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Abstract

In an age of increasing mobility, the house signifies stability. Its living spaces may seem a sanctuary, or a prison, or both at different times. Representing an achievement of men and women as makers, houses stand somewhere between the tent and the castle in the great chain of dwelling places, with aspirations generally expressed towards the latter. For at least a century, Australians have been majority suburban dwellers. Australian houses have generally been stand-alone structures, and the spaces within and between them are constituent elements in the identity of their inhabitants. There is an economics and a politics, but also a poetics of space which can be applied to housing.¹ Creative writers often negotiate the limits of the various spaces they have inhabited, especially when they attempt to re-forge the houses of their childhood.

BRUCE BENNETT

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In the history of Australian literature, the house signifies a rupture in the persistent British Victorian tradition whereby the fortunes of a family are forever stabilised and given palpable form. Henry Handel Richardson's trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* best represents this rupture, revealing the deep instability of the protagonist in his increasingly restless buying and selling of temporary dwelling places; in this respect he never leaves behind the tents of the goldfields. For some nationalist writers of the 1890s and later, the old bark hut signifies a distinctive vernacular answer to the British aristocratic tradition. By the mid-twentieth century, when Robin Boyd was writing *The Australian Ugliness* (1952), Barry Humphries was imbibing his source material for *Moonee Ponds* and Patrick White was brewing his *Sarsaparilla*, Australian suburbia was under attack. Post-war reconstruction was seen by many Australian artists and intellectuals to be imposing a false uniformity over Australians: elements of the middle-class had turned on each other and themselves. Eric Rolls sums up a more general view of houses at this time:

Australian houses impose on the landscape. Suburban houses line up along the streets, lawns shaven, windows washed, roofs trim, doors closed, as though mustered by drill sergeants. 'Squad, atten-shun! From the right, number!' How many councillors would approve a house built back-to-front? They would fear it might fart at them.

Country houses are collections of coloured boxes dropped in paddocks. They could never have grown up out of the soil. Dwellers in them are not so much protected as parcelled up.²

The metaphors here indicate the writer's sense of the unachieved ideal of an organic relationship between house and land. Instead, houses have become merely commercial products. More ludicrously, they mimic the uniform attitudes of armed forces in a war which has not been left entirely behind. A more ambiguous set of attitudes is conveyed in Randolph Stow's novel *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965), in which Hugh Mackay's postwar assimilation into suburbia is presented as a working-class desire for comfort and security and as a cop-out by his wartime mate Rick Maplestead, whose restlessness reflects that of many artists and intellectuals in the post-war years.

The suburbs and their houses had their strongest apologists in the 1970s including Hugh Stretton, Donald Horne and Craig McGregor. One result of their persuasive revaluations has been a more receptive audience for serious literary accounts of childhoods in 'ordinary' suburbs and country towns. Above all, the Australian house could be seen to play a legitimate part in the shaping of individual lives. In this context, the destruction of a house may seem a desecration of memory and identity. Hence one of the most representatively shocking scenes in contemporary Australian writing is the calculated burning-down of a house in Frank Moorhouse's discontinuous narrative, *The Electrical Experience*.³ Moorhouse's protagonist, George McDowell, a figure based on the prototypical male of the author's father's generation, is named as an executor of an old friend's will in the New South Wales south coast country town where the narrative is set. He is given the task of burning down the house; it is a test of his will that he should carry through this commission from his dead friend in the face of opposition from the town. Moorhouse's graphic rendition of the event demonstrates his awareness of its significance not only for the individuals concerned but also as a symptomatic cultural event. McDowell's determined drenching with kerosene of furniture, books, paintings and even stamp albums is seen by him as a test of his own 'character' and determination. When the conflagration occurs, no trace is left of his former friend's family who had lived in the town since it had been incorporated as a municipality. The objects of memory, of a history, are obliterated. In the context of Moorhouse's later writings, the burning of the house has a deeply ambiguous set of significations: the writer's fascination with motels, pizzerias, rented cars and airports as vehicles of urban anonymity and mobility reinforce his sense of the passing of an age of the family house as repository of history in the postmodern age. However, Moorhouse's alter egos recurrently resist the erasure of memory and history and are snubbed by the Balmain bourgeoisie, among others, for doing so. Ejected from a fashionable commune in Balmain, a Moorhouse alter ego

plaintively asks: 'Is there a commune for people who do not fit very well into communes?'⁴

In spite of the pressures of post-modernity, the living spaces of houses remain a potent area of investigation for many Australian writers, especially in their exploration of identity formation in early childhood (an area into which Moorhouse has not yet ventured). A recurrent site of such investigations is the verandah or its later variant, the sleepout. Fiona Giles's collection of stories by nineteenth century Australian women, *From the Verandah*, takes its title from Ethel Mills: 'She liked to see what was going on; and she said that in Australia most things happened on verandahs.'⁵ In one of the jargons of today, the verandah is 'liminal space', a threshold to the outdoors world of men, the outback or adventure.

In late twentieth century fiction and autobiography too, the outer reaches of the suburban house are often represented by the verandah and sometimes the enclosed verandah as sleepout. David Malouf's *12 Edmonstone Street* is a small classic in the exploration of identity through re-creation in memory of the child's spatial relationship to the South Brisbane house in which he was brought up.⁶ His recreated memory of the verandah, where he and his sister slept in home-made cots is recalled as being 'beyond our parents' bedroom window, where we are in easy reach':

The verandah is closed on that side by a fernery, or, as I see it, opens on that side into it. Diagonal slabs of unpainted timber gone grey with age are hung with stag horns, elk horns, orchids that sprout from fleshy knobs, and shaggy wire baskets of hare's foot and maidenhair. The ground is all sword-ferns round a pond with three opulent gold fish. Behind it is a kind of grotto made of pinkish-grey concrete, a dozen scaly branches of which, eaten raw in places, droop and tangle like the arms, half-petrified, half-rotting, of a stranded sea-monster. (p. 19)

The underlying drama here is of separation from parents; its keynote is fear. In retrospect, more calmly, the author sees verandahs as 'no-man's-land, border zones that keep contact with the house and its activities on one face but are open on the other to the street, the night and all the vast, unknown areas beyond' (p. 20). Malouf recreates the child as father of the man when he represents him rejecting the cot and refusing to stay there, becoming 'a night wanderer, a rebel nomad trailing my blanket through the house to my favourite camping places' (p. 20). In summary, he sees a mixed pattern of inside-outside in these early, deeply-etched memories: 'Perhaps it is this daily experience of being cast out and then let in again that has made the house and all its rooms so precious to me. Each morning I step across the threshold and there it is, a world recovered, restored' (p. 21).

This reconstruction by David Malouf in his early fifties of his pre-war childhood house is selective, as all such accounts are; it explores the interiors and verandahs of the old Queenslander house of his early childhood but chooses to exclude the brick house to which his upwardly

mobile father from a Lebanese family moved in 1947 when Malouf was thirteen. By contrast with 12 Edmonstone Street, the brick house seems 'stuffy and pretentiously over-furnished and depressingly modern'.⁷ Another Brisbane-born writer, Peter Porter, has explored his childhood and youth in relation to a weatherboard house on stilts in Annerley, which he recalls as part of 'shabby genteel' Australia:

We were on the Ipswich Road, an unlovely ribbon of shops, factories and hospitals winding out of Brisbane on the south side of the river ... Imagine a primitive interpretation of Le Corbusier's ideas, carried out in wood and painted in garish or depressing colours. Our house was only about five feet off the ground in front, but at least fifteen at the back, the ground sloped so steeply. It was mounted on wooden piles, each topped with a metal hat and coated in creosote to deter the white ants.⁸

This house has a schizophrenic history for Porter. Before his mother's sudden death when he was nine, the house opens out to a garden which offered Porter, in retrospect, a prospect of an Australian Eden, with his father gardening and his mother on the back landing shouting the names of horses she wanted to back to the woman next door who would then ring them through to the SP bookmaker.⁹ After her death his self-image is of being cast down and out, retreating to the under-the-house region to solitary, joyless masturbation. Later, as an expatriate in London he lives in basement flats, seeing the city from below, critical of the moneyed élites, a world he transcends in the gods at the opera. In misery, and disappointment, especially, houses and flats share his gloom; gardens are where love and occasional hope are found.

One of the most common characteristics of Australian literary houses is their fragile insubstantiality. Perhaps this is the cue for memory to recuperate them. Like Malouf's and Porter's wooden houses in Brisbane, Dorothy Hewett's and Les Murray's childhood farmhouses in the country are of weatherboard and iron. Of these, Hewett's is presented as more poignantly idyllic because she has left it behind. At the end of her autobiography *Wild Card* she recounts a final return visit to the abandoned house in a denuded landscape near Wickepin in South-West Australia. The sense of loss is expressed in her vision of the trees:

Two almonds, a few figs and one quince had survived. No she-oaks, no wattles, no tea-tree, no paperbarks, no bottlebrush, no salmon-gums, no stables or sheds or post and rail sheep yards, only the concrete dip left like a scar in the home paddock, littered with iron and rusty machinery.¹⁰

There is no need for Hewett to come back again because the 'real' house of childhood remains. There is no need because, in Hewett's words, 'in the Dream Girl's Garden, in Golden Valley, in the districts of Jarrabin and Muckinupin, the first house lies secure in the hollow of the heart'.¹¹

The task of recuperation is made both easier and more difficult for Les Murray by his return to live, with his family, adjacent to the 'weatherboard cathedral' of his childhood near Bunyah, in New South Wales. Romantic loss is thus tempered by realism. Yet childhood remains a recurrent source of inspiration. His poem 'The Sleepout' locates it precisely: 'Childhood sleeps in a verandah room in an iron bed close to the wall.'¹² Unlike Malouf's ambivalent inward-outward aspect in his sleepout in Brisbane, the defining characteristic of Murray's sleepout here is its predominant access to the outdoors, and to the broad freedoms of imagination:

Inside the forest was lamplit
along tracks to a starry creek bed
and beyond lay the never-fenced country,
its full billabongs all surrounded

by animals and birds, in loud crustings,
and something kept leaping up amongst them.
And out there, to kindle whenever
dark found it, hung the daylight moon.

The magic evoked here is expressed as a quality of child-like vision but is stimulated by the architectonics of the common 'sleepout', where access to dreams is a mode of extroversion.

Real estate agents still try to sell buyers their notion of the 'dream house'. Tim Winton has distinguished between houses one can live in and those of which one can dream:

Like most Australians I have spent much of my life in the suburbs. I was raised in the Perth suburb of Karrinyup. A quarter acre, a terracotta roof, a facade knocked out by some bored government architect, a Hills Hoist in the backyard and picket fences between us and the neighbours. It was the sixties and the street was full of young families, State Housing applicants, migrants from Holland and Yugoslavia and the English north - foot soldiers of the great sprawl trying to make our way in the raw diagram of streets we slowly filled to make a new neighbourhood. I lived there happily for twelve years but I do not dream of that house.¹³

Instead, he dreams of the Christmas holiday shack at the mouth of the Greenough River, south of Geraldton. For Winton, the house offers a retreat from the heavy afternoon winds to reading spaces on bunk beds within, but its chief quality is its access to the outdoors, to the sea:

From the front windows you could see out beyond the eyelid of the verandah to the bright limestone road and the rivermouth. Out there, the sand was packed hard and cars could be driven across between river and sea. The surf hammered night and day, never calm, never quietly, blue all the way to Africa.¹⁴

This emergent 'Australian' pattern of childhood houses which offer access to a vivid natural world outdoors is reinforced in the autobiographical reminiscences of Aboriginal writers Jack Davis and Sally Morgan. Davis's childhood house in the 1920s is a 'tiny weatherboard and galvanized iron hut' near Yarloop in South-Western Australia, which his father has enlarged to accommodate eleven children.¹⁵ The boy's living spaces are of necessity in the bush outside the hut, where he is at home with brothers, sisters and friends and a variety of pets including possums, magpies, wild piglets, ducks and bobtail goannas. Early childhood adventures in these spaces represent in Davis's narrative a happy prelude to his tragic separation from family and home when he is sent to the prison-like Moore River Native Settlement.¹⁶ In Sally Morgan's account of growing up in suburban Perth in the 1950s¹⁷ class differences and poverty as well as racial difference are evident. Her family's small, cramped State Housing Commission house is located in working-class Manning which differs from neighbouring Como, Sally realises, when she compares her school lunches of jam and Vegemite sandwiches with the Como kids' salad lunches in plastic containers. While her alcoholic, war-injured father is alive, he commandeers the sleepout and back verandah and the house seems 'menacing' and 'surrounded by all kinds of eerie shadows' (p. 42). After his death she finds comfort and security in the kitchen and the lounge-room where the open fire is stoked and rough beds are made up in the lounge-room. Thereafter, too, she and her sisters venture into the suburban bushland and swamp, adding a variety of pets to the household but (a generation later than Davis and in the more ecologically trained suburbs) returning goannas, tadpoles, frogs, gilgies and other wildlife to the bush. The dynamics of such domestic movements and their human significance deserve further investigation, in such autobiographies as in prose fiction.

It is clear that houses such as the above have become imaginatively alive to those who have inhabited them. Unlike the traditional European novel, these houses do not offer images of wealth or power. Nor do they offer the aesthetic qualities of 'charm'. Their association with childhood however makes them vehicles for the establishment of an aesthetic of innocence, where interior spaces are enlarged as signifiers of identity and the free spirit is drawn outwards to the natural world. With a different emphasis, the *politics* of houses and their inhabitants are explored in inner-urban environments by other writers such as Christina Stead and Helen Garner. Frank Moorhouse explores with a country boy's fascination the possibilities of freedom and independence in inner-city spaces, from private pads to communes. But the representation of houses of innocence in childhood which open onto a natural world remains perhaps the strongest imaginative compulsion in Australian literature.

A major challenge evoked by the literary texts I have discussed briefly here is to link their representations of living spaces with those of human sciences such as anthropology, architecture and human geography.

Clifford Geertz's anthropological emphasis on localism and 'thick description' points in the direction of a deeper awareness of local (including domestic) living spaces.¹⁸ A growing interest is evident among students of architecture in the socio-cultural factors in domestic space and their implications for design practice. For example, Londoners Julienne Hanson and Bill Hillier have used planning documents and literary texts to hypothesize that 'the order which exists in the interior of a dwelling, and the way in which that interior is related to the exterior, are predominantly related to social relations'.¹⁹ This analysis depends on British concepts of class and emphasizes relationship to the street rather than to backyard, garden, beach or bush as in most of the Australian examples I have cited. Interdisciplinary research on urban renewal at the Australian National University brings together architects, town planners, cultural geographers, heritage workers, public historians and others to questions of the value and significance of living spaces.²⁰ Much more serious attention should be given elsewhere to such investigations. If the spaces we construct and live in inform our value-systems and imaginings, as many Australian literary texts indicate they do, these texts should form an important part of such cooperative investigation and research.

NOTES

1. See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958). For an Australian application see Elizabeth Ferrier, 'From Pleasure Domes to Bark Huts: Architectural Metaphors in Recent Australian Fiction', *Australian Literary Studies*, 13, 1, May 1987, pp. 40-53.
2. Eric Rolls, *Celebration of the Senses* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1985), p. 142.
3. Frank Moorhouse, *The Electrical Experience: A Discontinuous Narrative* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974).
4. Frank Moorhouse, 'The Commune Does Not Want You', *Tales of Mystery and Romance* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1977), pp. 134-141.
5. Fiona Giles, ed., *From the Verandah: Stories of Love and Landscape by Nineteenth Century Australian Women* (McPhee Gibble/Penguin, 1987).
6. David Malouf, *12 Edmonstone Street* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985). For further discussion see Martin Leer, 'At the Edge: Geography and the Imagination in the Work of David Malouf', *Australian Literary Studies*, 12, 1, May 1985, pp. 3-21.
7. David Malouf, *Johnno* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 4.
8. Bruce Bennett, *Spirit in Exile: Peter Porter and his Poetry* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 31.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
10. Dorothy Hewett, *Wild Card: An Autobiography 1923-1958* (McPhee Gibble/Penguin, 1990), p. 271.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 273.
12. Les A. Murray, *The Daylight Moon* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1988), p. 18.
13. Tim Winton, *Land's Edge* (Sydney: Pan MacMillan Australia, 1993), p. 8.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

15. Jack Davis, *A Boy's Life* (Broome: Magabala Books, 1991), p. 8.
16. Keith Chesson, *Jack Davis: A Life-Story* (Melbourne: Dent, 1988), Ch. 2.
17. Sally Morgan, *My Place* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987).
18. See Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). The idea of localism as a site of knowledge is further developed in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
19. Julienne Hanson and Bill Hillier, 'Domestic Space Organization: Two Contemporary Space-Codes Compared', *Architecture and Behaviour*, 2 (1982), pp. 5-25.
20. The Urban Research Program at the Research School of Social Sciences, under the direction of Professor Patrick Troy, holds regular seminars on these topics at the Australian National University, Canberra.