
If Leslie Wilkinson were alive today, he would be dismayed at the title of this book. The idea that ordinary suburban houses might be taken to represent Australia's architecture was one of his worst fears. To Wilkinson, Annew, W Hardy Wilson and a host of others, the houses of ordinary people were the pinnacles of poor design ugliness and bad taste - a tradition carried on ably by Robin Boyd in the 1950s and 1960s, and by today's architects with regard to contemporary suburban housing.

Ironically, those early twentieth century architects, by their admiration and promotion of colonial architecture, also began another tradition. Their 'patina of nostalgia' has spread from colonial into Victorian architecture, and now into the Federation period. Thus, once sufficient time has elapsed, age lends a shroud of respectability to ordinary houses, which then become 'tasteful', 'picturesque', 'evocative', and, in the case of Federation houses, 'patriotic'. 'The next crop of books will undoubtedly deal with bungalows, 'Spanish' and P & O styles, and perhaps in 20 years' time we will see an earnest discussion of 1950s fibro cottages.

The problem with both these approaches is that they don't allow a genuine understanding of houses - the first is concerned with transcendent architectural aesthetics, so ordinary houses are dismissed; the second tends to project present-day concerns onto the material of the past - the search for nostalgia, for craftsmanship, for tradition, for national character, or whatever, prevents a house from 'speaking' about itself and its period.

This book is very beautiful to look at, with sumptuous photographs by Ray Joyce, and a selection of well-reproduced pictorial material. It offers an exhaustive and detailed guide to the conservation and restoration of Federation houses. Clearly it is architecture. But is it history? The first two chapters are 'historical background', which, I suppose, are intended to interpret Federation architecture in its historical context. The underlying theme is that after Federation, the entire Australian population was bursting with nationalistic fervour, and went about building houses which expressed this new patriotism. This is appropriate, in view of the looming bicentenary, as the foreword points out. In the best tradition of myth-making this theme is simply presented, rather than argued, as though it is beyond question. I can find no argument to support it. Do a few decorative motifs, like kookaburra windows and workers' drover finials, constitute a 'national' house? We are told that the Federation house is derivative, but then that its 'appearance developed in a manner, both in plan and elevation, that is uniquely Australian'. Does this mean that other derivative houses of earlier periods, like verandahed rural homesteads, are not, to the same extent, 'uniquely Australian'? What is it that makes Federation houses more 'Australian' than these? This section goes on to briefly deal with the various architectural 'ingredients' contributing to the emergence of the Federation house, but the development is not explicit. It is as though they somehow all went into a great melting pot and voila! national architecture was born.

There are many other problems with the historical material. The great gap between architects' work and the work of builders and their clients is ignored; the nature of 'national style' is not explored; workers' housing is ignored, apart from a cursory look at the numerically insignificant Daceyville; the treatment of the slums versus the suburbs is misleading - the poor did not escape from slums into suburbia, and the middle class had not occupied the slums; and so on. There are no references, and apart from several 'further reading' lists, no bibliography.

All this may seem a bit harsh, especially if the book is seen in terms of providing a valuable and practical guide to restoration and sympathetic management - browsers and restorers will love it. But this raises the interesting question of conservation in relation to historic interpretation. Should our efforts at conserving the material record of the past be based mainly on appearances, and cursory examinations of 'historical' background, or on a genuine investigation of what it signifies about the past, through careful, contextual analysis? Clearly, if the link between conservation/restoration and historical understanding is weak, we run the risk of 'recreating' the past in our own image, according to prevailing tastes and concerns.

Reviewed by Grace Karakens
South Australia's Jubilee 150 year in 1986 produced a wide range of worthwhile products for people interested in the historic environment. One of the more enduring of these was the Wakefield Press, which has specialised largely in historic monographs.

With Conscious Purpose is a well-coordinated series of essays on particular phases of the development of town planning in South Australia. It begins with a brief account of the famous work of Colonel William Light at the inception of the experimental colony, and concludes with a vision of the future from the current community of Environment and Planning, Don Hopgood.

The 150 years of effort have been split into eight chapters, of which the co-editors contributed five. The other contributors are historian John Tregenza and Flinders University geographers Murray McCaskill and Clive Forster. The chapters are uniformly concise, rich in expression and well organised, so that the book is cohesive and the reader moves easily from one epoch to the next.

The theoretical experimental colony of Edward Wakefield provided, among other things, a firm formula for the creation of the primary city, workers' blocks, sections for the capitalists, roads, reserves and the other components of civilised countryside. Within this specification, Light planned Adelaide and its environs in the way which earned him a respected place in the world community of planners. (The process and results of Light's task have been the subject of detailed discussion in other books, including the recently published Patterns in Perpetuity by Robert Cheesman).

Light's vision became a rubber stamp for the Government surveyors, who placed more than 200 parkland towns across the face of the state in the remainder of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, they were too close together and not always well sited, but there were some interesting variations on the theme.

Town planning at the turn of the century was largely a matter of land division plans. There was little thought given to location of industry, housing and so on within the towns, and less to the form of buildings and the architecture of urban design. The modern era of comprehensive town planning was brought to Adelaide in a rush by the missionary Charles Reade, a member of the Garden Cities movement. His rise and fall is the subject of the chapter by Tregenza.

After Reade and his followers, the stringencies of the 1930s saw town planning recede into land division control, to emerge again after World War Two with a system of development control based on Stuart Hart's 1962 report on the metropolitan area of Adelaide. The brave initiatives of the satellite towns of Elizabeth (successful) and Monarto (abandoned) are covered in this period. The most recent, and hence sensitive, period of this history is handled particularly well by McCaskill and Forster.

Town planning as a discipline is close to the centre of political power, the more so in a highly centralised state like South Australia. The nuances of that power are well explained in the text, so that it is easy to see in context the very different roles in society that town planning has played at different times in South Australia.

With Conscious Purpose is not a social history, but the control of the allocation and use of land cannot help but impinge greatly on the social and political life of the State. The reaction to the exercise of planning power explains the ebb and flow of its influence and the existence of seemingly illogical products. For example, the City of Adelaide is excluded from the system that covers the remainder of the state and has its own set of rules. (As one result, the most important heritage items have been the last to be formally protected.)

The essentially political nature of town planning practice is graphically illustrated by the book's accounts of 'land budget efficiency' and other theories of spatial organisation which successive planners have attempted to apply to an unwilling public as cures for ills perceived, often enough, only by the planners. The current cry in Adelaide is for 'urban consolidation' for which, predictably, all sorts of benefits are claimed.

There are a few surprising historical inaccuracies that detract in a minor way from this scholarly and interesting work, such as those relating to the arrival of the first ships in 1836 (the first was the 'Duke of York', not 'Africaine') and the role of George Kingston in Light's plan (the account of which relies on letters written 40 years after the event).

One of the strengths of this most worthwhile book is that the struggles of the distant past are dealt with in as vital a fashion as those of immediate memory. It offers no answers as to why our solution to simple conflicts of interest is an ever more complex set of rules. But it does show
that the motives for town planning in South Australia have always been noble to the point of idealism.

By doing so, it has firmly established the South Australian practice of town planning in a context which exposes a part of the mosaic of our understanding of colonial history that until now had been unseen.

Reviewed by John Ellis


Driving up a steep Sussex lane some years ago, I came upon two massive ruined pillars rising above the hedgerows. I had found the southern gateway to Winchelsea, one of the few towns in Britain deliberately planned on the rectangular gridiron principle. This ruined gateway now stands in open countryside, separated by half a mile from the present edge of the town. It took this romantic experience to stimulate a positive interest in gridiron town plans, where before I had sneeringly dismissed them as guilty by their association with a place called Peacehaven. Peacehaven, also in Sussex, is an ugly inter-war bungalow town that exemplifies the use of the gridiron for profitable land speculation at the expense of good town planning.

Adelaide is a gridiron city, along with most colonial settlements. It differs from other Australian cities because its center is laid out according to a plan prepared before any settlement took place. Johnson and Langmead state: 'Other centres in Australia of similar magnitude did not have the predisposed initial intention to be an urban place.' According to received wisdom, Adelaide's gridiron layout was designed by Colonel Light following good principles of town planning rather than simply as a convenient framework for selling land parcels. It is this thesis that is addressed by The Adelaide City Plan - Fiction and Fact.

According to the book, Light's self-proclaimed role as creator of the plan and finder of the site is a myth. Both are attributed instead to his deputy, George Strickland Kingston, who unlike Light was an engineer and a well-versed amateur architect. Light's role was merely to be responsible for approving Kingston's plan. The authors supply considerable evidence for their conclusions, although much of it is necessarily circumstantial.

The nature of the Adelaide plan, and its presumed roots in both colonial settlement and ideal community planning, are traced back to classical antiquity. There is a potted history of urban form from Hippodamus to Vitruvius, followed by a more detailed exposition of the Cataneo orthogonal plan and its subsequent practical interpretations, which include Philadelphia and Savannah as well as Adelaide. The Adelaide plan is then dissected in some detail, and its sequence of development explained.

The authors make considerable use of flat geometric analyses of grid forms, in particular with the Adelaide plan. Squares, circles, diamonds and topographical axes are overlaid on the plan to support the proposition that this is a sophisticated architectural master plan. Adelaide undoubtedly has a more sophisticated ground plan than other Australian cities of the last century, and the plan evidently paid regard to town planning principles of the day. These probably derived as much from the pragmatic surveying concerns of the Colonial Office in London as from Cataneo and other more visionary proponents. This begs the question: to what extent is Adelaide's elegant survey plan also a functional and architecturally exciting town plan?

Wren's unexecuted plan for London contained more formal vistas and other architectural effects than Adelaide's, yet is roundly condemned by A E J Morris, the author of History of Urban Form. The reason, as I recall, is that Wren's plan would have failed in functional and topographical reality despite its interest and sophistication as a piece of flat geometry. There is little analysis of these aspects in Johnson and Langmead's book. It is telling, for instance, that nowhere among the extensive and otherwise admirable plan illustrations are there any dimensions, let alone reference to block sizes and road widths. Cataneo has vastly different implications if the city blocks are 200 metres wide rather than 50 metres.

How functional was Adelaide's plan? Did the size, shape and disposition of the subdivisions enable efficient and well proportioned buildings to be designed? Was there too little road space or too much? Were there any intended architectural set pieces, and if so, how successfully were they implemented? None of these questions is addressed in any depth, some are not addressed at all.

Despite this criticism, I enjoyed the book. It corrects some important historical misconceptions, and it rightly credits the Adelaide plan with great town planning significance for its surviving ring of
parklands. Interestingly, the book suggests that it was a timid bureaucrat's unwillingness to take a decision that originally saved the parklands for posterity, rather than architectural single-mindedness.

A preface, foreword, prologue and introduction provide a somewhat ponderous entree to the equivalent of 12 full pages of text, but to these must be added the 40 plans, which are well presented and informative. The authors should be congratulated for publishing a work on urban form that is readable, well presented and historically accurate. Every city should have a similar planning self-portrait, and the book proves that a great deal of interest can be found in the grid-iron city form.

Reviewed by Michael Scott

Weston Bate, Euan McGillivray and Matthew Nickson, Private Lives - Public Heritage, Family Snapshots as History. Hutchinson. $16.95

The photographs which make up the bulk of this book are chosen from a collection of 2718 snapshots discovered in Victoria, in and around Ballarat, and in Manangatang in the Mallee. They are the fruit of an innovative pilot project carried out in 1985 by Euan McGillivray, the Museum of Victoria's curator of photography, and Matthew Nickson, from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology's photography department.

This project established offices in Ballarat and Manangatang, and asked local people to bring in their family photographs and talk about them. The photographs cover a wide range of social type, experience and - although generally based in and around the two research centres - geographic locality, with occasional entries depicting happenings as far afield as Western Australia, Queensland, Gippsland and Melbourne.

The aim of the project was to borrow, for copying, the kind of family snapshots that give a picture of past life - the kind that all too often moulder at the back of a dusty filing cabinet, or are thrown away on a visit to the local tip - and to extract from the donor/lender as much information as possible about each photograph. This was then entered on computer data sheets, cross-referenced and stored with the copied photographs for purposes of records and research. Nowhere else in the world, the book says, has such an approach been taken.

Family photographs are seen as 'the historic self-portrait of a democratic society'. They present anew hidden images of an Australia of which few people today have first-hand experience. They show what people of previous generations did and how they lived. Used in conjunction with recorded oral reminiscences, they answer the questions 'Who are we? What have we done? Where have we been?'

Nowhere is the strength of this research technique better illustrated than in Jack Howley's laconic account of a 1400-mile pushbike ride from Isisford in Queensland to Tyrrell, just beyond Manangatang, which he undertook in 1936 in mid-winter; it took him 28 days. We see the photographer himself about to depart, dressed in battered jacket and baggy trousers, the pushbike - a cross-country model fitted with thorn-proof tyres - equipped with a gallon water tank on the front fork, and a tent he sewed out of calico and carried wrapped over the tank and down the forks. (The bike also carried five water and food containers fashioned out of four-gallon petrol tins, and a canvas bag for 'whatnots' - torch, frying pan, tomahawk, camera and so on). We read about the rigours of the journey - pushing the bike through the sticky black soil around Augathella, being soaked riding beneath dripping trees. We learn that the Mallee is not such a bad place to live, after all.

We hear about the lavish property at Isis Downs in Queensland - a huge shearing shed with 50 stands with electric handpieces, a saddle room 'fit for anything, glass doors and the rest of it'; a race-meeting and ball with fancy cakes and cream puffs and people coming from miles around.

This is compelling material - the graphic departure photograph, the snapshot, slightly askew, of the famed Isis Downs shed ('I knew nothing about taking photographs'), the simple verbatim account of a trip which would not be contemplated today. It is a pity the rest of the book does not inspire quite the same response.

I began it with high hopes, fuelled by the comprehensive introductory chapters - Looking for the Past in Family Photographs, which explains the pilot project: The Invention of Photography: The Popular Eras, which tells how the camera became a tool of the people; Two Different Worlds, which locates the two research centres (populations 68,000 and 3401) and deals with their history, their development, and their differences. There follows a welter of photographs which to me seem generally ill-assorted. In most cases the intrinsic interest of each is submerged, at first slowly and then with increasing rapidity, by its seemingly random juxtaposition with other pictures which often have neither common photographer, donor, subject, nor
geographic location (although this last is not always the case).

One two-page spread, for instance, illustrates the statuary pavilion and fernery at the Ballarat Botanic Gardens c1900, a copper baby-bath (with inmate) and water tank, South Australia, c1930, a railways union banner and unionists in Ballarat, c1910, and foundry workers on the job at Ballarat East, c1920. What is the baby-bath doing there?

If a major aim is to show up the contrast between Ballarat and Manangatang, why are photographs which graphically illustrate the diversity of life in the two centres separated by several pages or even chapters? The children of the tiny Manangatang East School, for instance, lined up in shorts and even bare feet outside the tiny school with its iron water tank – and the staff and boys at Ballarat Grammar School in 1903, where formal headgear and stiff collars were the order of the day. Or the boys from Manangatang, pictured in the main street with its single-storey timber buildings, leaving for Melbourne on their pushbikes in 1933 – and the Ballarat sea scouts beginning a march to Melbourne in 1912, amid the prosperous surroundings of Ballarat’s sturdy nineteenth century banks and shops.

Why are some photographs used more than once? – the horse being painted to represent a zebra at Merrigum in 1910, Jack Howley’s truck at the kangaroo fence on the Queensland/New South Wales border in 1935, the children and goats carting water at Isisford in 1915? Why are the widely differing accounts from a Ballarat woman and a Manangatang man of life at a central west Queensland property not juxtaposed, as the introductory text leads the reader to expect?

Finally, I found the easiest way to make sense of the mass of photographic material was to use the index and look up specific topics – schools, for instance, or dogs, or dust-storms, or scrub-clearing. This approach works, but it illustrates a fundamental difficulty in listing photographs for computer reference, one which is discussed in two appendices to the text. The subjective element in choosing the words used to describe the pictures and their contents means that sometimes, relevant material may be overlooked – even despite the comprehensive data collection and catalogue sheets which have been filled out for every photograph collected from the citizens of Ballarat, Manangatang and districts.

Obviously there is a long way to go in this pioneering enterprise and the organisers are to be congratulated on making a start. But this reviewer, writing as a lay reader with no previous knowledge of the intricacies and special problems of the project, cannot help but wonder whether some of the ‘manual systems’ presumably superseded by the computer technology developed to catalogue this mass of source material might not be re-deployed, in order to make the fascinating photographs in Private Lives – Public Heritage tell a more coherent story.

Reviewed by Anne Latreille

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