Laying a yellow brick road: the rise of the suburban driveway

Introduction
Experiencing ‘the rise of the suburban driveway’ raises three important issues, each of which will be discussed in this paper. Firstly, innocuous though it may seem, there is an important relationship in suburban life between house, garden and driveway and a valuable historical ‘story’ to be made from this relationship.

Secondly, the fabric of this history is being affected and at risk of being eroded through the very fact that it is not recognised. The permanent – which is the car and the driveway – is continually coming into conflict with the transient – the garden.

Thirdly, there is a wide range of options for responding to this conflict. Four options will be canvassed to close the paper.

The historical texts for this examination are popular press publications: Australian Home Beautiful, its precursor, Australian Home Builder and Australian House and Garden, used in 30 year periods, mainly from the 1930s and 1960s. Also, it is important to note that within any one suburban picture there are at least two types of suburban house – the first where a driveway was never intended (say, Victorian and many Edwardian examples), and the later type, where the driveway always had a place in the suburban picture.

This paper is about the concept of the ‘Home Beautiful’ and it is for this reason that the analogy of the ‘yellow brick road’ is employed. The yellow brick road leads Mr and Mrs Average to their Emerald city. In Hollywood’s case, in the motion picture The Wizard of Oz, the average citizen is Dorothy, with her small dog Toto. The Emerald City is the home of the Wizard of Oz, the wizard who epitomises status and represents the means by which Dorothy can achieve her dream of being safe at home. Dorothy’s lesson, at the end of the film, is that ‘there’s no place like home’. She learns that her heart’s desire is only ever to be found in her own backyard. The Emerald City is very like the Home Beautiful concept, and the suburban driveway as the yellow brick road is surely a central part of this concept.

Using the analogy of the suburban driveway leading to the Emerald City or to the Home Beautiful, is valuable in understanding and juggling the other consolidation issues in the broader context of the land of Oz.

The rise of the suburban driveway
The ideal suburban house comes from a whole range of sources. The suburb, or ‘Sub-urbia’ – ‘below the town’, developed within the picturesque tradition, and as part of historical industrialisation. Other sources include the influence of Frederick Olmsted in urban and open space planning, and also the garden suburb concept. The model suburban house and garden is that a house should be set in a picturesque landscape with a serpentine driveway and stables.

Karen Olsen & Rowan Wilken
Karen Olsen of Olsen, Wilken & Associates, is an historian and horticulturist working in the heritage field. She has been awarded a 1996 Winston Churchill Fellowship to study interpretation in historic gardens internationally. This paper is jointly authored with Rowan Wilken, writer and researcher in cultural studies.
amenities and a pleasure garden. The idea of the suburban Home Beautiful was at least in circulation by 1909. Later influences include the popularisation and accessibility of the automobile, and Modernism, with its user-friendly do-it-yourself medium: reinforced concrete.

In the 1920s and 1930s, an awareness of the need for a special space for a driveway came to the fore in some early Australian Home Builder and Home Beautiful examples. Suburbs were developed for Mr and Mrs Average, many of whom did not have the immediate need for a car - cars were still an expensive extravagance. Yet in February 1923, the Australian Home Builder offered the injunction for the new property owner to plan for a driveway even if they had no car. Even in 1930, the same applied. "But I haven't got a car!" protested the architect's client, looking over his sketches for a small home. "And I'm not likely to have one; I can't afford it, and I don't like them," and so on.

In 1925, the journal stated, 'The rapid increase in the number of home owners purchasing motor cars has caused many inquiries for a serviceable private garage. Hundreds of subscribers have written requesting plans.'

In 1927, the winner of 'The best little home I know' competition, run by Australian Home Beautiful, was Mr A. Lauriston Crisp for 'Iluka' in Hobart: 'The allotment ... reserve[s] an area, should the occasion arise, for the erection of a garage (our emphasis).'

At the bottom of the driveway design pile was the owner-builder. Many new suburban property owners co-ordinated the building of their own homes (using builders rather than the more expensive architects) and these owners, at least in...
part, were reading *Australian Home Beautiful*, or their associate 'do-it-yourself' publications to find out how to go about it.

Practically or aesthetically there seemed to be no room for a driveway set in the picturesque ideal on the new suburban block. The garage, like a stable, stayed in place at the rear of the block, and the drive almost always became a straight line down the side of the house. Indeed *Australian Home Beautiful* stated 'practicality should always come before beauty'.

*Australian Home Beautiful* also recommended that when an owner's new suburban house was under construction they should just ask their builder to lay a concrete path and two-strip drive for the same cost of the total job; hence today, street after street of the same twin strips delineating a whole suburban pattern. (Some historians suggest that the use of the concrete strips — with a grass strip in between them — was to decrease their visual impact on the garden. This could be true, but also crucial to this development was a lack of both planning and finances which resulted in the driveway patterns existing today.)

The driveway certainly represented financial achievement or progress and it was linked closely to the powerful connotations of car ownership. In *Australian Home Beautiful* of February 1925, discussion covered the popularity and advantages of the car for home owners, and how the inclusion of a garage and driveway on a suburban block improves land value. 'Add distinction and value to your house', stated the journal (promoting a driveway and garage plan). The idea of the car, and of the suburban home, with its driveway, garden, garage and fence combined to hold a social value which was appropriate for Australians of the time to pursue. And it was appropriate to aspire to a *decorative* concrete drive. Instructions were given at various intervals in *Australian Home Beautiful* for laying strip drives or delving into more sophisticated patterning and crazy paving. Coloured concrete was even better.

Concrete had its own associations with the suburban Home Beautiful, some of which were expressed through the driveway. In May 1933, 'Concrete work for women' was proposed as a new hobby to be pursued by the wife in the Home Beautiful picture. In September 1933 the home owner was told, 'Whether he's in work or out of a job, there's nothing like a little work about the house to keep your boy fit and happy'. Titled ‘Keep him busy and happy’ this article advertised the publications *Concrete for the handyman* and *New way gardening*. Here was the invitation to resolve the pressures of the large world outside the home by activities within the Home Beautiful. Not least of these was the use of concrete, and not the least use of concrete was in the driveway.

At times the *Australian Home Beautiful* journal was a little more wary — even in 1927 it was lamenting, 'How often does the garage spoil the effect of a noble piece of domestic architecture'. A rather later example actually described the garage as an excrescence. But certainly, by the 1930s, the driveway was firmly established as part of the suburban scene according to *Australian Home*
Beautiful. It was used in the garden suburb, War Service Homes, State Bank designs and was integral to the suburban ideal. Today we describe the vision of the 1930s suburban front garden as ‘bungalow, with roses by the path and the driveway and the house’ and other traditions such as the front lawn.

In this first period of the 1920s and 1930s, driveways – especially concrete ones – were being recognised and laid down as permanent spaces, within the more transient spaces of the suburban garden. This humblest of mechanisms can describe the broader social and economic messages of the Home Beautiful concept in the 1920s and 1930s.

1960s

An impression of the suburban garden 30 years later, in the 1960s, provides a valuable contrast to the picture developed in the 1920s and 1930s. Such an illustration documents the evolving effect on the garden’s form and meaning through the inclusion of the driveway.

In keeping with the rapid expansion of Melbourne’s suburbs from the 1920s and 1930s to the 1960s, there is a corresponding upsurge in car ownership. Australian House and Garden of November 1964 suggested, ‘... practically every family in Australia possesses one motor car, with a large number of homes having two’. It continued, ‘With this motor car age comes a new living problem – providing shelter for the car’. Later the journal also stated, ‘We all take owning a car for granted ... (but)... hundreds of older type houses are styled so that a garage is a difficult addition’.

The appearance of the car as an essential family item and the problem of where to house it highlights the car/space paradox – we need the one, but we desire the other. On the surface at least, this would appear to create a tension where the car and garage come into conflict with the suburban ideal of the Home Beautiful, an ideal which adheres to the dictum ‘space equals opportunity’. This tension was diffused, however, when Australian House and Garden increasingly represented the car/driveway/garage as the redeemer of the Home Beautiful ideal. Articles included ‘Add a Garage and Rescue a House’; ‘Carports – Major Property Improvements’; and so on.

An AV Jennings advertisement for their ‘Catalina’ style house proclaimed that ‘downstairs the carport has room to spare for two cars plus a boat’. This poses an interesting question: ‘does the carport/garage actually usurp the house as the Emerald City/Home Beautiful ideal?’ Arguably the answer is ‘yes’, or at the very least they are synonymous. In any case, the result is the same: to service such a car-house, the driveway has to be widened. Once again, the yellow brick road leading to the Emerald City of car-and-people-house facilitates a further
incursion into the sanctity of garden space.

Such an evolution describes how the role of the car, garage and driveway have changed since first building the Home Beautiful concept.

**Heritage management of driveway and garden**

The 1920s and 1930s developments in the suburban house and garden space have become the heritage of today. Heritage studies (and urban character studies) are carried out by many Melbourne and interstate municipalities in an attempt to both quantify and qualify the heritage value of our early suburbs. These are then supposed to contribute to the management of the places. To be managed is a process of transference, where 1990s social values are superimposed onto the pre-existing suburb. When this happens, the role of the heritage practitioner is to try to ensure that the essence or fabric of that heritage is conserved, rather than overwritten or eroded by newer social values.

How can Australian social values in the 1990s be described? On the one hand, suburban driveways can be seen in a continuum from those earlier periods. However, more often, the car (usually there are two or three per house) is the most dominant icon in the front garden. It stands on its driveway or carpark, which itself takes up a large proportion of garden space. Victoria’s change in number plates signifies a shift of priority in more ways than one. ‘The Garden State’ is no longer; we are now ‘On the Move’.

Figure 2 Aspirations for a decorative concrete drive: a prize-winning entry for a Home Beautiful competition in 1930.
Within broader heritage management practice, how do Australian home owners generally, and heritage professionals specifically, consider the humble driveway? Both parties do consider the driveway - it must be dealt with and judged for its role in the garden with every planning permit, albeit often as an adjunct to the foremost issue of car management. Owners require permits for garage and carport construction and structural designs must consider the broader character of the neighbourhood. The City of Moreland initiated its heritage planning controls portfolio in specific response to the proliferation of carports which were constructed inappropriately, or which compromised the heritage streetscape around it. In South Melbourne the level of control is detailed, demanding only certain types of roller doors be used.

In heritage management, however, sufficient emphasis is not placed on the driveway, especially where it is defined as part of the garden. There are very limited, if any, local planning controls over garden space, while garden space seems to be getting smaller. Lack of consideration for the driveway in heritage management allows a superimposition of contemporary social values onto the fabric of the older space. This superimposition must have its consequences.

This process functions on at least three levels: practicality, status and security.

Cars are bigger than they used to be. For instance, from 1956 to 1960, even the diminutive Volkswagen underwent an increase in width of 6 inches. It is no wonder, therefore, that the two concrete strips of driveway often seem so inadequate in older suburbs. Sometimes cars do not fit down the driveway at all, or in the garage. Other practical priorities today include multiple car storage and ease of access to the kitchen and service areas of the house.

One level of divergence from the historic Home Beautiful ideal paves the way
for further incursions into the garden space. With this kind of precedent the
front garden no longer constitutes part of the Olmsted vision of community
parkland and social buffer.\textsuperscript{11} Thus, from the 1920s and 1930s to the 1990s, there
occurs a radical about-face in the common conception of suburban space use
value – that which was once strongly associated with the suburban ideal (the
front garden) now becomes a space merely to be better utilised. The result of
this equation is that ‘front garden equals carpark’.

On the level of social value and status several possible social meanings are
attached to the modern car and driveway. The car is an icon that signifies
wealth and status. So, what does it mean to be able to look directly outside your
bedroom window and see your bonnet? Power? Control? In some older
suburban areas, an owner’s attempt to impose an expression of social value on
the fabric of the house can be limited by heritage controls. Therefore, the mark
of one’s wealth is no longer the house in which one lives – it is specifically
expressed in the car. Given this, it seems perfectly natural to park it at the very
front of the property. Again, this is a 1990s social value which is being
superimposed onto the fabric of earlier development.\textsuperscript{12}

The third factor is security. The heightened desire for security in suburbia is
well documented.\textsuperscript{13} Security means home owners wish to relocate their cars off
the street, placing them most often in front of older housing blocks, at the
expense of the front garden.

This latter move is perhaps the strongest image of contemporary urban
consolidation. Security affects many Victorian and Edwardian homes. Fences
are pushed back and driveway space jigsawed out of the front garden. A space
is carved out by the fenceline, and then brick-paved in as a stamp of ownership
of the car as much as for security. This must be one of the greatest straight
losses of inner urban space – roughly half of a front garden is turned into
driveway, and driveway only. It is a pattern which is repeated street after street
in some inner suburbs. The result is that for other members of the community,
walking along the communal street now becomes defined in terms of bumper
bars and brand names. For the owners, they now have a parking spot assured,
but have sacrificed valuable outdoor living space where an owner can work on
their own car, children can play, or someone can grow a garden.

A valuable addendum to this is the concept proposed by Olmsted that the low
fences and green lawns of the front garden (not the high fences and bumper
bars) were effectively an extension of parkland, albeit on private land. This can
never be the case with arrangements such as these.\textsuperscript{11}

At this point in the discussion, it must be said that the car and its driveway are
winning hands down over the suburban garden. The permanent form of
concrete and hard wear-and-tear is dominating the transient shard of grass and
bedding plants on all fronts – the ephemeral aspects of the suburban garden are
being eroded by the more permanent intrusions of the hard/permanent
landscape, for reasons of practicality, security and social value. Moreover, the driveway and the garden seem in opposition here, not related at all. The yellow brick road is becoming more important than the whole of the rest of the land of Oz. It is vital to keep reminding oneself that in the chain which makes up the Home Beautiful, both elements are links with dependencies on the other.

**Future Options**

The final part of this discussion asks: how should we respond to these processes which threaten to overwrite our suburban heritage?

Urban consolidation in Melbourne is a given: conservation is the management of change, and it would be naive to believe that inner suburbs will not continue to change in the future. This paper has outlined one of the links in this change, the suburban driveway, as part of the historical image of the Home Beautiful.

How should heritage professionals handle the driveway–garden–garage–carport juggling game? Can both managers and owners protect the meanings embodied in our heritage areas, while still being able to satisfy contemporary social values in the same restricted space? This paper canvasses four options in approaching and managing the garden and driveway as part of suburban heritage.

**Option 1**

We decide that the suburban garden and its driveway as it was are paramount to how we as Australians understand and value our 'home'. We believe that we need to protect this understanding and we stop further development for cars. We choose to park on the road, or not to have a car at all. After all, we already have restricted street access for cars through traffic flow controls and totally car-free zones are merely an extension of this. They exist in Rome and other European cities and enhance quality of life in many ways.

For example, authors such as Robert Fishman argue that the association of the automobile with 20th century suburbia is a mistake. In Fishman’s view the true mode of sub-urban transport was the railway line. In Great Britain, the fight against the automobile is expressed in anarchical terms, where the left wing “Reclaim The Streets’ movement engineer deliberate traffic chaos to make party – or garden – space.” A more measured approach, suggested by some urban planners is that physical planning, and a push to consolidate the public transport resource, rather than a car dependence is the answer.

**Option 2**

We recognise that gardens are, in fact, a real liability. The classic suburb is something of the past: ‘The pattern of tree-shaded streets, broad open lawns, substantial houses set back from the sidewalks was a pattern of prosperity, family life, and union with nature that represents the culmination of the suburban style’. Now however, things have changed, and gardens are an
unnecessary extravagance. Gardens are wasted street space." Robin Boyd's concept was that front gardens were merely 'exhibition pieces' and lacked value." Even in 1933 Nora Cooper, in Australian Home Builder spoke of 'Dreams of future cities (which) relegates suburban house and garden to outer areas, devoted entirely to country homes, and house the working population in wonderfully designed blocks of flats which entirely gird the city.'

The argument that gardens are in fact a liability is a valid one. But it needs to be qualified by the fact that even if we don't value the garden now, suburbanites did in the past, and this balance is what heritage management can and should be about.

**Option 3**

We radically reconfigure our conception of the car, the driveway, the garden, and the Home Beautiful, so that we conceive of the car as itself being 'the new garden'. For example, Paul Groth proposes that carparks or parking lots are gardens in their own right." He claims, 'Cars and parking lots already function in a startling number of ways like small personal gardens ... Cars help us to establish our visible status and our sense of order in the world, just as gardens do ...'." Groth describes the car as a prize plant specimen or bird bath, rock garden or shrine." The colour of a car is the equivalent of carpet bedding. He states, 'Surely if Le Nôtre had had the beauty of freshly laid asphalt and 35 foot tall lighting standards at his disposal, he would have used them somewhere in the great gardens of Vaux-le-Vicomte'. In short, the new cultural significance attached to a car must flow on from it into the space it occupies.
Figure 5 A strong image of urban consolidation: driveway space jigsawed out of the front garden.

Groth has a point and can be supported by other, earlier writers. Chermayeff and Alexander saw that the car would supersede many other needs of suburban living. They claimed that 'the car heated and air conditioned, is not only a bus but a bedroom, offering far more opportunities for intimacy than the old-fashioned porch or the sofa by the TV screen'. In this picture, the car in the driveway in fact more accurately epitomises the notion of the Emerald City than does the suburban house. It also supersedes the value of the garden, as there is no longer a need to sit on the old-fashioned porch. There is a kind of inverse logic at work here, where the Emerald City is itself mobile and travels the Yellow Brick Road.

**Option 4**

We recognise that cars are not going to leave us, but also begin to more highly value the garden of which they are a part. We decide to manage the relationship between them and make them work harder at both. Multiple use, with the driveway doing double duty, is suggested throughout the history of the 1920s and 1930s, and the 1960s. This is a compromise which can benefit both the owner and others in the community. Multiple use also extends to the garden, the footpath and all the extra spaces in between. There must be the opportunity to adapt, and we can certainly learn from our past.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, managing our suburban heritage requires a lot more than clicking our heels together and saying 'there is no place like home'. Melding the micro with the macro in heritage management requires an understanding that there will
always be tensions. Harbison states, 'A garden connected to a house can be a second home more real to the inhabitants ... We need these two homes, a green one and a brown one, a grown one and a built one, two worlds in tension'. To these fields of tension can be added a third - a yellow one, of the driveway leading to the Emerald City.

In the movie of The Wizard of Oz, when Dorothy returns to see the wizard to claim her reward of returning home, the wizard, says ‘Go away, come back tomorrow, I’ll think about it.’ The diminutive dog Toto - acting at the seemingly innocuous microscale - jumps out of Dorothy’s arms and runs behind the curtain to expose the wizard as a fraud. The Wizard of Oz then promises to take Dorothy home, only to leave her behind accidentally because he doesn’t know how to work his balloon. As heritage practitioners, we want to be wary of not leaving Mr and Mrs Average behind. It is the micro level of urban consolidation - that is, Mr and Mrs Average trying to find a place for their new cars within their older suburban block - which will test the larger statements of urban heritage planning.

We would like to acknowledge the generous assistance of the following people in the preparation of this paper: Esta Milne, Darren Tofts, Timothy Hubbard, Richard Aitken and Jan Penney.

Endnotes

1 The Wizard of Oz, MGM/UA, 1939.
3 See the Journal of Horticulture of Australasia from that period.
5 Australian Home Builder, February 1923, p 38.
6 Australian Home Beautiful, 1 May 1930, p 17. In a Carnegie home, the spare space at the side garden is described in one journal. The side garden has a configuration directly comparable to that of a driveway and garage and it is converted to a night-time ‘ten pin bowling green’, complete with ‘a small fernery at the western end with garden seats provided’. Bowling is offered as an alternative to wasting time in ‘useless yawning and gossip’ on hot summer nights. J. T. P., “The Villa Bowling Green: Pleasant Outdoor Summer Days and Nights”, Australian Home Builder, January 1924, pp 36, 40-41.
10 Bryce Raworth, Our Interwar Houses, National Trust of Australia, Melbourne 1991.
12 Ibid. A further example is thoroughly documented in the 1920s Hollywood romance musical Car of Dreams. The boy is rich, the girl is poor, together they meet over a Rolls Royce, fall in love and live happily ever after.
13 Australian Home Beautiful, May 1933.
14 Australian Home Beautiful, September 1933, p 39.
15 Australian Home Beautiful, October 1948, p 78.

The front lawn was considered 'a safe space in which young men and women could properly engage in such games as archery, horseshoes, badminton, and croquet, watched by their elders on the porch'. J. B. Jackson, quoted in Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*, Basic Books, Inc. Publishers, New York 1987, p 147.

*Australian House and Garden*, November 1964, p 36.

Australian House and Garden, February 1964, p 48.

Crowe writes, 'The landscape for home life must be one where children can play and go to school in safety, where all ages can relax, stroll, gossip and live without danger to their lives or nerves. In a motorised age, it must also be possible to bring a vehicle up to, or within easy reach of every dwelling. Obviously, then, there are two separate living spaces: the mechanical and the human'. Sylvia Crowe, *The Landscape of Roads*, The Architectural Press, London 1960, p 76.

Lloyd, *op.cit.*, p 34.

*Australian House and Garden*, February 1964, pp 48-49.

*Australian House and Garden*, November 1964, pp 34-37.

See for example, 'The Best Planned Carports Do Double Duty', *Australian House and Garden*, November 1964, p 36.


Timothy Hubbard, Heritage Adviser, City of Moreland, pers. comm., 1995.

Robert Sands, Heritage Adviser, City of Port Phillip, pers. comm., 1996.

A model code developed as a joint venture by Federal Government - the 'Green Street' venture - recommends private open space allotments of 80m² constitute an acceptable minimum. VicCode 2 reduces this to 25-40m²; previous codes recommended 90-150m² for the 'average householder's activities'. There is roughly 500m² of open space around a typical suburban home (Lloyd, *op.cit.*, pp 37/38).


Fishman, *op.cit.*, pp 1467.

Social values or status can also be reflected in the materials of the drive as well as in the vehicle on the drive. To convert your driveway to a gravel surface necessitates higher maintenance.


Writing on suburbs with walls, Olmsted described it as 'walking outside the walled precincts of a madhouse'. Fishman, *op.cit.*, p 146. Olmsted, to eliminate the madhouse effect, prohibited high walls, required each house to be setback at least 30ft from sidewalk and have trees on each side of the street. He thus 'specified the design conditions for that greatest of American landscape institutions, the front lawn', Fishman, 1987; *ibid*.

As Fishman points out: 'The automobile, when it came, helped to destroy the basic conditions for classic sub-urbanization; the true suburban means of transportation has been the commuter rail line'. Fishman, *op.cit.*, p 135.


Such a stance is promoted by authors such as Newman, Kenworthy and Vintila, who maintain that physical planning is the key to better cities; Peter Newman, Jeff Kenworthy & Peter Vintila, 'Can We Build Better Cities?: Physical Planning in an Age of Urban Cynicism', *Urban Futures Journal*, 3 (2), 1993, pp 17-24.


Chernayeff and Alexander suggest we can 'better delight the passer by with well-designed walls, fences and façades of attached houses'; Serge Chernayeff & Christopher Alexander, *Community and Privacy: Toward a New Architecture of Humanism*, Pelican/Penguin, Middlesex, p 127.

Boyd, *op.cit.*, p 73.


Ibid., pp 134-136.

Ibid., p 134.

Ibid., p 136.


There are qualities to be found in ‘left over’ and ‘undesigned’ spaces – these are the buffer zones between private and public. A good example of this is suggested in ‘Footpath Plantings – For Community Minded Gardeners’,  *Australian House and Garden*, November 1964, pp 46-47, 100, 102, 104.