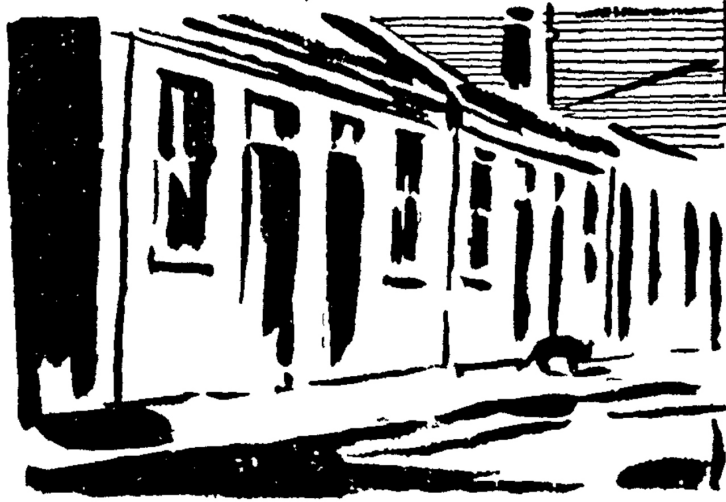


REHOUSING



Slums—City.



Slums—Country.



New Zealand shows the way!

Royal Australian Institute of Architects, *Wanted! A Plan!*, rehousing proposal, showing the New Zealand example, the 1943 Dixon Street Flats designed by the Department of Housing Construction. © Royal Australian Institute of Architects, *Wanted! A Plan!*: post war development, Sydney, Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 1946.

Sunny flats will replace... A congested slum block: Sydney's post war housing improvement schemes

BY NONI BOYD

The present text traces the post war slum clearance program in Sydney, Australia, that saw the construction of modern blocks of flats drawn from international examples of rehousing schemes. This State-funded urban renewal program continued from the late 1940s until the 1980s. Many of the blocks of flats are slated for demolition, yet no overall assessment of their design quality or detailed discussion of the range of building forms or apartment layouts has been undertaken. There is a danger that these well-designed blocks will vanish rather than be retrofitted and that this unparalleled demonstration of modern housing progress by the State of New South Wales will be incomplete.

Until WWII housing for the working classes close to the center of Sydney, Australia, was dominated by two building types, both of which were owned by investors: rows of terrace houses erected from the 1830s until WWI and walk-up blocks of apartments erected during the interwar years. During the 1930s there were calls for wholesale slum clearance of areas of substandard housing and its replacement with modern housing. This desire for slum clearance arose out of concerns for public health.

The Housing Improvement Board, formed by the New South Wales (NSW) State Government in the mid-1930s to replace the Housing Investigation Committee, had identified slum areas in the Sydney suburbs of Alexandria, Darlington, Erskineville, Glebe, Paddington, Mascot, Redfern, Surry Hills, Waterloo and Woolloomooloo.¹ This ring of suburbs surrounded the heart of the colonial city. Whole blocks of substandard housing in the vicinity of Devonshire Street in Surry Hills and to the east of Redfern Park in Redfern were proposed for urban renewal prior to the outbreak of WWII. In 1934, a committee of the NSW Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects had considered a scheme that would have seen an entire block in Redfern cleared and modern housing erected.

To rehouse the people from the areas in the inner Sydney suburbs of Redfern and Surry Hills proposed to be cleared, a housing scheme was erected in nearby Erskineville from 1938, constructed under the 1936 NSW Housing Improvement Act. The Erskineville Housing Scheme, designed by William Ronald Richardson (1890-1972) and Morton Herman (1907-1983), was the first public housing complex in NSW designed according to modernist principles, and was inspired by international developments in the provision of workers' housing.

Conceived of as a demonstration project, this rehousing scheme was based on contemporary ideas from Europe where traditional

street patterns were rejected for buildings set in open landscaped space (...). The modernist ideals embodied in the project make it the primary built prototype for the Post World War II Housing Commission projects.²

This complex survives today and has been supplemented by a series of later apartment blocks, however, only the first stage of the complex has been afforded any heritage protection.

The need for good quality housing for workers had long been an issue that Australian architects discussed. Reports of overseas housing developments could be found in the Australian press from the Victorian Era (1837-1901) onwards. During the interwar years Australian-trained architects on travelling scholarships to Great Britain and the Continent visited European housing exhibitions in Berlin and Vienna, as well as modern architectural developments in Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia. The architectural and popular presses carried reports of the visits by architects, such as Sydney Ancher (1904-1979) and Walter Bunning (1912-1977), to see new forms of housing.

The threat of war saw several Sydney-trained architects who had been working in London during the 1930s returning to Sydney in 1938, bringing with them first-hand knowledge of planned housing estates with modern blocks of flats. Walter Bunning used these ideas in his advice to the Commonwealth Government on appropriate forms of housing for post-war Australia.³ In his book *Homes in the Sun*, published in 1945, he contains a diagram of modern communities based on Scandinavian prototypes.

In *Wanted! A Plan!*, the Royal Australian Institute of Architects' proposal for post-war redevelopment in Australia, an example of high-rise housing in New Zealand, was illustrated as showing the way. A multi-story block of flats was shown as a prototype for rehousing those currently living in small-scale housing erected during the previous century.

Although not identified by name, the multi-story block illustrated is the Dixon Street Flats in Wellington, New Zealand. This building is under threat of demolition, yet the influence of the design of the block, as a model for post-war housing beyond New Zealand, has not been fully identified.

Whilst there were numerous published ideals for modern housing and planned communities in Australia, including planning schemes prepared in 1948 following council amalgamations in Sydney that would have seen entire suburbs vanish, the continuing post-war building material restrictions resulted in key projects such as electricity generation plants, schools and hospitals taking precedence.

The scale of slum clearance initially envisaged in Devonshire Street and Redfern proved beyond the capacity of the Sydney City Council, whose boundaries had recently been expanded to include Redfern. During the interwar years it was the local government (i.e. local councils) that was largely responsible for the provision of housing. Dr. John Smith Purdy (1872-1936), the Sydney City and Metropolitan Health Officer commented in 1936 that “no Government (...) has yet realized that housing the low-est-privileged was a collective responsibility.”⁴

The NSW State Government took over slum clearance, establishing a Housing Commission under the 1941 Housing Act that made provision for clearance areas to be gazetted and housing improvement schemes erected. Unlike Great Britain, where areas had been bombed during the war and housing needed to be rebuilt, the erection of modern public housing in Sydney was undertaken as a more gradual urban renewal from the late 1940s until the 1980s by the NSW Housing Commission, later the Department of Housing.

Investigations by the newspaper *Tribune*, in 1947, found that much of the substandard housing was owned by absentee landlords who had neglected to maintain the housing stock as the 99-year leases were due to expire. Their tenants were “ordinary working people with a burning desire to get out of the slums into decent, modern cheap rental flats or cottages.”⁵

The visit of the NSW Minister for Housing, Clive Evatt (1900-1984), to homes in the Redfern area, which he described as being in scandalous condition, where residents lived in squalor and misery, was reported nationally.⁶ The need for slum clearance is not an issue often associated with Australia, as the country was considered to be new, without the problems of the Old World.

The previous year, work had commenced clearing land for the Devonshire Street Rehousing or Clearance Scheme in Surry Hills and on the Redfern Clearance Scheme, clearance of the block bounded by Elizabeth, Kettle, Phillip and Walker Streets in Redfern. Within the resumed area of Devonshire Street 900 people had been living in 241 substandard dwellings. Residents from the slum clearance areas were rehoused in Army Camps in the Sydney area. The Devonshire Street Clearance Scheme was to cost one million pounds and was to be undertaken in co-operation with the Sydney City Council. This new housing complex was to include 15 blocks of flats built on a star plan designed to provide maximum sunlight, air, and privacy.

The latest Swedish ideas in flat design are the basis of the plans... the star plan breaks completely free of the conventional idea that blocks of flats should be huge box shaped structures covering as much of the site as possible (...).⁷

The new blocks were to be surrounded by landscaped grounds including tennis courts and a community center. The architects of the first group of apartments, completed in 1953, were Morrow & Gordon in association with James Aubrey Kerr (1896-1971). Not all the proposed star blocks were erected and a larger multi-story block was subsequently built in the center of the Devonshire Street resumed area. Part of the site was dedicated to a park.

In the Redfern / Waterloo area the urban renewal took place in waves, with a different scale and form of housing erected in each decade by the NSW Housing Commission (and, after 1985, the NSW Department of Housing). The urban renewal was influenced by international architectural developments, which Sydney architects followed closely. The Housing Commission investigated international examples and always sought to improve on what they had seen and ensure that it was a suitable approach for Sydney. At the request of the Minister for Housing, the architect Percy Gordon (1892-1976), who was to design the initial blocks for the Devonshire Street Clearance Scheme, had visited housing estates in England, Denmark and Sweden in 1947, furnishing a report to the Housing Commission in early 1948.⁸

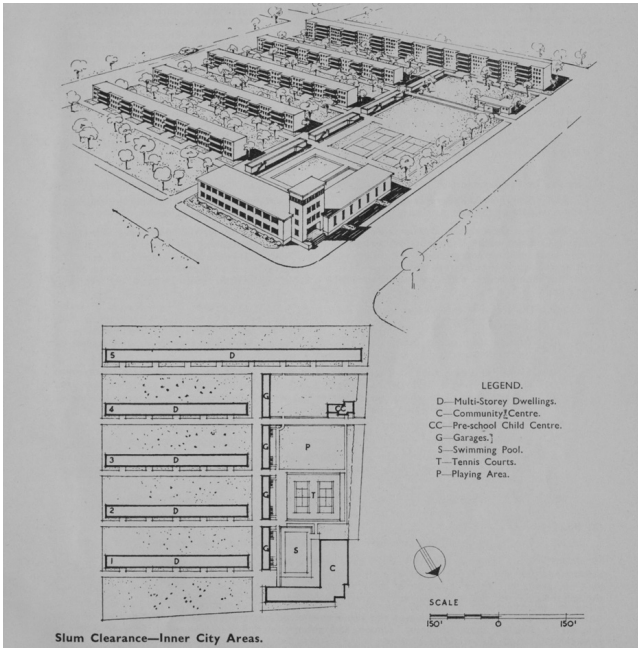
The 1950s saw the start of the progressive urban renewal of the Redfern area. Entire blocks were demolished, and construction began on a series of blocks of flats including two larger blocks – Kyeema and Willawa – designed by Stephenson and Turner in 1952, supplemented by number of the more standard Housing Commission walk up blocks. These standard blocks, designed to be economic in their cost and layout, were developed in close consultation with the commissioners of the NSW Housing Commission.

There was a complete contrast in housing forms between the new blocks of flats being erected by the Housing Commission according to modern architectural ideas and the low scale 19th century housing it replaced. There is, however, little discussion in the Housing Commission's Annual Reports of the architectural character of the buildings erected as part of the Slum Clearance in Redfern beyond the numbers of units erected. The success of their slum clearance program, and the growing demand for flats, saw the Housing Commission continuing to acquire land in the Redfern area in order that ‘modern dwelling units’ could be constructed.

By 1959 “slum clearance efforts at Redfern have now rehabilitated quite a large area and some hundreds of families are now comfortably housed in modern, attractive flats within a few minutes traveling time of the city.”⁹

Larger scale tower blocks were also being proposed and the slum clearance project was extended south into the adjacent suburb of Waterloo. During the early 1960s, two substantial tower blocks were erected, William McKell Place in Redfern (1961) and John Northcott Place in Surry Hills (1963). When completed, the Y-shaped John

01 Walter Bunning, Proposal for Slum Clearance for Australian inner-city areas, 1944, included in his final report on appropriate housing types for Post War Australia to the Commonwealth Housing Commission. © Commonwealth Housing Commission (Australia), L. P. D. O'Connor, Australia Department of Post-War Reconstruction, "Final Report, 25th August 1944", Sydney, Ministry of Post War Reconstruction, 1944.



02 View from Redfern Park showing the different eras of Housing Commission Flats. The Poet's Corner slabs, by Peddle, Thorp and Walker, are to the rear. © Sydney City Council Engineers, 1968, Sydney City Council Archives 022\022151.



03 Morrow & Gordon and James Aubrey Kerr, three-story star plan blocks of the Devonshire Street Rehousing Scheme, Surry Hills, Australia, 1953. The star plan blocks with the John Northcott Place (1963), by Lipson & Kaad Architects, behind. © Noni Boyd.



04 Hanson Todd and Partners, Purcell, Redfern Clearance Scheme, Redfern, Australia, 1971. Current view. © Noni Boyd.



05 Stafford Moor and Farrington, Endeavour Project housing, Waterloo, Australia, 1976. Current view. © Noni Boyd.



06 Morrow & Gordon and James Aubrey Kerr, Lipson & Kaad Architects, Devonshire Street Rehousing Scheme, Surry Hills, Australia, 1950s-1960s. Aerial View of Northcott Place, Devonshire Street, Surry Hills, looking south east showing the NSW Government's Slum Clearance and Rehousing Scheme, bounded by Devonshire Street, Riley Street, Belvoir Street and Clisdell Street, mid to late 1960s. © Surry Hills, City of Sydney Archives, Sydney Reference Collection, Box CSA069597 040/040786, Alternative ID SRC 14390.

Northcott Place, designed by Lipson & Kaad Architects, was the largest apartment building in Australia, containing 429 units and accommodating 1200 people. This block is located within the Devonshire Street Clearance area.

In the mid-1960s, a group of three tall slab blocks known as Poet's Corner (as each block was named after a well-known Australian poet, Kendall, Gilmore and Lawson) was erected on the ridge that separated Redfern from Moore Park. Designed by the well-known architectural firm of Peddle, Thorp and Walker, these slab blocks continue to dominate the skyline of this part of Redfern.

Within the Redfern Clearance Scheme area private architectural firms with expertise in the design of housing were employed by the Housing Commission to design blocks for the more complicated sloping sites and to design specialized forms of housing, such as pensioner housing or "aged units." Purcell (1971) designed by Hanson, Todd and Partners as units for the aged was located within walking distance of the Redfern shops. Each unit has a north-facing window designed to let sun into the living area. The provision of sun-filled flats was a theme that can be traced through each era of housing.

The project that is the most controversial today is the Endeavour Project in Waterloo: four 17-story slab blocks set in a vast area of lawn. Designed by Stafford, Moor and Farrington and erected in 1976, the architects used modular planning and repetitive layouts to lower the costs and construction times. The blocks are all named for prominent locations and explorers from Captain James Cook's voyages of discovery.

The last two blocks of the Endeavour Project were two 30-story blocks for single, aged people: Matavai and Tauranga. Advice was sought from a wide range of experts in the field of aged housing. The Housing Commission noted that:

Two pencil slim towers that have the crowning place in the NSW Housing Commission's Endeavour Project at Waterloo, represent the best and most modern thinking about the way elderly people should be housed to give them the most pleasure and enjoyment as well as safety and comfort in their surroundings.¹⁰

A further series of these 30-story tower blocks were planned to be repeated across Waterloo, however, resident action saw the proposal abandoned and the existing low scale housing stock rehabilitated and supplemented with carefully designed infill. This architectural expression of this new infill housing is postmodern in its character, whereas the lower scale 1950s blocks and the 1960s and 1970s slab blocks clearly followed the tenets of international Modernism.

More recently the pair of towers Matavai and Tauranga has become known for the "We Live Here" installation. Colored lights placed in the apartment windows turned the towers into a work of art, bringing public attention to the removal of public tenants, including long-standing elderly residents, from the public housing in Redfern / Waterloo.

Another more interesting complex, the Drysdale and Dobell blocks in Waterloo, was designed in the early 1980s by the Housing Commission (design architects Tao Gofers and Penny Rosier). The stepped form and generous terraces were intended to be a more human scale than the slab blocks erected during the 1960s and 1970s. A child-care facility was incorporated at the base.

The late 1980s also saw the construction of a series of blocks that collectively received a Civic Architecture award in 1993. Described by the Institute of Architect's jury as being the "finest residential street erected for a century," the series of buildings included Singles Housing (1988) designed by the Department of Housing's Urban Renewal Group, Waterloo housing (1989) designed by Peter Myers (1941-) and the Walker Street Housing designed by Philip Cox, Richardson, Taylor and Partners (1989). These

projects saw a move away from the modernist slab block set within an expanse of lawn to buildings designed with street frontages. This change in architectural character reflected international developments in the provision of public housing that had seen a move away from the tower block form with a single entrance to the construction of new streets of housing.

Today much of the higher density public housing in the Redfern Waterloo area is proposed to be demolished and replaced by new housing stock, designed and erected by developers for the private sector, a trend often referred to as social cleansing (or simply by the broader term of gentrification). The public housing tenants are being removed from the majority of the areas that surrounded inner Sydney, areas where workers had been housed in Housing Commission blocks since the slum clearances of the 1940s and had previously lived in rental accommodation since the 19th century.

Despite international precedents for the retrofitting of public housing blocks, the approach being taken in Redfern / Waterloo appears to be the demolition of many of carefully designed Housing Commission blocks, although little of the proposal has been made public. The Lord Mayor of Sydney, Clover Moore (1945-), and her councilors have protested at this approach, taking the State Government to task over the proposed densities to be created by the new housing to be built by, and for, the private sector with only limited provision for social housing. Whilst some generalist heritage advice has been sought regarding the heritage value of the buildings, the designs of the individual blocks and groupings have not been assessed in the context of the development of modernist planned housing estates or the evolution of public housing nationally or internationally.

The Redfern / Waterloo area is arguably the largest concentration of high-density public housing to have been erected in Australia, with blocks designed by Sydney's leading post-war architects. However, no overall assessment of the design quality of the blocks or detailed discussion of the range of building forms or apartment layouts has been undertaken.

There is a danger that these well-designed blocks will vanish, rather than be retrofitted, and that this unparalleled half century of housing progress by the State that obliterated slum housing providing "modern comfortable flats" will be incomplete. Even at an international level, it is difficult to think of another concentration of public housing of this scale where the development of post-war housing can be traced decade by decade, with the building stock demonstrating first the adoption of ideas drawn from

international Modernism and subsequently, due to resident action, the abandonment of the multi-story slab block and the return to more traditional streetscapes.

Notes

- 1 "Reveals Shocking Slum Conditions", *The Labour Daily*, Sydney NSW, 20th October 1938, 3.
- 2 Michael Zanardo, Noni Boyd, *Affordable Housing Sydney: Architectural Guide Map*, Sydney, Studio Zanardo, 2019.
- 3 Commonwealth Housing Commission (Australia), L. P. D. O'Connor, Australian Department of Post-War Reconstruction, "Final Report, 25th August 1944", Sydney, Ministry of Post-War Reconstruction, 1944.
- 4 "Wipe Out Slum is Big Scheme", *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney NSW, 21st April 1936, 8.
- 5 "They've forfeited right to own slums", *Tribune*, Sydney NSW, 27th June 1947, 3.
- 6 "Sydney's 99-Year Slum Leases Expire Soon", *Herald*, Melbourne VIC, 27th June 1947, 9.
- 7 "'Star-Plan' Flats will Replace City Slum", *Sydney Morning Herald*, Sydney NSW, 29th April 1948, 2.
- 8 *Idem*.
- 9 NSW Housing Commission, "Report of the Housing Commission of NSW for the year ended 30 June 1959", Sydney, NSW Government Printer, 1959, 11.
- 10 NSW Housing Commission, "Matavai and Tauranga", Sydney, NSW Government Printer, n.d.

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- "Reveals Shocking Slum Conditions", *The Labour Daily*, Sydney NSW, 20th October 1938, 3.
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Noni Boyd

Sydney-based architectural historian and heritage specialist. Her areas of expertise are 19th and 20th century architecture in Australasia. She has contributed entries for the *SOS Brutalism* exhibition and catalog, *Deutsches Architekturmuseum*, Frankfurt (2018) and *Australia Modern: Australian Modernism in Architecture, Landscape & Design*, University of Melbourne (2019).