlier in the year, leaving the estate empty and ripe for subdivision. The National Trust made a small fortune from two-bidding 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 a 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 Koovong 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



The house had preserved the Victorian era, even to the gas lights.

THE RAPE OF NAREEB

It took the best part of a century for the trees... and only days for the bulldozer to tear them down. **ROBIN BOYD** reports that this is the cheap way to prepare a site for building.

prety little mess we are making of the look 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 uncivilised, the more hopeless.

Giant goes

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 trees with the tips of its burs and delicate blue branches lightly sweeping the lawn. It has gone with the rest.

What a lot of fuss I make about an old strip of garden, only parts of which were beautiful! But it is symptomatic of a practice of a certain kind of developer — not, thanks be, of all developers — which should have died out about the time compulsory education came in. In the inner suburbs they rip out old imported trees. In the outer suburbs they destroy the native trees like so many weeds.

I can see absolutely no possibility of there being an admirable reason for the almost total destruction at Nareeb. No reasonable economic exploitation of the land would have demanded

the removal of so many trees. A number of the scrawlier old pines no doubt were expendable, but a first-year drafting student could have planned a reasonable maximum coverage of the land by new buildings, without trampling on all the more beautiful specimens. Even two or three of the better trees could have been preserved. But the thing to be understood in most cases like this is that the object is not reasonable economic exploitation. Complete destruction by the bulldozer is the cheapest way to prepare

land for new construction, and quite evidently no other but the cheapest way is considered. Two things are worth noting about the practice of tree-destruction. One is 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 get 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 United States.

Second, 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 be-

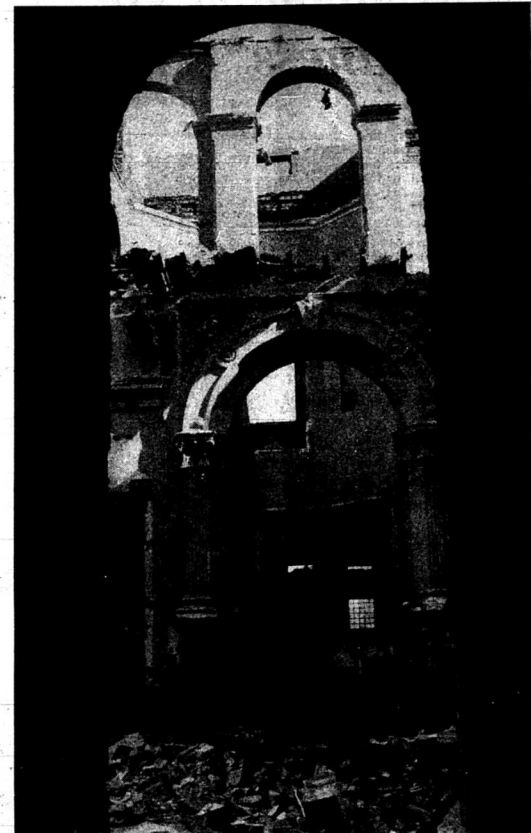
fore his builder arrives on the site. Their removal was the first improvement of the land made by its first developer.

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.

Shadeless

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 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. It 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.



The mansion, built in 1888, was quaint rather than beautiful.

THE ANSWER IS NOH

THE Australian Ballet, which opened its farewell season in Sydney this week, before the company's first international tour, is now of age.

This young company of gifted and disciplined dancers will carry the flag to London and other centres and will surely confirm its status as a ballet company of memorable charm, vigor and grace. The current season's programmes consist of revivals, classics and two new ballets — *Le Conservatoire*, a Danish classic to music by Paulin, and *Yugen*. Robert Helpmann's new creation — perhaps the most exciting achievement from the company so far.

Mr Helpmann's programme note informs us that he has choreographed *Yugen* for the Australian Ballet "in the belief that this young company should draw on the legends, music and cultures that are their neighbors, just as the English ballet has drawn on the countries of Europe."

Yugen, a simple story freely adapted from the

Japanese Noh play, *Hageromo*, tells of the nocturnal visits of Tsukiyomi, a moon goddess, to bathe in a lagoon on the earth.

When a ballet as beautiful and fragrantly tender as this comes our way, it does not matter overmuch what have been the sources of its inspiration. If the purpose of the Noh is neither to portray a story nor to set a moral, but simply to express beauty, a principle which has ordered this work, then only evaluation is called for. In this instance, Helpmann ambitiously seeks to represent in ballet form the principle of *Yugen*, a Zen Buddhist concept of beauty undefined.

New ballet forms and styles permeate *Yugen*. The work of dancers, choreographer and designer (Desmond Heeley) emerge as a tantalising conception of vibrant, ecstatic ballet, wondrously counterpointed by the Japanese composer Yuzo Toyama's richly atmospheric score.

Kathleen Gorham as the moon goddess and Garth Welch as Hakuro, a fisherman, dance with a command and faultless precision.

FRANCIS EVERES.