Electricity City

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Later Housing at Yallourn;
(State Electricity Commission)

Yallourn is a surprising place. That is to say the township itself. A brown coal mine conjures up visions of a collection of shabby, depressing houses, strewn along a straggling main street, with a dusty general store supplying the necessaries of life. Yet at Yallourn, in the heart of the bush, there exists a township that can teach many a lesson in town-planning and in civic and domestic architecture.
This complimentary description of the town of Yallourn was made barely eight years after the first four-roomed wooden cottages had been completed in what was to be one of the brightest but briefest flowerings of the garden city movement as interpreted and applied in the Australian countryside. Yallourn was planned, built, lived in, loved and fought for by its residents, and demolished in a period of only sixty years. The same overriding factors which brought the town into existence— the vast resources of brown coal with very economical power generation properties underlying Victoria's Latrobe Valley were also the reason for its subsequent demolition, which began in 1975 and is currently in its last stages.

The idea of a town at Yallourn was conceived in 1918 in parallel with the establishment of the State Electricity Commission of Victoria. The first annual report of the Commissioners in 1920 recorded that ... 'as indicated in the Electricity Commissioners' Report 1918, the Commissioners have adopted the policy of providing suitable accommodation for the officers and workmen employed and to be employed at Morwell. ...Progress is being made with the preliminary plans, and the design will embody the most modern practice.' As there is an existing township at Morwell some eight kilometres from the site of the Commission's township, in order to avoid confusion, it was necessary to find a suitable name for the new township. The name Yallourn was chosen, derived from the Aboriginal words, Yalleen (meaning brown) and Lourn (meaning fire).

By 1921, pressure was building up for accommodation for Commission employees engaged on construction of the Yallourn power station, and although the general layout and design of the township was not quite complete, it was decided to erect fifty wooden and brick cottages, each containing four rooms as a nucleus of the township.

The plans and description of the scheme for the erection and establishment of Yallourn township were prepared under the direction of the Commission's architect, A.R. La Gerche, A.R.I.B.A. and were contained in a report submitted by the Commissioners (John Monash, Chairman) to the Victorian Attorney-General on 15th December, 1921.

This report had been prepared in accordance with sub-section 2 of Section 11 of the State Electricity Commission Act No. 3104 which directed that '... the general plan and description shall set forth:'

PAGE 21

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT VOL.1, NO.4, 1981
(a) The character and extent of the works proposed;

(b) The area within which the works are to be carried out;

(c) What lands within the area the Commission recommends shall be set aside for streets and roads, parks, gardens, and places of public recreation;

(d) What lands within the area the Commission recommends shall be set aside for religious, charitable, or public purposes:

(e) What houses and buildings the Commission proposes to erect;

(f) What works of sewerage, water supply, and the supply of electricity the Commission proposes to carry out, and what lands (whether within or without the area) the Commission recommends should be set apart or acquired for the purposes of such works; and

(g) An estimate of the cost.  

In this exemplary example of concise reporting, from which many of today's planners and architects could take lessons, all of these requirements were met in a mere eleven pages of text supported by seven plans and drawings.
The site chosen for the town of Yallourn was on the eastern slopes of a spur of the romantically-named Haunted Hills and, while sheltered on the east, west and north by higher land, afforded panoramic views over the power house and mining areas located a mile to the east. Messmate and stringybark vegetation covered the site and it was reported that '... the gullies are filled with ferns and other undergrowth, and wallabies and kangaroos are sufficiently numerous to be constantly met with in the scrub'.

Factors which had influenced the choice of this site included the requirement '...that the dwellings should be within easy walking distance of the industry, that they should not overlie an easily accessible bed of coal' (author's italics). Other siting factors considered were a high and dry position with a porous subsoil capable of effective drainage, facilities for an adequate water supply, the relationship of the township to the prevailing wind and the location of the power house chimney stacks, the possibility for expansion and the location of railway access. The selected site was considered to meet most, if not all, of these requirements.
The factors which influenced the actual design of the township plan were stated clearly in the 1921 report and perhaps defensively in anticipation of possible criticism.

It may appear to some who can recall instances of rapid expansion of small places that the design is too limited, and that insufficient allowance has been made for the unlimited possibilities of the future. But in reply to any such comments, it should be sufficient to state that the planning of an industrial town is an eminently practical problem, and any scheme must face the question of cost and capability of realisation. The designer, while using his imagination freely, must still hold it carefully in check, and, while avoiding a parsimony unworthy of the enterprise, always remember that grand undertakings involve a large expense in maintenance, and that nothing is so depressing as an unfinished project with no prospect of completion.

Careful consideration should accordingly be given to ensure compactness and economy. By this means, the cost of reticulation of the various utilities will be reduced and the burden of maintenance lightened.

The layout of the township plan (figure 1) focused on the town centre which was located about 220 metres from the railway station. A small square in front of the station, flanked on either side by buildings designed to accommodate travellers and others having casual business in the district, was intended to form a dignified and effective entrance to the township. An avenue, two chains (40 metres) wide, was planned to link the railway station with the Town Centre and to continue through the town square as a key axial element in the layout.

The township's civic buildings and shops were to be grouped around an open square designed in the form of a 'place'. Sites around the town square were set aside for administration offices, post office, banks, fire station, court house, police station, an Institute containing rooms for indoor amusements and recreation, and buildings for other public or semi-public utilities.

In addition to the central avenue, three principal roads were planned to radiate from the civic centre to give ready access to every part of the town. However, this apparent dalliance with beaux arts geometry was quickly dispelled because ...while the nucleus of the design is of a radial form, no special attempt at a symmetrical lay-out has been made in the effort to provide roads with easy grades, residential streets with pleasing vistas, and blocks with cheerful aspects. The residential areas were laid out in a relaxed geometric form with the long axis of streets generally drawn parallel to the contours.
The initial plan for Yallourn was economical in its use of land with approximately 600 allotments planned to accommodate a population of 3,000 people together with sites for associated public and private buildings covering an area of 320 acres or half a square mile (129 ha). However, a total area of some 1170 acres (479 ha) was recommended to be set aside for the proposed township works. The residential allotments were planned to have a frontage of 60 feet (18 metres) and a depth of 120 to 130 feet (36 to 39 metres) as it was considered that the wider frontage will give greater freedom for the orientation of dwellings, provide adequate room for lighting and ventilation all round and avoid narrow areas useless for vegetation.\(^1\) A description of the town soon after its establishment stated that the blocks on which the houses stand are not large, but are of sufficient size to permit privacy. In no place in the township are they huddled together as in the poorer parts of Melbourne. No dwelling in Yallourn is so small that it has not sufficient ground for a pretty garden.\(^1\)

House Construction, Yallourn, c.1923
(State Electricity Commission)

A hierarchy of roads was identified in terms of reservation widths with the central avenue, leading from the railway station to the town centre, having a width of two chains (40 metres) and other main roads having a width of one chain (20 metres) which was considered sufficient to provide for possible lines of traffic, side walks, ornamental trees and sodded marginal strips. Within this reservation, the width of the road pavement was to be regulated to serve immediate needs but allowance was made for
the expansion of pavement widths to include a possible tramway system (which never eventuated). Residential road reservations varied from 50 to 32 feet (15 to 9.7 metres) where only one row of houses faced the street. All residential streets were to be planted with trees and, with the exception of the main roads, were to be finished with a bed of gravel so that the ...roads will resemble the drives through the grounds of a large residence and the avenues of a public park. An average building setback of 20 feet (6 metres) was suggested for residential areas and long straight roads were to be avoided because by diverting their direction a more pleasing effect is attained, street vistas are possible, the violence of the wind is checked, and the amenity of the scheme is increased in many ways.

The 1921 report recommended that existing trees should be protected and preserved except for the clearing necessary for houses and other buildings. Provision was made for both passive and active recreation with an area, centrally situated adjoining the railway station, set aside for bowls, tennis and croquet and a sports ground placed in a park belt adjoining the railway line in a well-wooded area with the clearing confined to the actual playing fields. The total provision of park land and recreation reserves totalled almost a quarter of the developed area of the town. Particular attention was given to the provision of children's playgrounds as no modern town-planning scheme that does not make provision for the recreation of the children is complete.

The report suggested that front fences in residential areas should be done away with but noted that the opening of the whole of the surroundings of the dwellings after the fashion prevalent in the Western States of America and other places is at present scarcely feasible. The allotments have been made sufficiently large to allow residents to grow vegetables or keep fowls, or stable a horse and jinker.

Sites for a primary school, hospital, shops and churches were located in central and prominent positions. The role of the churches as lynch-pins of Victorian society in the 1920s was apparent. ...the value of a church building in giving variety or distinction to a street picture is recognized by all town planners. An area for industry was located east of the township which was to include a site for an abattoir and destructor.

Water supply for the town was to be drawn from the nearby Latrobe River via a service reservoir to the north-east of the town which would ensure a copious supply of clear water, much above the usual country standard, and fully equal in purity to that enjoyed in the Metropolis. Some investigation was made into a water-borne sewerage system but initial cost estimates which
would have resulted in a weekly charge per dwelling of four shillings, ruled this service out in the short term. Naturally full provision was to be made for reticulation of electricity to allow for the installation of various electric labour-saving devices. This reticulation was to be overhead generally but underground in the main part of town.

Local timber, clay, gravel, sand and stone deposits were proposed to supply most of the building materials for the town as it was considered that ... by the full use of the local materials, a separate individuality and character (will) be given to the settlement and the customary uniformity of most of our country towns .... induced by the easy means of transit over the railways of building material .... avoided. 18

The cost of erection of the first 200 dwellings with associated buildings for industrial and communal artworks and for the formation of roads and reticulation of water and 'electric energy' was estimated to £224,360. This estimate was some £74,360 above the amount of £150,000 made available by Parliament for the provision of accommodation of Commission employees at Yallourn. This difference was accounted for by a considerable increase in the Commission's activities since the original estimates were approved by Parliament some two years earlier. The capital cost of general service buildings which were considered properly chargeable to private persons and Government Departments such as churches, police station, banks and schools were not included in this estimate.

As the township was to be owned and operated by the Commission, consideration was given to its revenue earning potential, as well as its capital cost.

It was proposed that ... the township consist mainly of brick buildings, which will command a slightly higher rental than wooden buildings. 19 It was calculated that the total revenue receivable when the first stage of the township was fully occupied would be £14,000 per annum which would represent an 8% per cent return on the capital cost of the net revenue producing outlay. However a deficit of £6,000 per annum was forecast for the early years of the life of the town but the Commissioners in their report commented that a deficiency of £6,000 per annum will be a very small sum in relation to the whole of the future revenue of the Commission, and we are of the opinion that the Commission's customers should fairly, be asked to bear this surcharge in the interests of the permanent employees resident at Yallourn. 20
The scheme for the township of Yallourn as set out in the 1921 report was adopted by the Government and work commenced in 1922 on the first section of 200 houses to accommodate a population of 1100 people. Construction of the town got off to a flying start with the Commission's Annual Report for 1922 reporting that the design of the roads and streets and drainage within the area covered by the first section of the township... is not practically completed, and about two-thirds of the work has been executed.21
NOTES:


3. State Electricity Commission of Victoria, Second Annual Report (1921/a) p.11

4. Ibid.

5. State Electricity Commission of Victoria, Report on Establishment of Township at Yallourn (1921b)

6. Ibid., p.1

7. Ibid., p.2

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., p.3

10. Ibid., p.4


13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., p.4

15. Ibid., p.5

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., p.6

18. Ibid., p.7

19. Ibid., p.8

20. Ibid.