

# 'Come Over to Paddo'

By REYNER BANHAM

IT is the privilege of innocents abroad to put their foot in it. Often some off-the-cuff criticism of an apparently small point turns a welcome guest into an undesirable alien. To cause a stir by praising the wrong thing is a less common achievement, but I found that it could be done when I was in Sydney earlier this year for the architects' convention. In all innocence I praised the nineteenth-century terrace houses, in which the city abounds, and at once I found that I had roused very mixed feelings indeed, culminating in a television interviewer's direct challenge: 'Dr Banham, is it true that you approve of slums?'

Looking back, it is difficult to say which were the more interesting, the terraces or the mixed feelings; but the situation of which both are part will bear thinking about. I knew (without having visited Australia) that the nineteenth-century architecture there boasts some of the prettiest cast-iron detailing in the world, and I saw some choice isolated examples of it as soon as I landed at Perth. But in Sydney it is not isolated; the first morning I was there, a couple of friends took me out to view the architectural scene, and as their fast car swooped and snarled (all Sydneysiders are Jack Brabhams at heart) up and down the switchback roads of the city, I was astonished to see serried ranks of cast-iron balcony fronts built into an architecture of which the world knows almost nothing.

These rows of terrace houses represent one of the most sophisticated architectural vernaculars the Commonwealth has produced—and also one of the most simple. They are usually two-storeyed and built on a plan that closely resembles the English 'tunnel-back', with its two rooms up and two rooms down and a tail of sculleries and so forth at the back; yet it differs from its English counterpart in the treatment of the façade. The party-walls between the houses are brought forward, sometimes as much as four feet, to support the ends of the balcony. The roof is brought forward to the same extent, and usually brought well down over the upstairs windows, like a hat pulled well down to shade the eyes. In fact, shade is the basic aim. As in a modern *brise-soleil*, the two horizontal projections—balcony and roof—give shelter from the high midday sun, while the projecting party-walls on either side give shelter from the 'light that kills', that low evening sun which is, for some reason, so much more of a problem in the southern hemisphere than in ours.

But this façade in a picture-frame is also an architectural element that can be assembled with others like it to form a convincing terrace, even when it has to step, house by house, up or down a hill—and in Sydney most of them seem to do just that. But, better still, each picture-frame can contain a façade of a different colour without destroying the continuity of the terrace. Most of the terraced areas like Paddo—the familiar Sydney term for the Paddington district—are now sixty or more years old and have suffered the vicissitudes of fashion; as a result, the colours

in a single terrace may range from peeling ochres and ruined umbers, romantic as a Venetian palazzo, through the horrors of 'Grocain and Grocen', to surprise pink, chrome yellow, and blue-and-white as crisp and hygienic as the styling of a washing machine. The projecting walls between one house and the next keep each colour neatly compartmented, as in a child's paint-box, so that the architecture is not blown apart by the contrasts; a bright autumnal light bathed them that Sunday morning, and the whole scene had the unaffected gaiety that we tend to think

of as a Mediterranean speciality. No architecture-fancier from northern Europe could fail to be captivated by such a combination of order and spontaneity. So I praised them.

I got my 'come-ounce pretty soon. 'Come over to Paddo, Doctor' cried one of the other speakers at the Convention. He was a well-known Sydney lawyer and said he had a vivid recollection of some thirty-five years ago when he spent a couple of hours in a terrace house arranging the funeral and sorting out the affairs of a remittance man. 'I don't think', he said, 'I was ever in a

gloomier, worse ventilated, more uncomfortable place, less suited to the climate in which we live; and I cannot really see how it can be said that long, narrow structures, completely enclosed on two sides, with small doors and windows only at front and back . . . are in the least suited to our climate'. He spoke with authority for there are indeed tiny, broiling back-rooms that no air ever reaches because their windows look out, not on to shaded balconies, but the brick walls of alleys barely thirty inches wide. There is no doubt that many of the terraces are slums. Their back yards have been overbuilt in a manner that is unknown in British tunnel-backs, so that overcrowding is compounded by an excess of rooms to overcrowd. Yet the terrors of the back yards are increased by another factor that is so obvious as to be downright subtle.

The terrace I have just described is the ideal terrace, facing north, toward the midday sun. But even in the hilliest parts of Sydney, a street usually has two sides; for every terrace that is correctly oriented for the sun, there is another facing it that is the wrong way round, the sun beating on its exposed backside, its elegant screening on the front no more than window-dressing or status-seeking.

So, in praising the terraces, not only for their aesthetics but also as a self-conditioning human environment, I was 50 per cent. wrong, and in damning them as slums, affronted Sydneysiders were 50 per cent. right. But, worse than this, in suggesting that any form of habitation could ever be better than a quarter-acre lot in the suburbs I was questioning a basic tenet of Australian life. This was not accidental: the theme of the convention was 'Architecture and Human Behaviour', and I believe, like Jane Jacobs in her sensational book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, that high-density living, properly designed, leads to better patterns of human behaviour than suburban sprawl does. For me,



'Now she hasn't any time for the likes of us wot live in a mere semi-detached!'—a cartoon from the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* of May 22, 1962.



the image of a Sydney terrace as a sociable society is epitomized by a group of dads in a neighbourly cluster around an elderly Holden car that had expired, like a wounded bull, in a pool of its own oil, with small boys filling the gaps between the men and drinking in the exchange of paternal wisdom.

Such a scene would be unthinkable in the Sydney suburbs—it would take too long to gather the group together—and I think Sydneysiders have lost something valuable in drawing apart from one another. They have also destroyed something valuable—a heroic landscape of fiords and hills clad in a woodland flora that, to European eyes, is as alien as the Venusian forests beloved of science-fiction writers. And they have wrecked it for the sake of a suburban vision that can only be described as tawdry. To say this is not just Old Country snobbery—this is the epitome of that Australian Ugliness that Robin Boyd (no Pom-mie, he!) has castigated in his famous book\*, pretentious shacks tricked out with every gimmick that can be borrowed and misunderstood from the modern architecture of the world. So ubiquitous and tireless is this 'featurism', as Boyd calls it, that it finally devalues even the good modern architecture of the suburbs, of which there is a good deal.

Yet, when you come to look at it closely, the outstanding fault of all this madly fashionable suburban housing is that it repeats, almost in detail, the mistakes of the despised terraces from which the suburbanites have fled. Again and again one saw picture-windows placed on the street front of the house when the view was at the back; placed there, presumably, to be seen by the Joneses, commanding only a prospect of the Joneses' picture window on the other side of a heavily trafficked free-way. It is not for me to speculate why Australians should have developed this mania for conspicuous occupation of quarter-acres of wide-open space, usually without main drainage, but there were signs that some of them were beginning to wonder if they had not sold a priceless birthright for a mess of cottages.

Neither of my friends happens to live in a terrace house, but they took me to see them, and also to see those pedestrian arcades that are one of the glories of Sydney. These marvellous cast-iron extravaganzas, with shops on one, two, or three levels, with elaborate balconies and often generously scaled staircases, have survived and flourished in Australia while they have been destroyed in Europe, and provide much-needed pedestrian spaces in the centre of the city. I doubt if we are in for an arcade revival yet, but I could not help noticing that in some of the terraces we visited the cars at the kerb were not clapped-out heaps, but shiny new Porsches, Jaguars, and the inevitable Volkswagen buses that are the trade-mark of 'progressive' families the world over. Here, when the mothers called their children, the names were not Joanie or Sidddy, but Adrian and Fiona, and the paintwork was in current shades of sludge, effete blues, keen yellows, or stark black and white. Opinion-makers and style-setters, journalists, architects, show-biz people and enlightened civil servants had started to move in. You do not have to be a great expert on urban moods and fashions to recognize the signs of an area about to become compulsively attractive, and it looks as if many Sydneysiders will come over to Paddo in the near future, clean up the terraces, clear out the back yards, and revive the terraces in the way that inner-ring areas in a number of our big cities have been salvaged by fashion in the last few years—I suppose Canonbury is the classic example, as well as the first.

I may, in fact, have innocently said the right word at the right time. I don't suppose anyone will remember me for it, or thank me, and I don't really mind. What I do care about is that the lessons of the rise, fall, and recovery of the Sydney terraces should be learned and understood. For the world at large they are a model object lesson of the pendulum of architectural taste: men creating a close urban pattern as a relief from the pioneer emptiness of their continent; then creating a wide-open suburbia as a relief from the high density life of the town; and now returning to close-packed urbanity as a relief from a sprawling suburbia that is, in some ways, as much a desert as the Nullarbor plain.

But for Australians the lesson is of a closer and more detailed kind, a warning against façade architecture, a warning against superficial judgments about what makes slums, a warning against following fashion without stopping to think what is really at stake. The flight from the terraces was, I suppose, one of the symptoms of post-colonial adolescence, a manifestation of that persistent Australian determination to keep up with the Jones nations, much as emerging African states doggedly build themselves hopelessly unsuitable glass-walled office blocks just to show that Ghana Jack is as good as his former white master.

It would be tragic if the return to the terraces were an equally irrational mistaking of shadow for substance, an exchange of the forms of suburban life for the external trappings of urbanity. This time, someone must solve the problem of the terraces that face the wrong way, of the sun that shines on the back of the house. If back yards must be built in—and garage space is visibly a problem in Paddo—then there must be ways of doing it without making stinking alleys and furnace-like courtyards. This, in its turn, may call for radical revisions in the manner of using the house, including turning it upside down and living on the first floor with a platform built out over part of the back yard.

All this is possible; the sort of people who are moving back into the terraces are, by definition, the adventurous ones, and the skill needed to work out new solutions capable of damping down the idiot swing of fashion is there. Not only are there very good architects working in Sydney, but the convention also showed that there is first-rate talent to give advice—climatologists, psychologists, and other scientists deeply interested and deeply involved with problems of human habitation, and a first-rate experimental building station just outside the city, and a department of architectural science in the university. The terraces could be the scene of a rehabilitation operation that went far deeper than smart paint and a face-lift, and Sydneysiders could then cry 'Come over to Paddo' in a very different tone of voice.—*Third Programme*

*The New Architecture of Europe* by G. E. Kidder Smith (Penguin Books, 10s. 6d.) is a detailed study of what are considered to be the finest post-war works in sixteen European countries. Private houses are not included, but churches, office-blocks, factories, schools, public buildings, and the more important housing projects are described, analysed, and illustrated.

*A History of Architecture in and around London* by Walter H. Godfrey (Phoenix House, 42s.) is a second edition of the book which first appeared in 1911 under the title *A History of Architecture in London*. It has, of course, been extensively revised and expanded, and contains over sixty plates and almost as many plans and line drawings.



'Featurism' in an Australian street: an illustration from *The Australian Ugliness* by Robin Boyd