**Book Reviews**

**The Life and Death of the Australian Backyard**

Tony Hall, CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, Victoria, 2010. RRP $69.95  
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The arresting title of this book reflects the passionate concern of its author, Tony Hall, an experienced English urban planner who arrived in Queensland in 2004. Greatly disturbed by what he saw – with fresh eyes – as deplorable changes to suburban backyards there since the early 1990s, he set about analysing why this occurred. Having done that, he concluded that because neither the general public nor commentators appeared to be aware of the actual nature and scale of the phenomenon, he should write this book to fill the gap. It is a well-researched and articulate advocacy by a planning professional intended to set public debate going.

Having analysed six typical suburbs Australia-wide, Hall provides tables on the size and nature of Australian backyards as they evolved in the later nineteenth century and first three quarters of the twentieth century. The tables show average lot sizes, percentage site coverage by buildings, setbacks from boundaries, and open space left for backyards. He then describes the use and perception of the backyard, but deplores the lack of empirical studies on this topic. He attempts to fill this gap by researching and pulling together elements from a wide-range of broader planning studies, and condenses his findings into several tables.

Throughout the book he stresses the importance of backyards in terms of their collective value to the community. ‘The backyard helps to create a residential area that is landscape dominated, bringing with it ecological climatic and aesthetic advantages to the community as a whole.’ More specifically, backyards contribute to a ‘garden suburb’ character which people find visually attractive. Trees and soft landscaping provide several microclimatic benefits, facilitate biodiversity and stormwater drainage, and help sequester carbon and other pollution. Backyards can provide outdoor space for clothes drying, storage, rainwater tanks, vegetable and fruit trees, and ornamental garden beds. In addition they allow plenty of natural light and air, an ‘outdoor room’ for entertaining, and secure, private places for children’s play, which public parks cannot do.

Chapter 2 has an interesting discussion, mainly written by colleague Jeff Mead, on the meaning of the backyard. It identifies three successive typologies – the working yard, the domestic yard, and the contemporary yard. In Chapter 3, Hall addresses his principal topic – the death of the backyard. He examines and illustrates what has occurred in a selection of suburbs Australia-wide, and is appalled. Criticising the square blocky houses (McMansions) covering nearly the whole block, he cites damage to the amenity of the dwelling (reduced natural light and ventilation), reduction in outdoor facilities, lack of outlook, little scope for children’s play, and lack of the advantages cited above.

To some extent he lays the blame on New Urbanism and the demand for higher densities, even in existing suburbs, but argues backyards do not need to disappear. He cites examples in Britain where higher densities are achieved, but private open space has still been provided. He is cautious about laying too much of the blame on national planning codes and design standards such as those fostered by the Joint Venture for More Affordable Housing, which morphed into the Green Street Joint Venture and fostered the Australian Model Codes for Residential Development (AMCORD). These were then taken up at state and local levels to varying degrees throughout Australia. In my opinion, these probably had greater weight because neither the general public nor commentators addressed his principal topic – the death of the backyard. He mentions theLight and Air, an ‘outdoor room’ for entertaining, and secure, private places for children’s play, which public parks cannot do. The author surmises (p. 89) why people choose the maximum size footprint they can afford.

‘Their perception is that it is to their financial advantage to maximize the resale value of their houses, and this means maximizing its floor area. However, they wish to do this for the lowest initial outlay. They therefore seek, or are encouraged to buy, the maximum floor area for the minimum price. They do not perceive, in their own minds, the open space around the house as having investment value [. . .] Styling, ornament and landscaping is concentrated on the front of the house where it has the greatest impact on prospective purchasers.’

The author hypothesises that contemporary social values and behaviour are at the heart of the design changes. ‘People are focusing on monetary goals rather than quality of life. The emphasis has moved from enjoying an outdoor life to acquiring
perceived security that would result from increased salaries, possessions and investment in property. The result is excessive working hours, personal stress and investment in floor space rather than in enjoyable houses and gardens. The author warns that once big blocky houses are built, they can't be undone. You can't retrofit them to provide outlook, natural ventilation, swimming pools, gardens or barbeque terraces without knocking part of them down.

In my opinion, Hall could have made more of the point that the deliberate exemption of the family home from a capital gains tax and/or death duty, and the benefits of negative gearing – both politically untouchable today – have fostered people's over-investment of their spare capital in their family home. He barely mentions the influence of the many TV programs promoting desirable indoor living lifestyles and 'add-ons', nor people's fascination with home renovation and extension programs. Many viewers lap these up, all with a view to 'making a mozza' when they eventually resell their property to reap their investment reward.

My colleague, Ari Anderson, suggests more could have been made, too, of the contribution which large additions to existing older houses have made to the shrinkage of the backyard. If a percentage of the mature species on a site are removed during the construction process (often encouraged by the owner), the backyard may end up looking like a shadow of its former self. Ari thinks Hall could also have mentioned insufficient Council certification processes for ensuring that good landscape designs prepared at the planning stage are actually realised; the fact that owners and developers often conspire in trying to avoid tree protection orders, have no interest in plants, often concrete over lawns and garden beds, and generally opt for a minimum, low (i.e. no) maintenance garden. Moreover, good, creative landscaping of a site is not necessarily cheap to achieve, and most home owners have already spent all their money on the grand mansion before addressing landscaping.

The purpose of the book is to make planners aware of their omissions to provide for backyards that serve the desirable functions the author describes. 'Once the professionals have been persuaded, they can work on the politicians. The process can take time, but it can be successful in the long run.' The author offers some thoughts on possible regulatory changes (and the politics thereof) and the need for better design guidance, and reiterates the multi-benefits of backyards. He argues that a campaign to change current attitudes and lifestyles away from their present unhealthy obsessions is not radical: it would be, in fact, a return to traditional Australian values and outdoor lifestyles.

One is left with the feeling that a full-scale sociological study of Australian family life, attitudes, behavior and values would be a desirable companion book to this one, together with a deeper examination of the wider economic, financial and taxation factors which influence house buyers to go for houses that are against their own longer term interests (other than purely monetary).

The book itself is a slim, unpretentious volume, produced economically by CSIRO Publishing, who has not designed it to attract the wider public audience that the author probably wanted. (Its RRP at $69.95 will not assist this.) In its present format, with some tables and black and white photos sprinkled throughout the text, plus the telling but briefly captioned aerial photographs annoyingly bunched together near the end, it may not capture the wide readership that Robin Boyd's book *Australian Ugliness* did in the early 1950s. But, as Hall says, it's a start. He hopes his spark will ignite a wide and lively debate.

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Urban Nation: Australia's planning heritage

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Urban Nation: Australia's planning heritage arises from research carried out by the City Futures Research Centre at the University of New South Wales for the Australian Heritage Council in 2006-07, which delineated a thematic contextual history of urban planning in Australia, an area that had been sadly neglected in the heritage discourse up until that time. The study team, comprising Professor Robert Freestone, Dr Christine Garnaut, Dr Susan Marsden and Dr Simon Pinnegar, also developed a methodology for the identification of planned places of national heritage significance and arrived at an indicative list of Australia's major sites of planning heritage. In writing this book, Freestone expands on the previous study and provides an overview of the history of planning in Australia that seeks to illuminate the contribution of urban planning to our diverse cultural heritage at national, state, regional, and local levels.

Freestone writes with a commitment to enriching the reader's understanding of the art and science of planning in a national context. It is refreshing to read a book that not only purports to be 'national' but does in fact move the reader both temporally and geographically across the country. No state or territory is unexamined and that examination is both thorough and illuminating. Extensive referencing and a wide-ranging bibliography leave the reader with the opportunity for further exploration of areas of particular interest.

Devised in sections that reflect both chronological and thematic concepts, Freestone takes the reader on a journey through Australia's settlement history and the creation of a cultural identity influenced by international trends, but remaining distinctly Australian. Freestone's identification of the people who influenced the planning of Australia's cities and towns and the cross-fertilisation of their ideas provides much food for thought. It is of interest to read the debate in the 1829 between the New South Wales' Governor Ralph Darling and the Surveyor General Thomas Mitchell over the width of streets. Freestone sets out how Mitchell argued for the introduction of narrow streets to alleviate heat, dust and winds, apparently based on Spanish models, however Darling's preference for wide streets to admit air and breezes, based on the Indian colonial model, prevailed. He also argues that Darling's regulations of that year marked the beginnings of the quarter acre block as a standard module for Australian urban settlement.

It strikes the reader that much of the history of planning in Australia has revolved around the idea of improvement; of health, of visual amenity, and, latterly, of the environment. Yet Freestone does not shy away from the myriad of problems and even failures of some planning methodologies. In concluding with a preliminary
list of Australia’s major sites of heritage planning, Freestone does not advocate that ‘all such places must be preserved in toto or that the quality of life they have delivered is unimpeachable’ rather he suggests that ‘a contemporary role for planning today is to help guide the conservation and development of planned places of significance’.

While immersed in an academic discourse throughout, the book succeeds in being accessible to those with an interest in heritage and the built environment. It is well-illustrated, with both archival and contemporary images, that assist the reader in understanding the themes presented. The inclusion of insightful quotations are of particular interest and enrich the understanding of each topic. The ‘The Ideal City’ reproduced from The Bulletin, of 25 October 1890, demonstrates similar concerns that have exercised the minds of constituents for over one hundred years (for better or worse).

I enjoyed exploring Australia’s cities and towns with such a well-versed guide and have little to criticise. I note that, like many other books on Australia’s heritage, Freestone has described the colonisation of Australia as ‘European’ settlement rather than ‘British’. This is an area I would like to see explored by Australian writers in greater depth generally and, in this instance, the descriptor of ‘British’ settlement would have explained more fully the political and historical influences of the ‘home country’ on Australia’s urban planning particularly during the 19th and 20th centuries. I would also have liked to see the timber mill towns of southwestern Australia included in the discussion of ‘planned towns’. These company towns provided sustainable infrastructure for a whole community based around steam-driven timber mills and demonstrate an adaptability of planning principles to the local environment in their siting and layout that is worth further exploration.

It is worth noting in conclusion that Urban Nation: Australia’s planning heritage is not only a useful resource, but is intended as a starting point for the myriad of discussions that are yet to be had in relation to the heritage value of planned places in Australia. It is an area that promises to be greatly enriched by Freestone’s contribution.

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