

## History and Current Planning Tasks of Terrace Houses in Melbourne

Haruki MAKIO\*, Daisuke SHINOGI\*\*, Eiichi SUGIMOTO\*\*\*,  
Tetsu TOKUONO\*\*\*\* and Shigekazu SUGIYAMA\*\*\*\*\*

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### Synopsis

People began to come back from outer suburbs to inner suburbs in Melbourne due to phenomena such as inner city revival. The predominant character of the housing stock remains the Victorian terrace house in these inner suburbs. These terrace houses and the terrace areas are re-appreciated because of their historical values as well. New residents start to live in these areas after maintaining and renovating these terrace houses. Such reviving terrace houses would be desirable in terms of anti-sprawling and re-using residential stocks. There are, however, several problems regarding these renovations for there have been diffusion of cars, advancement of technology and changes in lifestyle. Some 100 years have passed since most of these terraces were constructed. In the scope of this archival research are discussed planning tasks of the terrace houses in Melbourne.

Keywords: Inner Suburbs, Inner City Revival, Reservation and Renovation, Terrace House, Melbourne

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Backgrounds

People began to come back from outer suburbs to inner suburbs in Melbourne due to phenomena such as inner city revival. The predominant character of the housing stock remains the Victorian terrace house in these inner suburbs. These terrace houses and the terrace areas are re-appreciated because of their historical values as well. New residents start to live in these areas after maintaining and renovating these terrace houses. Such reviving terrace houses would be desirable in terms of anti-sprawling and re-using residential stocks. There are, however, several problems regarding these renovations for there have been diffusion of cars, advancement of technology and changes in lifestyle. Some 100 years have passed since most of these terraces were constructed.

Surprisingly few academic studies have been undertaken on Melbourne so far in so far as architectural and urban planning. However, Melbourne's city structure is said to be positioned somewhere between an Asian or European transit-oriented city and an American automobile reliant city (Makio, 2003: 169). Terrace houses as a housing style have been studied and most of these studies have focused on the terraces in the UK, of different characters from the ones in Australia as hereinafter described. These papers highlight the design and façade aspects of the terraces while terrace houses as residential stocks in the city have been hardly paid attention to.

#### 1.2 Objectives

In the scope of this archival research are discussed planning tasks of the terrace houses in Melbourne. We begin with the history of terrace houses in Melbourne: how these residential stocks have been accumulated and what the problems of the terraces are regarding architectural planning. Then we launch into a discussion on ups and downs of the terraces and current planning tasks of the terraces.

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\* Student, Doctor Course of Dept. of Architecture and Building Engineering

\*\* Student, Department of Architecture and Building Engineering

\*\*\* Student, Master Course of Dept. of Architecture and Building Engineering

\*\*\*\* Research Associate, Department of Architecture and Building Engineering

\*\*\*\*\* Professor, Department of Architecture and Building Engineering

## 2. Five Styles and Planning Aspects of the Terrace

### 2.1 Definition of the Terrace House

Let us discuss the definition of the term ‘terrace house. A terrace house, which will be treated in this paper, is one designed so that it *does* or *could* form part of a continuous row of similar houses. Technically, a terrace should be a row of at least three houses, but in practice one finds pairs and even single houses with blind side walls<sup>1</sup>. These houses, including semi-detached or free-standing houses, are defined as terrace houses in this paper. Such definition may look too inclusive, but the term ‘terrace houses’ is an overworked one, and used capriciously in Australia as already pointed out. (Turner, 1995: 12, Cutten History Committee of the FITZROY HISTORY SOCIETY, 1989: 88).

It is worth noting that the Australian terrace house differs from its 18<sup>th</sup>-century English predecessors in several ways. In short, a terrace house in UK consists of rows of attached houses of between two and five stories above a basement. They have a dry area and approaches were vertically divided, whereas in Australia these houses may be of one, two, or three stories, and usually approaches are treated horizontally with a semi-private front yard and a private backyard. There is no example of more than three stories plus basement in Melbourne.

### 2.2 History of the Terrace: Five Styles

Here we develop our arguments with 5 paragraphs in chronological order according to 5 different architectural styles. As Howells and Morris (1999: 6) argue, “these five broad architectural styles used —Georgian, Regency, Early Victorian, Boom style, and Federation—cover the period from the building of the earliest terrace houses in Australia until their demise around 1920.”

#### Georgian Style (1820–1850)

Howells and Morris (1999: 16) describe: “The general hallmarks of the Georgian terrace embrace a modesty of scale, discreet use of materials, a chaste application of decoration and simplicity of form.” These Georgian terrace houses were built right up to the street alignment leaving no space for a front garden. The use of the hipped roof in preference to the gable and the appearance of the central hallway suggested a freestanding house rather than the row-house type. Usually, these houses did not have verandahs or balconies and backyards are the spaces only to accommodate a lavatory and storage.

#### Regency Style (1830–1860)

The appearance of the Regency style in Australian architecture marks a highly significant phase in the cultural development of the young colonies for it signals the first attempt to be up-to-date with architectural fashion. In Australian architecture the Regency style was most successfully applied to domestically-scaled residential buildings. “The most important advance in the design of the Regency terrace lay in grafting the verandah from the freestanding house and cottage onto the terrace-house form.” (Howells and Morris, 1999: 32) Still without a front yard, the Regency terrace house differed little from its Georgian predecessor in terms of creature comforts.

#### Victorian Style (1850–1870)

The Victorian age was a period of great economic development and saw a rapid increase in the urban population. In this era, “The early Victorian terrace house (1850—1870) was quickly adopted in most Australian cities as the typical form of housing (Howells and Morris, 1999: 10, 40).” Small but significant changes the plan of the typical Victorian terrace underwent were deeper full-width projecting verandahs, the development of the service or kitchen wing, and so on. The lavatory remained in exile at the bottom of the backyard, close to the back lane and convenient to the night soil cart.

#### Boom Style (1870–1890)

The ‘Boom style’ is most apparent in the increase in size and scale of the houses and the lavishness of embellishment added to them thanks to the great wealth generated by the 1850s gold rushes. (Howells and Morris, 1999: 10)

#### Federation Style (1890–1920)

The financial crash of the early 1890s had a sobering influence on Australian society and its aftermath was a

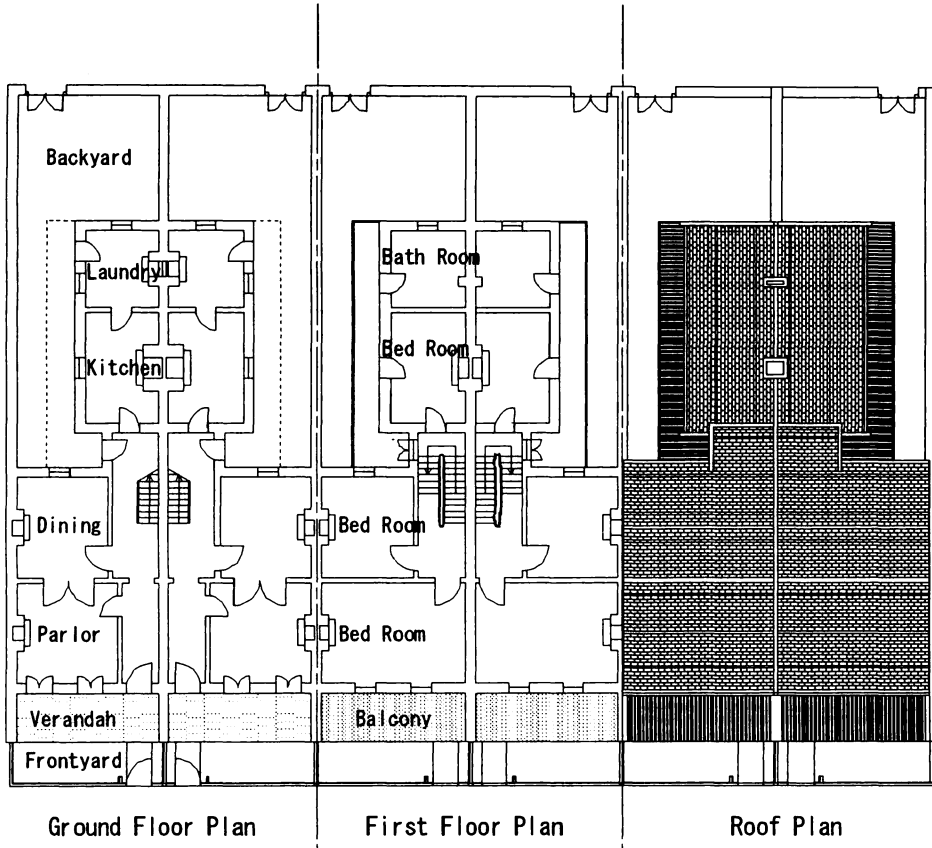
ess ostentatious and more modest legacy in architecture. The Federation terrace was generally more sound than its predecessors and the crusades of the social reformers contributed to major advances in health and hygiene standards of house design. By the 1920s, however, the terrace house was widely regarded as a building type which inevitably degenerated into slums, and as a consequence was outlawed under new building regulations or was superseded by the appearance of the freestanding suburban bungalow (Howells and Morris, 1999: 10, 72).

**2.3 Terrace Houses as Residential Stocks in Melbourne**

Let us examine the plan of the Victorian terrace, which plays a major role as a current residential stock in Melbourne. The figure 1 shows a typical plan<sup>2</sup>. A general set of rooms are a parlor facing a terrace and a dining room and a kitchen in the narrower-width back wing on the first floor and some 2 bedrooms and a bathroom on the second floor. The lavatory was in the backyard, close to the back lane and convenient to the night soil cart.

Regarding site plan, there are a terrace and a parlor facing the street while sanitary spaces facing the back lane. In this semi-private territory facing the street, where residents are able to see what is going on and be seen, rich neighborhood community was fostered. The land was used efficiently in terms of speculative point of view, while residents had noise problem due to shared walls.

As for the plan inside, we are able to point out the problems of natural lighting and ventilation due to the limited technology in those days although they devised ‘tunnel back’ so that these problems were alleviated. As a result of these room-location restrictions, some connections are unnatural such as kitchen-dining, bedroom-bathroom.



**Fig 1 Plan of a Typical Victorian Terrace**

Reference) Cutten History Committee of the FITZROY HISTORY SOCIETY, (1989), Fitzroy: Melbourne's First Suburb, Hyland House Publishing Pty Limited, pp.93

### **3. Rise and Fall of the Terrace and Current Planning Tasks**

#### **3.1 The Fall of the Terrace**

The terrace house lost popularity soon after the World War I. The first reason for this fall was that the advancement of transportation network connected the city and suburbs. Australians obtained large gardens instead of inner city amenities. Accordingly, the terrace areas were deserted and deteriorated. As Howells and Morris (1995: 76) describe, “Until the 1960s the detached house in the suburbs was overwhelmingly favoured by Australians as their preferred type of housing. A growth in public transport systems assisted their move to the suburbs and for the first time trams, railways, buses and ferries allowed citydwellers to live a considerable distance from their work.” After the World War II, when there was a strong tendency towards a automobile city, not much attention was paid to the maintenance of housings in the terrace areas.

Another reason was that people became tired of too much decoration of the terrace. As Turner (1999: 45) explains: “For most Australians, ... , terraces heaped with effusive Victorian ornamentation became a dishonoured and disgraced style.”

In this terrace-fall era, inner suburbs were occupied by the poor, while outer suburbs by the wealthy. Accordingly, as Howells and Morris (1995: 12) describes, “By the 1920s the terrace house was widely regarded as a building type which inevitably degenerated into slums.” Terrace deterioration at that time was terrible and Park (1982) describes, “Smelling of leaking gas, and rats, and mouldering wallpaper which had soaked up the odours of a thousand meals. There was little sentiment for the once grandiose house, which, like its impoverished tenants, had fallen on hard times...”

#### **3.2 Re-appraisal of the Terrace**

Planning authorities who, wished to raze all such ‘substandard housing’ and build concrete blocks of flats in their place in the 1950s. In the 1960s, however, the situation was turned over and the terrace was re-appraised. This reservation- and renovation- has lasted until now has 2 major reasons.

The first reason is immigrants especially from the Southern Europe in the 1950s and the early 1960s. As Turner (1995: 82) points out, they “quickly recognized terrace houses as bargain first homes in their new country. The Victorian houses were re-roofed and further decay and deterioration halted.”

The second reason is that people were disillusioned by a supposed-dreamlike outer suburb life. Howells and Morris (1999: 12, 76) summarizes the situation: A number of outer-suburb residents were disillusioned... the physical distance from the city centre and its attractions, lack of local amenities, and the need for long-distance commuting eventually encouraged many to rediscover the sense of urbanity... and began the flight back to the inner city, rediscovering both the convenience of living close to the centre of town and the charm of the nineteenth-century terrace house.”

#### **3.3 Newly-Constructed Terrace Houses**

Many of Australia’s best architects have created terrace houses for our own times. Under such a situation, “Planning authorities and local councils began to take notice as planning and building regulations were relaxed to permit the reemergence of the contemporary terrace house — a process that has continued into the 1980s and 1990s. Often built in older inner-city areas designated as protected historic precincts. (Howells and Morris, 1999: 12)

These newly-constructed terrace houses would offer comfortable residential conditions with parking spaces and privacy protection. Yet, these constructions in older inner-city areas designated as protected historic precincts brought up some arguments such as harmonizing these buildings with the traditional characteristics. Howells and Morris (1999: 112) point out that this is a problem of how “to create a building in keeping with the area without recourse to poor copies of past styles.”

### 3.4 Renovations and Current Planning Tasks of the Terrace

There are two types of renovations. One is to bring it back to the original condition by maintaining structural members and equipment. The other is to change the plan to some extent.

The former is to success traditional terrace style and in many cases residents have much affection to their terraces. Older and traditional terraces usually have structural instability, water penetration in all its forms, and biological attack, whether fungal or by insects. Some apparent examples are, cracking in wall plaster, structural damage to the masonry (Howells and Morris, 1999: 77).

The latter, on the other hand, is to change plan inside and site plan. Changes inside would be, all in all, highly rational although there is always a problem of how we should stick to the original. Whatever its grace and charm, the design and planning of the traditional terrace house left many aspects of domestic comfort and convenience either poorly achieved or altogether unresolved. One of the most common renovation methods would be, as explained (Howells and Morris, 1999: 117), recasting the traditional plan and bringing the functions of the kitchen wing into the main body of the house, which solve the natural lighting problem as well. With modern appliances, good lighting and ducted ventilation, no longer need to be located along external walls with windows or chimney flues. Regarding natural lighting, relocating the stair towards the centre of the house, rather than along a party wall, and capping it with a generous skylight, it was possible to allow in a flood of diffused light. Besides, modern materials such as structural steel and plate glass allow (the imaginative architect) an opportunity to create double-height spaces and to remove internal walls where required. This leads to well-connected indoor and outdoor living spaces and the creation of a successful garden in a very limited area.

Nevertheless, some renovations effecting site plan change the rich natures of the terrace areas. Walter and Wright (1991: 37) point out a terrace house now turns its back on the street, reoriented towards the privacy and greenery of a rear garden with a new entertaining/sitting area opening onto the outdoors. As Gehl (1977: 21) argues semi-private territories such as front yards play a major role in fostering community in the neighborhoods. These low fenced front yards can be; a viewing platform to the outside world for the small children; a safe home territory from which to proceed into more public territory for the school children; recreational spaces for the adults; and a place to stay, to watch the world go by and take part on a modest level for the old people.

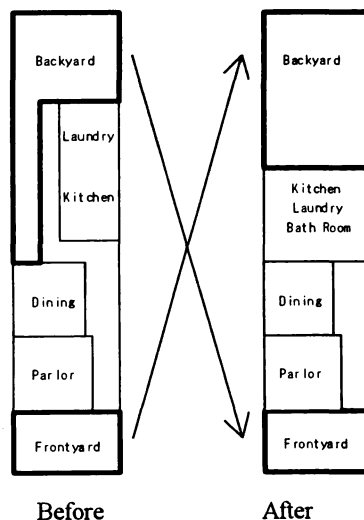


Fig 2 Example of Relocating the Front and the Back by a Renovation

Of some traditional terrace problems the provision of a garage opening onto the rear lane was the simplest to solve. However, there are emerging concerns regarding car accidents and crimes, for the back lane was not originally designed for cars. It is necessary to have planning policy at a block level.

#### **4. Conclusions**

We traced the history of the terrace house in Melbourne. The terrace, many of which were built from 100 to 150 years ago, became speculative subjects and reflected social and cultural situations of each era such as economic booms, population increases, technology advancement.

Five broad architectural styles used; Georgian, Regency, Early Victorian, Boom style, and Federation; cover the period from the building of the earliest terrace houses in Australia until their demise around 1920.

The 2-story Victorian terrace, which plays a major role as a current residential stock in Melbourne, has a parlor facing a terrace and a dining room and a kitchen in the narrower-width back wing on the first floor and some 2 bedrooms and a bathroom on the second floor. The lavatory was in the backyard, close to the back lane and convenient to the night soil cart. These terraces have problems of natural lighting and ventilation, and of clumsy connections, and so on.

The terrace house lost popularity soon after the World War I, however, the situation was turned over in the 1960s and the terrace was re-appraised. Some renovations effecting site plan change the rich natures of the terrace areas. Reorienting the original back onto the street with higher fence would completely spoil good natures of the terrace blocks. These semi-private territories were highly remarkable regarding neighborhood community in those days.

Of some traditional terrace problems the provision of a garage opening onto the rear lane was the simplest to solve. However, there are emerging concerns regarding car accidents and crimes, for the back lane was not originally designed for cars. It is necessary to examine planning tasks so that advantages of Australian terraces would not be defected.

#### **5. Endnotes**

- 1 'Blind walls' are walls without doors or windows.
- 2 The original figure is measured drawings, by Jonathan Duggan and Stephen Clements, of the terrace houses located at 39-49 Brunswick Street. We filled in the names of each space as they fit.
- 3 The term 'tunnel back' is applied to a light-well, formed where the narrower walls did not occupy the full width of the terrace. Turner (1995: 33) explains this device: "These walls were, of course, party walls, shared with the neighbouring houses on either side. A terrace house could therefore only be two rooms deep, as a middle room would have no access to a window. This problem was overcome by having those rooms that extended beyond the basic two built on a narrower width, thus creating a type of alleyway between the inner side walls and allowing windows to be built into those walls."

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