

## SOME ASPECTS OF DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE IN QUEENSLAND

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It may seem strange that a History student should tonight be speaking to you on architecture—and perhaps I shouldn't. But for the last twelve months I have been attempting to write a thesis on "Cultural Developments in Queensland." During that time the term "culture" for me has evolved from connoting merely the "pure arts" to embracing a whole way of life. Taken in this light I have been able to consider the artistic developments from the point of their significance in the whole social legacy—as being indicative of the nature of the dominant social group, if any, and of the values that prevail in our community. The cold chronicle of political incidents and economic statistics do not tell the whole story of a nation's development. It was, therefore to the fields of literature, art, music, drama, and architecture that I went to fill in the picture of our social development. Australia was settled overwhelmingly by immigrants from the United Kingdom. Naturally, they brought with them a cultural heritage from the old country which could not be incorporated entirely into the national life of this "new land". The interest of my thesis was concentrated on tracing the moulding by Queenslanders of an Anglo-Saxon heritage in a different social, economic, and physical environment; thus tracing the growth of a truly indigenous culture—a culture to which the reader, the listener, the visitor might point and say, "That is Australian."

Just as a Labour Prime Minister indicates the stage of political development a nation has reached, so the novels, the houses, the songs of a period are the record of the everyday life as it is lived, or has been lived, not by Prime Ministers alone, but by ordinary human beings who are the raw material from which history is shaped. Architecture is one art that touches us all every day. It is perhaps the acid test of a nation's adaptability. Men must build shelters long before they begin to write or to paint, and though the

immigrant will try to transplant here the architectural styles he is familiar with from the home land, he will not be able to reproduce exactly because the pressure of climatic conditions and the availability of material make themselves felt from the start.

The first Governor of Australia was an unusual combination of the visionary and the practical man of affairs. His plan for the first settlement did not stop at a vision of log cabins, but he drew up elaborate plans for a great and beautiful city. But, Australia's first architectural plan was not executed because of a crisis in housing. Nearly two centuries later, a crisis in housing is still preventing any nobility of architectural development. That Housing should decide and determine the development of architecture here does not seem extraordinary to Australians. Few of us are aware that Australia is outstanding as possibly the largest individual house-owning community in the world; and Queensland, of all the Australian States, is the largest house-owning State in proportion to her population.

Figures from the 1947 Government Year Book show the following percentages of owner-occupied homes to total dwelling in each State:

New South Wales	.....	.....	58.1
Victoria	.....	.....	60.8
Queensland	.....	.....	70.9
South Australia	.....	.....	64.2
Western Australia	.....	.....	63.8
Tasmania	.....	.....	60.5

The first settlement in Australia was made before the big shift to the towns was very far under way in England. Most of the early settlers were familiar with private homes rather than tenements. Despite the growth of industry and urbanization, the convention of private homes laid down in the beginning has firmly entrenched itself in the Australian way of life. This is not to deny the existence of flats and boarding houses, but to say that such buildings are always considered as temporary occupation by the vast majority of their occupants. It is the medium and small suburban home which has been the predominant feature of this half century. The origin of this characteristic

probably is explained by the circumstances in England during the period of the establishing of New South Wales. Australia was being settled during the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution. The Revolution in industry was accompanied by a Social Revolution bringing about a general levelling of society, and a higher average standard of living. There were still great distinctions in wealth, but society did not fulfil the Marxian prophecy of the "ever-increasing poorer and poorer." The large majority of Australian working men to-day certainly own more than their "labour". It would seem to be the aim of almost every Australian working man to one day own a home of his own. It is perhaps significant that clause 5 of the Preamble to the Australian Labour Party's most recent Federal Platform states:

"The Australian Labour Party believes that the security of the family should be the primary aim of the Government. This is best attained by freedom from unemployment, home ownership . . . ."

Australian domestic architecture reflects pre-eminently an egalitarian society. It reveals itself in its uniformity and its adherence to the dictates of economy. It is these two aspects which are commented upon by overseas architects visiting here. A European doctor of architecture<sup>(1)</sup> remarked on the uniformity of Australian housing, particularly in Queensland—a uniformity of materials (hardwood and corrugated iron), a uniformity of design (stilts and verandahs), a uniformity of ornamentation (elaborate facades and cast iron railings), and finally, a uniformity of colour (beige and brown). The uniformity may be extended to garden layout. An American Professor<sup>(2)</sup> described it as a "levelling without the peaks". Doctor Langer suggested that this style was adopted partly to adjust the house to the climate, and partly in imitation of certain features of the English upper class—the huge gate, the central flower bed and palm trees, reminiscent of the grounds of a mansion together with the elaborate steps, stone vases on either side, and finally, the kitchen with its association of domestics, was relegated to the back.

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1. *Doctor Karl Langer.*

2. *Professor Burchard.*

Many of these homes that were "the thing" in 1900 still stand, their incongruousness in modern society emphasized when they become tenements or offices. Some typical examples may be seen in Tank Street, lower George Street, along North Quay and the older parts of Brisbane. One classic example is "Binna Burra" in George Street, of red brick, ornate with stone scroll work, mass produced in English factories and imported in bulk by the Australian colonists apeing their English "betters".

While there was this slavish devotion to the British styles, Queensland, by 1900, had already exhibited a distinctive development. Beside, the two storied brick and wooden structures in the Georgian style—plus the front verandahs. For examples: Ashton Hall in Bonney Avenue, Clayfield; the old University, George Street; old homes along Coronation Drive. There was also the one-storied, simple timber-framed construction on stilts surrounded by verandahs. W. Bunning has written of this style:

"It is obvious that these houses raised on piles completely free underneath, of simple framed timber construction, with the decisive deep-shadowed character given by the surrounding verandah, could, by clearly reasoned sensitively handled design, become Australia's first contribution to world architectural development. Unfortunately, Brisbane architects seem to have swung away from this development to adopt the trivial passing fashions of the more urban cities."

Bunning was writing in 1941, and the between wars period had seen the indiscriminate imitations of European and especially of American housing designs along with its jazz and cinema. The overseas periodical and housing magazine flooded the market and did much to prevent the development of a truly indigenous style. At the turn of the century there were definite suggestions which I have already mentioned, of a design which could, in time, have been made more aesthetically pleasing, but when the printed page became so freely available there was a frantic desire to be up to date with overseas styles and an equally frantic fear of appearing "colonial". But the mushroom growth of unverandahed Tudor and Spanish bungalows

was not really so prolific in Queensland as in New South Wales and Victoria. There are certainly examples of them in Brisbane, but in the main, the timber framed house on stilts was preserved but little attempt was made to improve it. One change that might be significant was the general closing-in of verandahs. Originally designed to glade the walls and rooms from the heat, verandahs were now needed for living purposes and were shut in. And although Queenslanders begin to feel sensitive about the stilts, there is little intention of doing away with them because once again they do afford extra space. Underneath the house can be used as a garage, storage and laundry space. There is a great deal to be said in favour of the last argument even if scientists do prove that actually the extra height makes very little real difference in humidity and breeze.

It is since World War II that the most important developments have taken place in architectural progress here. The development is closely linked with the improvement also in training facilities for architects in Queensland. The Queensland Institute for Architects had been founded in 1888. (A similar institution had been established in New South Wales and Victoria in 1871, and South Australia in 1886). But one had to be a qualified architect to belong to it and until 1935 only a diploma course was available at the Technical College. The four year College evening course was recognized by the Board of Architects as qualification for registration in Queensland, but was not sufficient for admission to the Queensland Institute of Architects. In 1925 Mr. Cummins, now Professor Cummins, recently returned from study overseas, was appointed lecturer at the college and he started to make improvements in the course to raise the standard with a view of securing recognition by the University of Queensland.

In 1937 a diploma course was established at the University, and in 1947 a six-year day and evening degree course was commenced. In 1950 there were fifty students enrolled in the degree course and sixty doing a diploma course.

These extensions and improvements in training facilities have already had obvious repercussions on

Queensland domestic architecture. It is also significant that more people are now able to afford to consult an architect, a natural result of a prospering and growing community. The previous practice was only too often to economise by cutting out the architect in order to spend more on the actual building, and so prospective owners consulted builders with cuttings from overseas magazines irrespective of climatic conditions here. Private homes to-day are particularly the realm of these younger architects and they are displaying, according to the experts, a keen sense of both functional and artistic demands. Characteristics of the contemporary style show greater consideration of climate, site and cost; a greater use of colour; more exploitation of materials and variety in use, though the majority, for reasons of economy still build in timber.

But the architect has to earn his bread and butter, and like the writer, in danger of being dictated to by public opinion. In the last few years there have been significant attempts on the part of architects to educate public taste. Since they have to give the people what it wants, then they intend to make the people want what is good for them. This awareness of their responsibility was amply demonstrated by the Australian Architects' Convention, sponsored by the Queensland Chapter of the R.I.A.A., held in Brisbane in 1952. Its purposes were "to bring architects together as a group for the exchange of ideas and discussion of mutual problems, and by bringing architects and laymen into closer contact, to demonstrate to the latter the value of the architect in the community's life". The exhibition was held at the City Hall and was visited by 60,000 people. Organized study groups and lectures were held for the architects. The fact that such a successful Congress could be held in Brisbane speaks for itself of our progress in this field.

There has been a tremendous demand for housing throughout Australia since the end of the war. The demand is far in excess of the materials and labour available and the result has been government restrictions and regulations. But far from stifling progress these very restrictions have stimulated development. They have called for a whole reorientation of ideas in step with modern society. The result is the "com-

pact home" suited to a sub-tropical climate, designed to eliminate unnecessary labour. The spacious sprawling mansions with even their degree of adaption to the climatic conditions, were still reminiscent of a different social pattern in which domestic labour was freely available.

In housing, as in so many other fields, Queensland exemplifies aspects of the "Social Service State". The Queensland government has been responsible for housing schemes, for public hospitals, and for State Schools. Queensland, in fact all Australia, can be justly proud of its hospitals, and in this field, Queensland is no runner-up. Brisbane boasts of the largest public hospital in the Southern hemisphere and a second is under construction. Professor Burchard wrote: "Every Australian city of any size has one or more hospitals of the first class, measured by any architectural standard, buildings which dominate the towns just as cathedrals did in days of yore."

It is in the domain of private homes that the government assistance has been of greatest significance. Already in 1900 one might say there were roughly three main groupings according to incomes: upper, middle, and lower. The few in the upper income bracket were able to arrange their own finance and employ their own architects to design individual homes. (This is the group who in 1900 were responsible for the two-storied verandahed Georgian reproductions; the "reduced castles"; and the more spacious "homestead-style home). The middle group were able to buy a block of land and succeed in building comfortably, usually in wood, through building societies and banks. But in the lower group, private investors became wary after the over-speculation which brought the Great Depression of the 1890's in its wake, and so the State Government found itself responsible for homes just as it had for the railways.

Early in this century the various State Governments enacted legislation "to establish State or semi-State authorities with power to make advances or to assist persons of limited means purchase or erect homes for personal occupation." In 1909, Queensland State Advances Corporation was set up and the Workers' Dwelling Act passed to enable the Govern-

ment to assist persons in receipt of small incomes to provide homes for themselves. Operation of this Act began in 1910. It provided that any person who was not the owner of a suitable residential site, who was not the owner of a dwelling house in Queensland or elsewhere, and who, at the time of making the application was not in receipt of an income of more than £200 a year, could apply for an advance to enable him to erect a dwelling house on his land for himself and family. Since then the Act has been consistently amended making the maximum annual gross income limit £750 in 1943.

The Act of 1909 was supplemented by the Workers' Home Act of 1919. Parliament passed the last Act with a view to enable those persons to secure a home with as small a cash outlay as possible, who owing to their financial circumstances were unable to contribute the deposit necessary for a "worker's dwelling". Owing to the high cost of building at the time no action however, was taken to put this measure into operation. The Act was amended in 1922 to provide for model suburbs and building commenced in February, 1923.

"Courier-Mail", 20/10/53.—"Since the Workers' Dwellings Board came into operation in 1910, more than 26,700 Queenslanders have acquired their homes under the Government's several schemes. And more than 20,400 have liquidated their indebtedness."

Another Queensland State Government housing scheme was the Building Revival Scheme of 1932, inaugurated to assist in the relief of unemployment.

After the first World War, Queensland shared in the Commonwealth War Service Homes Commission—designed to assist returned servicemen to erect new dwellings, or to purchase dwellings already erected. This Act is still in force and provides "homes for Australian soldiers who served during the 1914-1918 war or during any war in which His Majesty became engaged on or after September 3, 1939—including service in Korea and Malaya."

All this government housing assistance has contributed greatly to the general appearance of uniformity presented by the over-all picture of Queensland



homes, particularly so when the government design has changed little in the course of fifty years. It allowed for a simple timber framed construction, usually on stilts, and lately minus the verandah. The last invocation is once again a matter of economy. There are now a few basic designs for the government's "model suburbs", some allow for modest brick bungalows, but these are more common in the Southern States. The regular construction in Queensland is in timber.

Besides the government schemes there have been some notable privately sponsored settlements. The most familiar to Brisbaneites is the Chester Housing Schemes at Mt. Gravatt. They are all built in timber, on low stilts, no verandahs, and with tiled roofs.

To sum up then, what has the last fifty years of domestic architecture in Queensland to tell us of an historical background, our social pattern, and our artistic sense? In style, in 1900, we were still reproducing pretentious miniatures of English upper class mansions. Throughout fifty years the more conservative functional Queensland home developed, and the between war period saw the mushroom growth of Tudor cottages and Spanish bungalows giving the landscape an air of unreality and quaintness. In most recent years, indigenous and overseas contemporary designs have been fused to produce a home for Queensland at once functional, economical and aesthetically pleasing.

Throughout, I have stressed the "uniformity" of our domestic housing. Just as the heroes of our literature have consistently been the "little men", in turn, the convict, the bushranger, the miner, the shearer, the drover, the small selector, the town labourer, so too has this working class put the characteristic stamp on the general impression of our homes. While the architecture of all Australia reflects a fairly average level, the levelling is most marked in Queensland. There never were in Queensland, founded fifty years later, the spacious, elegant homes of the English squatterocracy in New South Wales; nor the town villas of Greenway's stamp; and now while we have an Ascot, Sydney boasts of Killara, Vaucluse, Darling Point, Rose Bay, Point Piper. But if Brisbane is not as old, nor as wealthy, as

the Southern capitals, neither has it its dire poverty and consequences of greater and too quick industrialisation. We may have Spring Hill but it is not to be compared to Redfern, Darlinghurst, Woolloomooloo or Surrey Hills.

Since the visitor often notices the peculiarities which the occupants of the house neglect, I think it is not a waste of time to quote a long passage from Professor Burchard's observations during his visit here in 1951. It brings home to us just how far our buildings have been dictated by considerations first of cost, and then by our overseas heritage.

"This costal landscape, sometimes wrongly called monotonous, is in fact, one of the most beautiful in the world. There is a great roll and swell to the land. There are dry seasons almost everywhere so the ground will be californian brown part of the year. The blue but cloud-filled sky casts an ever-changing dust free light, an amazing light, on the variform contours which, because of their colour, are readily modelled. The trees, sometimes in clumps, but often free standing, have enormous structure easily revealed through the diaphanous leafage. This is true whether they are the ubiquitous gums or the brilliant but less prevalent figs. The coloured trunks, a muscular, sensuous grey for the fig, a gleaming white for the gum, white to the very finger tips of the tree, these trunks are things to look at. Even burned over areas recover rapidly and have their own eerie power. All is at once soft and powerful, entrancing and frightening.

"The palette is subtle and superficially serene . . . . blue grey leaves, stronger yellow notes of wattles and blooming silky oaks . . . . accents of scarlet of the flame trees . . . . purples of jacaranda, lilac wistaria.

"You would think that Australians who love this beautiful landscape would try to bring it into their houses through proper windows. But this has not seemed important to most of them. You would think too, that they would not like to affront this landscape with ugly red bricks, red or blue corrugated iron, mottled roof tiles or a stone of too busy veins. But they do not seem to mind . . . ."

“We have not minded because the first thought in building a house in Australia, where the average working man is a home owner, has been one of cost. Aspects of aesthetics have stayed in the cupboard. Where the potential owner had more money and was style conscious, he imitated overseas traditions, evidently regarding them as having some snob values, and the most obvious were those they had been familiar with in the old country.”<sup>(3)</sup>

We might well ask what has held Australian Architecture back? Though there is a shortage of materials it cannot be only that. There are more materials in Australia now than Australia's best architect, Francis Greenway, had to use in 1810. Therefore, it is at ourselves we must look. Our buildings betray our adherence to a philosophy of egalitarianism, and this is quite different from equality of opportunity and can have disastrous effects for aesthetics. The general architectural taste of Australia is best described as lower middle class British suburbia. There is a sameness about it all, not squalid, but generally ugly. Compared with America, the big moments of the American cities, even of a hundred years ago when she was the same age as Australia is now, are finer, but the range there, it must be admitted, is from the marvellous to the dreadful . . . . still there are the redeeming peaks.

This is not to say that Brisbane has no fine buildings. As I already pointed out, Queensland has every right to be proud of its hospitals, but still the fact that we do boast, given half a chance, that our “City Hall is the finest in the Southern Hemisphere”! surely betrays our own surprise at such an achievement from Queensland. We have not the peaks of fine monuments and foundations because the government of Australia have had always to think of housing first. This demand has taken so long to meet, that it has helped to prevent directing attention to more artistic achievements. The fate of Governor Macquarie set an early precedent for our statesmen who might be tempted to “extravagance.”

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3. Professor J. E. Burchard, “*Architecture in Australia*”, *Architectural Record*, August 1952.