The Australian Home
FACTS, FANCIES AND FALLACIES

This article was first published in the 'Building & Engineering Journal' of 20 December 1890. It forms a small part of a mass of literature published in Australia between the late 1880s and early 1900s which clearly displays a pre-occupation with the development of an identifiable architectural style in Australia.

Of all the rich monosyllables that abound in our English tongue there is none that expresses so large a grasp of the deepest natural feelings as the word home. From the time when the cave-man or lake-dweller first thought of a settled shelter for himself, his mate, and his "large, coarse issue", the idea of the home has gone on acquiring strength, depth, and sacredness of meaning, in proportion to its growth in usefulness and comfort, as well as to the development of the true home feelings connected with the family, the garden, the farm, the neighbours, and the green mounds in the churchyard. And, considering how much is due to the home as the principal factor of civilisation, we can hardly assign to architecture a nobler task than domestic building. The professors of the art, however, have not generally shown much concern about it; even Mr Ruskin, in one of his early works, refers to it as "the most degraded branch of the whole art of architecture, one hardly worthy of being included under the name", because, forsooth, "its ostensible object is the mere provision of shelter and comfort for our despicable shell". Surely not such a very contemptible object! At all events, we should have no "Modern Painters", no "Stones of Venice", no "Fors Clavigera", unless it had been pursued with some little success. And may it not be claimed moreover that the home, as it should be, is something more and something higher than only a place of rest and refreshment for the body and protection from the elements - namely, a centre of duty, usefulness, and natural piety; a storehouse of pleasant and profitable things; a fit meeting-place for those who are bound together by indissoluble ties?

But the master-masons of the middle ages were occupied with castles, palaces and cathedrals; and the architects of later times, absorbed in the study of Grecian, Roman, and Renaissance, could not be expected to condescend below the mansion of a noble patron. So the dwelling of the ordinary citizen, or rustic, had to get built as best it might - by rule
of thumb and in hand-to-mouth fashion, being altered or enlarged from
time to time, in accordance with the needs or fancies of its inhabitants.
Fortunately for them, the workers of those days generally possessed a kind
of simple taste; the sense of what is comely, fitting, bienseant - 'tis
all one - which impelled them to picturesque production. Knowing little
or nothing of ancient or foreign styles, they wrought on, undisturbed in
the exercise of their common sense, and thought chiefly of building to
suit natural conditions and the wants of the time. Having no means for
bringing materials from afar, they used those which they found about them;
and having no machinery, they were fain to rely on their own wits and their
own hands in fashioning these to the best purpose, and giving them the
best appearance they could. And the success they commonly achieved by
such methods is proved by the admiration for old work which is universal
in the present day, and by the persistent practice of imitating it.

In our time not only grand edifices, but also dwellings of a very modest
kind are planned by professional architects, and it might be fairly ex­
pected that the scientific skill brought into play would produce results
far superior to those of earlier ages. Even where only a builder is con­
cerned there seems to be no good reason why, with all his advantages over
the men of old, he should not be able to do at least as well as they did.
Yet the fact remains that all the triumphs of science, all the improve
ments in technical methods, all the facilities for conveying material,
all the splendid works on architecture, all the institutes and lectures
and journals, all the progress in social and intellectual status, have
not yet brought forth in any country a distinct and beautiful modern
domestic style, adapted to the requirements of the place and the time.
Here in Australia the early settlers, like all newcomers, were forced
to adapt themselves to their altered conditions; having no choice, they
were compelled to build with such materials as the country afforded, and
they naturally thought of climate, convenience, and their mode of life.
If they had come out hither two or three centuries ago there would have
been some chance, perhaps, of developing an unmistakeable Australian
style on these lines. It would not then have been easy to import corru­
gated and cast iron, or architects whose only notion was to imitate. The
resources of the country, both in men and materials, would have had to
suffice; and when it was considered advisable to show that we were very
respectable people, quite able to hold our own with those of the old
country, we should not, perhaps, have sought to prove it by wearing frock
coats and bell-toppers, or by groping among the ruins of Elizabethan and Queen Anne styles for the models of antipodean houses in the nineteenth century.

Let us now endeavour to trace the natural course of architectural development in this country, free from all disturbing influence; for only by such a process can we gain a fair notion of what our dwellings ought to be. There is no need to go farther back than what may be regarded as the primitive type of Anglo-Australian abode, the wooden hut, in which we shall find at least indications of all essential features, both useful and ornamental.

The hut, as the word itself implies, would before all be a shelter from the elements; and therefore, while bearing in mind that even in the simplest and rudest constructions, the plan must always be laid down before the elevation, we will first consider it from outside. Now in Australia, speaking generally, we require protection from blazing sunlight, heavy rains, and strong winds, whether hot or cold. It is evident, therefore, that walls and roof must be thoroughly water-tight; but it is not worth while to go into the details of their structure, as the rough materials and methods used would soon be discarded, wholly or partly. But it may be noted that the valuable effect of harmony with surroundings, quite indispensable to the artistic eye, can best be attained by the use of local materials; and hence that the slabs of bark or shingles found suitable by the miner or squatter, remain the best of coverings for roofs, at least in country districts.

As regards the form of roof, the high pitch of northern climes is needful only in mountainous parts, where heavy falls of snow may be expected. A very moderate slope will generally be sufficient in Australie. But this will make the roof insignificant; whereas it should always be conspicuous in a dwelling-house. This law has been proved once for all by Mr Ruskin in one of his profoundest passages. How then shall we get over this difficulty and avoid the unsatisfactory effect of an insignificant roof? By raising it, thus committing the structural fault of doing what is unnecessary and paying for what is superfluous? There is no need for this; a natural extension, prompted by considerations of comfort, will give us all that is wanted. The caves will be made to project right over the verandah - not a miserable yard or so, but six or seven feet at least,
thus protecting the walls and windows from the hot glare, creating an airy space of shelter and coolness, and at the same time giving due emphasis to the agreeable impression of a sufficient hospitable cover. This device is largely used by the Americans, and it has been well applied in some houses recently erected about Melbourne. Contemplating them we may recall some words of the great master, whose deep spiritual insight we must always admit, even when we venture to dissent from his conclusions:— "We have in these roofs an excellent example of what should always be kept in mind, that everything will be found beautiful which climate or situation render useful."

It will be observed, however, that an adequate projection of the eaves will darken the interior of the house. And the same objection applies with greater force to the separate verandah-roof; the wider and lower, and consequently the more efficient it is, the more will it exclude light. This is a very important point, seeing that the verandah stands first among the distinctive exterior features of the Australian home. It will be convenient, therefore, to consider it at once with reference to the elaborate modern house, as well as to the primitive abode. For in the squatter's hut the darkening of the rooms will not be a serious matter; the interior being little used in the day-time except for meals, the want of strong light will hardly be felt. In itself it is pleasing, whether in hot weather when it forms a delightful relief to the outside glare, or in winter, when the shadows are thrown up by the ruddy glow from the hearth. But when the family life becomes more complicated, and much work has to be done or leisure passed indoors, the case is altered. Must we then limit the projection of the eaves, or raise and narrow the verandah-roof, so as to lose most of the benefit? "Not a whit! I have a device to make all well." Before proceeding, however, it should be observed that the separate roof of balcony or verandah, being attached very near the top of the wall, will produce the same effect on eye and mind as the extension of the eaves, provided it be covered in with the same material as the main roof.

Whichever method be used, a narrow, longitudinal opening, or else two or three small apertures, made in the roof, near the face of the wall opposite the windows, and filled in with thick glass, would make up the defect of light in the room, without at all destroying the pleasant shade outside. The glass, of course, must be well fitted and fixed, as in ordinary skylight.
lights; and to obviate any possible inconvenience from blazing sunbeams, the design in a most pleasing manner. Another instance of utility making for beauty: and we shall have one more if, in a large window with two casements, we retain a substantial middle bar, which will keep the hyperthyron from warping or drooping, while it makes a desirable division of the large hollow space, thus counteracting the effect of a yawning gap. The hinge of pivot sash above being then divided into three, we shall have, perhaps, the very best form possible for a window.

In the fireplace, also, there is no good reason for departing from the early type. If its only purpose were to provide as much warmth as possible at the lowest cost, a stove with pipes would be the very best things. But the sight of the fire is so genial and cheery, it is so delightful to sit by the fireside, that it seems a mean and pitiful economy to suppress it. From the time of the early Romans, who fought pro aris et focis to the "hearth and home" of England, it has always been the centre about which the home feelings clustered; and, though it is not of so great importance in Australia, being used at most for one-third of the year instead of two-thirds as in the parent country, there is yet quite sufficient need for it here to make it a very important feature. No doubt a large, open chimney, with seats inside, is the best thing; but space can rarely be afforded for this. The hearth should then be a plain bricked or tiled compartment, with sides and top sloping outward and upward to allow imposing standards; and a basket-grate of good, wrought iron-work for coal may rest upon them or be used alone. All the triumphs of the ironmonger's art, whether cheap and nasty, like the common iron grate that must be frequently smeared with filthy, black stuff, or expensive and superior like the elaborate arrangement with tiles clapped into the framework - an absurd pretence and affectation - all such ought to be rejected. There is no necessity or excuse for these things, and there never was. The simple old plan has always been the best for comfort and convenience. Those copings round the hearthstone, by-the-way, that are now fashionable, are not altogether right. In the summer they are in the way, and at all times it is difficult to sweep out the hearth, thus closed in. A moveable fender is best for all purposes.

Though a structural feature, the fire-place forms the most important link with indoor decoration, and starting from it as a centre, it would be easy to proceed much farther than present limits will allow. Just a few words,
then, respecting the mantel-piece, which also lies within the builder's province. We do not want a structure of heavy mortuary marble, with a shelf to hold a lot of useless knicknacks - an arrangement that is almost always hidden away under inappropriate draping as soon as people get into a house. The old mantel-shelf was nothing but the top member of the cornice which finished off the wooden framing, supported perhaps by handsome brackets. That is what we ought to have; and where the cost can be spared it may be constructed of beautiful wood and adorned with rich carving.

The use of our splendid native woods throughout the interior will produce a far nobler, more chaste, and at the same time homelier effect, than fanciful, polychromatic devices. The various kinds of cedar, jarrah, the Queensland silky oak, the blackwood, and many others are eminently suitable for the boldest as well as the daintiest work. Floors, if possible, should be of parquetry in oak; otherwise, if stained at all, which is quite a legitimate proceeding when no imitation is attempted, they should be stained all over. We should wish to avoid any semblance of sham.

As to the internal arrangements it is evident that halls and staircases ought to be as spacious as possible. A foot or two can better be spared from the rooms. And the grand effect of massive balustrades and newels ought not to be overlooked; for we want here the indubitable appearance of strength. Bathrooms ought to be large, light and airy; and it is well that kitchen and scullery should be detached from the main building, with a covered way between, taking care, however, that this runs diagonally from the back door, so as to prevent the view from the hall.

Now, anyone building for himself a house in accordance with the suggestions that have been made would be doing nothing more than providing for the reasonable requirements of home-life in Australia, and in our own time. And this by merely expanding, developing, and - where necessary - elaborating the parts and features of the primitive Anglo-Australian type of dwelling, with the addition of some few conveniences and comforts that could hardly be within reach of the earlier settler. All that is anywise needful or desirable will be accomplished without foolish mimicry of the Italian villa, the Swiss cottage, or the Elizabethan house, or any other foreign or antiquated style; all which, however beautiful, must be more or less unsuited to our needs, and have, moreover, associations that will ever prevent them from looking at home in our country.
But what of the artistic effect, it may be asked? The reply is easy. Wherever fitness, harmony, and simplicity are the sole guiding principles of our work we need never concern ourselves about artistic effect; it will inevitably come of itself, as it always has come when workers have thought only of what was reasonable and right, instead of what was novel, pretty, and fantastic. And only by such a process can we hope to evolve a domestic style bearing the impress of our clime, our time, and our people, displaying, in short, a character which may in a measure be the reflex of our own. If that is manly, honest, and serious, we ought, in the first place, to tolerate no sort of shame of affectations; no half-timber work that is only stuck on the gable in vain, cockney show; no ridiculous towers and turrets; no false parapets with their pediments and flanking urns, nor anything else typical of long-departed cults or customs. The aspect of the houses that are fit for us ought to be that of simple, sober, dignity, conveying the impression of unpretentious ease and comfort, of cheerfulness and of the profitable, decent lives of those who dwell in them. And such an aspect will certainly be the result of the means and methods here indicated. Of course the last word has not been said; a great deal might have been added concerning the disposition of passages and rooms. But these and other details depend largely on circumstances; they can be settled by anyone for himself with the help of a skilled architect. Internal decoration is an endless subject; we can hardly take up a technical journal without finding something about it, and nothing more could be done here than strongly recommend the use of wood for internal finishing. Not only is it highly effective in the right way, but no material can be cleaner and sweeter, while it will last many lifetimes with little renewal or repair.

Exterior decoration is another matter; it is the flower of style, and cannot be overlooked. There need be no fear, however, that our Australian home would fail to afford abundant opportunities for "ornamenting construction" instead of "constructing ornament"; and the question of what kind of decoration will naturally and almost inevitably be applied to its members may form a subject for some future occasion.