Craftsman Bungalows in Blackburn
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The Craftsman bungalows of designer and builder, Algernon John Elmore (1882-1961) relate in particular aesthetic and functional ways to Blackburn, Melbourne, at the time between 1910 and 1929 when it was a rural suburb. His oil-stained timber bungalows were appropriate for Blackburn. Not only did they fit harmoniously into the landscape of gums and wattles (Figure 1), they sat more happily on their foundations in Blackburn's heavy clay sub-soil than did solid brick houses. Simple rectangular forms, striking craftsmanship in Australian timbers and many original ideas in design are the distinguishing qualities of Elmore's work (Figure 2).

His bungalows demonstrate that he shared in the common stock of ideas of the International Arts and Crafts villa movement that flourished in Western Europe and America in the decade and a half before the Great War. One of the fundamental ideas of this movement was that a house should fit into its site and seem to arise from it as an organic growth. Associated with the Arts and Crafts designers and architects, in both hemispheres, were the advocates of the 'Fresh Air' movement: the building or buying by middle-class people of cottages - bungalows in Southern California and Australia - in the country or at the seaside for fresh air. On a suitable tract of

Figure 1  Tanglewood, a Jarrah bungalow in treed setting. Built 1913, photographed 1928.
countryside, within commuting distance of a city or town, the Arts and Crafts designer would site his small country house appropriately, expressing in form and materials the ideal of closeness to nature.(2)

Any evaluation of Elmore's houses as works of craftsmanship and design should start, therefore, with the re-discovery of the Blackburn landscape as it then was. The focus is particular: the bungalows belong mainly to an area of central Blackburn known to early residents as 'The Paddock'. The Paddock was bounded by the railway line to the north, Blackburn Road to the east, Middleborough Road to the west and the Blackburn Creek to the south. In this area Elmore erected at least 29 timber bungalows, five of which have now been demolished.(3)

Early photographic records provide valuable evidence of what the pre-built landscape of The Paddock was like. It contained a broad swathe of indigenous eucalypts and thick bush undergrowth spreading out from a nucleus on Blackburn hill over the contours, down to the Blackburn Creek in the south and to the narrow arm of the Creek in the north. The thick bush thinned to tall stands of eucalypts here and there on the northerly undulations, stopping abruptly at the previously cleared western portion of The Paddock, in the north-east where Blackburn township spread out. This remnant of untouched Australian bush was surrounded by apple orchards, dairies and poultry farms.(4)

Elmore's remarkable building achievement in Blackburn began with his purchase of four...
large lots averaging 100' by 335' in King's Paddock, Blackburn, on 29 November, 1910. They had been advertised as 'specially designed to meet the demand for Landscape Gardens, and forming a splendid Building Rise sloping to a ti-tree valley'.(5) A year or two later, he acquired rights to a 30' lane and bought another large lot, 100' by 395', both adjacent to his property, for a timber yard. Here, he set up his joinery, machine, paint and cement shops and extensive drying racks. Elmore's timber yard became the industrious workshop of his Craftsman building enterprise. In 1912 he designed and built his own home, Kyalite, on the four-acre property.

Within two years his Craftsman bungalows in Blackburn were the subject of an article in a popular magazine, Home and Garden Beautiful, in the issue of December, 1914.(6) The front cover photograph showed Kyalite (Figure 3 and 4). The setting is picturesque. Tall gums shade and frame the verandah and a track winds down to the rustic footbridge over the reedy Blackburn Creek. The jarrah bungalow, a simple unadorned rectangle with low-pitched corrugated iron roof, relates carefully to its site. The airy fly-wired verandah, 45' by 10', runs the length of the eastern frontage and is incorporated under the sweep of the gable. The linear quality of its exterior is expressed by the vertical lines of the verandah studs to which fly gauze is attached, and the horizontal shadows cast by bevelled edges of the weatherboards. The simple external form and appropriate building materials suggest that some of its inspiration came from the Australian vernacular homestead tradition.

This image of a bungalow in the country must have encouraged many settlers to Blackburn to have their homes built by Elmore. The image was, at the very least, visual confirmation of the verbal rhetoric of auctioneers' notices. For example, the advertisement for a Great Land Sale at Blackburn in November, 1910, when 124 lots in the Blackburn Township Estate (the eastern portion of The Paddock) where offered for sale, had read: '...the southern portion (south of the railway line) comprises lovely sylvan hilltops, slopes and glades, mostly fortunately still well studded with fine varieties of eucalyptus, and being attractive patches of the health giving Australia bush...'.(7) By the time the Great War had ended, Elmore had designed and built at least eight bungalows in The Paddock for clients who had come to Blackburn for its space, salubrious air and bush scenery.

The railway line which had carried steam trains to Blackburn since 1882 (electrified in 1923) played a significant part in attracting residents. For the majority of Elmore's clients were commuting breadwinners - in the public service, small city businesses, skilled trades and professions. Some were retired people. In the pre-war land sales they bought, on average, three or four adjoining lots, thus creating one acre building blocks. In the re-subdivisions of the early 1920's, the norm was to buy two or three lots to form half acre building blocks. Thus Elmore had a broad canvas on which to design, sometimes sitting a bungalow in the middle of a two-lot block to take advantage of natural contours, views and trees. With a great interest in and knowledge of Australian native plants, he often advised clients on suitable trees and shrubs to plant on the sparser blocks. He had planted 70 varieties of wattle at Kyalite, and there was still room for a rose garden, a grass tennis court and miniature golf course!

If the residents of The Paddock were city occupied for most of their working lives, they nonetheless responded to their rural milieu by adopting country habits. Many kept poultry as a hobby; some kept a milking cow or two; most were engaged in horticulture - landscaping gardens, growing vegetables and flowers for the table, or to exhibit at local Horticultural Society shows. The women baked cakes and bottled fruit for the busy round of social and charity fund-raising events, so important in forging community bonds in a rural district. All had the opportunity to observe the native bird life and wild flowers in their own gardens or along the bush tracks which served as roads in The Paddock until the late 1920s.
Figure 3 Kyalite, A J Elmore's first Jarrah bungalow in Blackburn, built 1912. Cover photograph from Home and Garden Beautiful, 1914.
Figure 4  Fly-wired verandah with access from bedrooms in a 1923 bungalow. Board-band-batten ceiling panels, rough-sawn weatherboards, Mountain Ash joinery.
How, then, did Elmore's bungalows fulfill the domestic and practical conditions which they were intended to satisfy for his clients? Consider, first, the fly-wired verandahs. Elmore believed fly-screening was essential for bungalows in rural Blackburn. Arcadian the area might have been, but it also provided an attractive environment for the household fly, with dairy cattle and poultry farms in the vicinity, unmade roads and open channels, household refuse heaps and outdoor sanitary closets. Building regulations in the Nunawading Shire did not require houses to be screened in this period. Yet in considering the comfort and hygiene of his clients, Elmore's designs for fly-wiring were practical and appropriate for rural bungalows. For example, fly-wired hooded ferneries outside banks of casement windows obviated the need for screens, and open-air fly-wired dining or breakfast rooms were comfortable eating spaces in the warmer months.

Fly-wired verandahs were the flexible areas of living space. They became outdoor sleeping rooms on hot summer nights. Usually situated along the sheltered eastern side, the verandahs had access from bedrooms through double doors. For Kyalite, Elmore made Craftsman beds from Victorian hardwood and fitted them with castors, a practice common in this period. The verandahs served, too, as 'isolation' bedrooms for a sick member of the family. Infectious diseases like diphtheria, typhoid and scarlet fever were prevalent in the Shire, as they were throughout Melbourne in these decades. Isolation of the sick, fresh air and rest were recommended by health authorities as the best treatment. And, as a means of alleviating the distress of tuberculosis, patients were often advised to live in districts like Blackburn.(8) Like many people of his generation, Elmore was a 'fresh air' fanatic. In designing appropriate open-air living spaces his houses not only met the health requirements of the time, but also expressed his strong personal convictions.

Where the early verandahs were screened from floor to ceiling, his bungalows viewed from a distance had a graphic quality. From close up, the airy spaciousness struck an informal welcoming note. Once one stepped inside, the verandah became an integral part of the house, a haven from flies and insects, dust and wind. Sitting in a deck-chair, or perhaps on Elmore's Craftsman couch in Jarrah on such a verandah, one could not have failed to notice 'the mellow radiance of wood tones' in the Jarrah floor, the oiled weatherboards and Red Pine ceilings, treated with shellac and a light waxing to highlight the natural grain (Figure 4).(9)

Informality was expressed in the planning of interior spaces. In some of Elmore's pre-War houses he did away with the entrance hall; from the verandah one entered direct to the living room through double doors (Figure 5 below). The living rooms were large by later standards - 25'6" by 16'. This generous space would be broken partially by an ingle-nook, connected with the main area by an archway framed with two stout posts supporting a heavy beam carrying the wall above. The wall, built right up to the posts, prevented draughts coming in to the ingle. For his treatment of walls, Elmore anticipated the problem of cracking in lath-and-plaster linings, caused by shrinkage of the clay around foundations, by

![Figure 5 Plan of Kyalite; the verandah leads through double doors to the living room.](image)
covering the plaster with canvas, nailed to the studs. The canvas was first glazed with size to stretch it tight as a drum skin, then tinted. If the plaster cracked, it would not be noticeable. The rough texture was also pleasing.

The living room had to be flexible enough to meet the needs of all its occupants. It was where one came to choose a book from the built-in bookcases or shelves, to sit and read in the inglenook or at the built-in window seat, or play the piano. The recesses beside chimneys and under window banks were spaces Elmore utilized for his pieces of built-in furniture. To achieve 'the simple good taste' preached by the Arts and Crafts movement, a designer had to plan built-in furniture to leave clear spaces, and to create an element of strength and solidity.

Built-in furniture not only fulfilled the aesthetic criteria of the Arts and Crafts philosophy, it was an innovation designed to lighten the burdens of housework (Figure 6 below). Elmore was sensitive always to the woman's requirements. The generous provision of built-in wardrobes, dressing tables and washstands in bedrooms, of linen-cupboards, walk-in china cupboards and servery hatches with double-ended drawers and cupboards between kitchen and dining room bear witness to this thoughtful designs. They avoided waste space and difficult corners to clean. For 'Kyalite', Elmore designed a draining table, with sink inserted, of Kauri pine fixed on brackets to the wall. Capacious pantries with shelves designed for easy access he considered essential working spaces for the housewife. Fly-wired, south-facing pantry windows opened direct to the outside or onto

The Living Room and Bedroom at Kyalite showing Craftsman Furniture.

Figure 6 Craftsman furniture at Kyalite.
Figure 7  Entrance verandah (1921) of hardwood construction
screened back verandahs to receive cool breezes.

After World War One, economic necessity urged architects and designers to give much thought to planning the smaller 'five-roomed bungalow' and 'the servantless house'.(10) Elmore, too, was forced by the exigencies of the time to reduce the proportions of his bungalows. The entrance hall returned as the focus around which the five or six rooms were grouped. Verandahs were reduced in width to seven feet in most bungalows. To provide extra sleeping accommodation for families, they were sometimes boarded up from the floor to a height of three-and-a-half feet as shelter for beds, and enclosed above with fly-wire or sliding glass sashes. Fly gauze was usually left off verandahs which gave entrance to front doors. It was replaced by a low balustrade with a hardwood coping rail over four-inch wide horizontal and vertical laths (Figure 7). For some clients Elmore incorporated loggia rooms on the east or north, with access to living rooms.

It is in the excellence of their craftsmanship that his bungalows best express the Arts and Crafts principle that design should stem from function, and form from the materials and tools used. By the end of the Great War, the International Arts and Crafts movement had spent much of its vigour. Yet, in the post-War decade, Elmore was perfecting his craftsman's skills in timber, building with Australian hardwood, and using mainly hand tools. He had begun his training in traditional techniques in joinery as a lad of 13, working with the local carpenter-cum-undertaker in Penshurst in the Western District. Tuition at the Working Men's College in Melbourne before the turn of the century, two years working as an 'improver' in Western Australia where his interest in using Jarrah developed, and then as foreman carpenter under Otto Yuncken for the Melbourne building firm of Clements Langford in the first decade provided the solid basis on which his skills were to develop.(11)

With only two years formal schooling, he was, nevertheless, a voracious reader all his life. His strong desire to use Victorian hardwoods developed from an expert knowledge of Australian timbers, especially the large family of eucalypts, and their suitability for use in building. After 1918 his bungalows in Blackburn were nearly all constructed from hardwood: rough-sawn, undressed weatherboards, floors in Mountain Ash or Stringybark, framing in Messmate, and interior joinery in beautifully grained Mountain Ash. He bought most of his mature timber direct from Horners & Monett, Sawmillers, at Black Sands, who got it from fine stands of Mountain Ash in the area around Launching Place. Fiddleback species for some of his unique pieces of furniture were obtained from the Powelltown area. In the 1920s six railway trucks a week of 'green' squared timber were unloaded at the Blackburn siding for the short journey by jinker to Elmore's timber yard. The hardwood was quarter-sawn into the required planks, boards and scantlings and air-dried for up to four months in vertical racks. Elmore was air-drying and building successfully with Victorian hardwood before kiln-drying was the firmly established procedure.

He developed an original joint to minimize the effects of any further shrinkage of his air-dried hardwood. This he called his 'Jesus Joint': the stiles of the architraves had a splay at the top, planed back with a chamfer, over which the head of the architrave fitted. A rebate the width of the splay was cut out of the back of the head. If the hardwood stiles shrunk a little after construction, no gap could be seen. If they shrank a lot and came away from the head, Elmore used to say 'only Jesus would be able to fix them!' I have not yet seen a 'Jesus Joint' that has opened up in 60 years. Disarmingly simple and functional, these joints are aesthetically pleasing because the grain is highlighted by the splay, and a three-dimensional effect is achieved by the conjunction of the splay with the head of the architrave (Figure 8). They are one of Elmore's most distinctive trade marks.

Elmore avoided mitred joints wherever possible because they tended to open up, since even seasoned hardwood is liable to some movement. This did not apply to the
wide mitred weatherboards in undressed hardwood, where accurate mitring on an outside edge has the tendency of pulling the boards together. For joints between walls and ceilings he preferred a splayed moulding to the more orthodox scotia and ovolo forms. This was consistent with his use of linear rather than sinuous forms in all his joinery.

Elmore's treatment of board-and-batten panelling for walls and ceilings is striking. The eight-and-a-quarter inch boards for the panels were mostly cut from quarter sawn Mountain Ash, the joins between them covered by one-and-a-quarter inch battens or stiles. Sometimes selected panels of Mountain Ash or Woolly Butt cut on the back and showing the heart were sorted into a job to create an interesting contrast in grain and shade. The walls of main rooms were panelled to the top of the doors, sometimes with a projecting plate rail, supported by splayed brackets running along the top. He used board-and-batten panels in beautifully grained hardwood for ceiling linings, too, in living rooms and halls. The panels were sometimes placed above and thus exposed ceiling joists and supporting beams (Figure 9).

In true Craftsman tradition, only hand tools, like jack planes, trying and smoothing planes and steel scrapers, were used in the joinery to form a finished surface. Elmore was an expert at planing timber to get the finish he desired. He had acquired the technique while working on Queensland Red Cedar counters in banks and business houses in Melbourne earlier in the century. The big wide counters had to be planed with a wooden smoothing plane fit for
Figure 9  Panelled living room ceiling, c1921.
a French polisher to polish; the skill required to attain a perfect finish with a hand plane 'was out of this world!' (12)

Fireplace mantel shelves, supports and surrounds were specially designed and crafted by Elmore for each bungalow. The mantels, from one-and-a-half to three inches in thickness, were sometimes supported by squared posts to which splayed brackets were jointed with square wooden plugs or buttons. This joint was typical of Craftsman building techniques, which advocated expression of joinery in timber construction. Sometimes an elegantly curved under-mantel board, carefully selected for its grain, echoed the arch of clinker bricks in the fireplace opening (Figure 10). For other fireplaces, simple clinker brick corbels supported the solid weight of mantel shelves. The colour and texture of the clinker bricks, 'blues' mixed in with 'knobbies', achieved a pleasing contrast to the smooth surface of timber.

Elmore rarely used pigmented stains for interior hardwood, preferring the effect of natural oil stains. For interior woodwork, creosote was broken down with varying strengths of kerosene to create different shades, from a warm biscuit brown through to burnished copper and the darker 'walnut' browns. On the weatherboards, rough-sawn and left undressed, Elmore applied Bunker Oil, a crude slow-drying oil which stayed 'wet' but not tacky for a week before soaking into the timber. This both stained and protected the boards from the weather.
Figure 11  Elmore's chairs in Fiddleback species, drop-leaf table in Mountain Ash, and Jarrah couch.
All the exterior woodwork was oiled in this manner. It created the appropriate natural effect for his bungalows amidst the trees in Blackburn.

The landscape of what was once called The Paddock is no longer rural, but a pocket of bushland remains on its southern slopes. Today, this is Blackburn's 'Bellbird Area' whose streetscapes have National Trust classification. Here, the convention of small unobtrusive houses tucked into the bush, without front hedges or fences, owes a great deal to Elmore's bungalows which expressed in their simple forms and timber construction the ideal of harmony with the natural setting. Throughout The Paddock many of Elmore's bungalows have been painted and altered as needs and fashions have changed. A few remain with the original form and detailing, intact enough to provide a composite picture of his unique work in building.

Elmore certainly was influenced by the designs of the early California bungalows. People who knew him well recall that he consulted America magazines which promoted the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement through articles, as well as plans and photographs of bungalow and furniture designs.(13) Some pieces of furniture which Elmore designed for his own home, like a simple massive couch in Jarrah, show a strong similarity to the designs of Gustave Stickley's Craftsman furniture, promoted through Stickley's own magazine The Craftsman (Figure 11). Australian magazines of the period, such as Building Real Property Annual, also helped popularize the hybrid style of the Pasadena Bungalow which had developed out of the unique Craftsman bungalows in Pasadena of the brothers Charles Sumner Greene and Henry Mather Greene.(14) However, the ideas which inspired Elmore's work were filtered through, they were crystallized by his skill and imagination into bungalows that expressed a fine sensitivity to place and climate, and to a way of life at a particular time.

The perspective appropriate for evaluating Elmore's bungalows is that conveyed by Charles Sumner Greene in 1905, quoted in Randell Makinson's Greene & Greene: Architecture as a Fine Art:

"One may often see pictures in the current magazines of California bungalows and much might be said in their praise. It is not so much what one does as how one does it."(15) (my emphasis).

This carries the true ring of the Arts and Crafts philosophy. Greene's own sentiments about small, medium-cost bungalows capture precisely the essence of Elmore's work in Blackburn:

"The attractiveness of this kind of house depends upon simplicity and adaptiveness to surroundings for the outside and deftness of arrangements inside. When one approaches such a house it must not obtrude itself upon one's sight, but rather fit into the things about it. Good things are not always seen at once, but they do not need advertising when they are found."(16)
Footnotes

(1) Elmore built only two solid brick houses in Blackburn, upon clients' insistence.


(3) 'The Paddock' comprised the area of three pre-World War One subdivisions: Blackburn Township Estate, King's Paddock and Frankcom's Paddock. The Haughton Map Collection, in the La Trobe section of the State Library of Victoria.

(4) Photographic illustrations advertising T R B Morton & Son's auction of Frankcom's Paddock in 1914; a 1924 aerial photograph of The Paddock, advertising the auction of Koonwarra Estate. Material lent by Blackburn residents.


(6) 'Semi-rural Suburban Homes', in Home and Garden Beautiful December, 1914. Copies lent by the Elmore Family.

(7) Haughton Map Collection, Vol. IV, p.80.

(8) Box Hill Reporter, 1910-1929. Elmore built two bungalows in the Shire, one of them in Blackburn, for clients who had a 'consumptive' in the family. These bungalows were generously provided with verandahs.


(11) Information supplied to me by members of the Elmore Family.

(12) Information on A J Elmore's building techniques given to me by the builder's son, Jack Elmore, who 'served his time' with his father in the 1930s.

(13) Information given by Jack Elmore, and Mr R Letcher of Blackburn.


(15) Quoted in Makinson, op.cit. p.102.

(16) ibid.