

The 'six-pack': the past and present of walk-up flats

Charles Pickett, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, Australia.

Most of us have a few photos from our past that are rarely displayed in public. Two of mine record these flat buildings, coincidentally in the same Marrickville street (although I lived in them some years apart). They are typical of the red-brick walk-up flats that are a feature of Sydney suburbia. Many of us have lived in them, often before moving on to more salubrious accommodation; for others, walk-ups have provided long-term homes.

Two or three floors high, devoid of elevators, walk-ups are the most common apartment format in Australian cities and towns. Despite this, they are rarely written about or discussed. The ongoing debate about the urban and social consequences of apartment buildings usually focuses on larger blocks, although walk-ups have had a more pervasive impact on urban streetscapes and living patterns.

Walk-up flats resulted from the accommodation of the apartment format to Australian suburbia. By determining the growth of flats through regulations originally conceived for cottages, State governments and local councils initially ignored the flat as a minority of the housing spectrum. The first legislation that drew distinctions between different types of urban housing was NSW's Ordinance 71, introduced in 1921 under the Local Government Act. Although this legislation allowed local councils to regulate housing density, buildings and subdivisions, resume land and control new roads, it failed to make adequate controls for flat buildings beyond setting minimum distances from buildings and site borders.¹ While these regulations made little specific allowance for flats, they did not discourage them. To the contrary, NSW building laws encouraged the walk-up format, while rent controls favoured flat construction generally.

Melbourne's building laws imposed limitations on height and site coverage, although individual councils added their own regulations.² Again, these more rigorous regulations encouraged low-rise walk-ups, although on more generous sites than was generally the case in Sydney.

In Sydney and Melbourne apartments reached the suburbs during the 1920s and 1930s, following the outward march of cottages along the railways and tramlines. By 1933 flats accounted for more than ten percent of the residences in the Sydney western suburbs of Ashfield, Petersham, Annandale and Burwood.

The streets around railway stations and shopping centres were remade with squat blocks of texture brick, tinted glass windows marked the stairwells, plaster decorations trawled the vocabulary of exotic architectures, prominently displayed names mostly recalled the 'Old Country' – 'Stratford' 'Lyndhurst' - or the new urbanity of the USA – 'Pasadena', 'Monterey'. In 1947 the average suburban flat contained four rooms (usually two bedrooms, living room and kitchen) and was occupied by three people.³

As the suburban frontier expanded again from the 1950s and 1960s, the same process was repeated further into the periphery. Flats appeared in numbers in Sydney suburbs like Canterbury, Rockdale, Sutherland and Strathfield. Melbourne's flat dwellers remained concentrated in the eastern suburbs, with Camberwell and Caulfield following the pre-war flat booms of South Yarra, Toorak, St. Kilda and Hawthorn.

The official denial of the functional differences between single and multi-unit dwellings

¹ Ruth Thompson, 'Sydney's flats: A social and political history', Phd dissertation, Macquarie University, 1986, p.46.

² RV Cardew, *Flats: A study of occupants and locations*, University of Sydney, 1970, p.27.

³ *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 1947.

allowed apartment development to be accommodated to the existing street and sub-division patterns, but it also limited their architectural and urban potential. In a sense the 'Australian dream' took its revenge in this suburbanisation of apartments, simultaneously ensuring that their image was forever compromised.

Not surprisingly, criticism of walk-up flats reached a crescendo during the 1960s and 1970s. The architect Morton Herman lamented in 1937:

Sydney is fast becoming swamped by innumerable box-like blocks which march, cheek by jowl, down uninteresting streets in increasingly dull suburbs....The resulting dwellings can only be regarded as mere shelters, and the addition to the cultural and civic benefit is nil.⁴

Forty years later, Harry Seidler was scathing at the walk-up flats replacing houses throughout the suburbs:

The total effect of this demolition of individual houses for replacement on the same site by now quite standard three-storey flats is truly horrifying. The results are barrack-type buildings, their long dimensions filling the depth of the narrow allotment. What used to be yards at the back and on the sides...are denuded of vegetation and paved for cars. On floors above, the living rooms of adjacent blocks face each other across the five-metre wide canyon...⁵

Henry Pollack began building suburban walk-ups during the 1960s before founding the Mirvac construction and property company: 'In the 1960s hardly anyone built home units of good quality...I had to compete with low-cost builders who ran one job at a time and walked around the jobs collecting discarded cut bricks and putting them back in the walls...'⁶

Yet a disconnect existed between professional opinion and urban reality – the market for walk-ups flourished despite widespread condemnation. Throughout, the assumption was that walk-ups provided a basic accommodation for renters who could not afford anything better.

However walk-ups were common in wealthy suburbs as well as poor and middling. By 1933 Sydney's eastern municipalities of Waverley, Woollahra and Randwick hosted almost as many flats as the City and inner-Sydney. Waverley, including Bondi, Bronte and Dover Heights, went from 9 per cent flats in 1921 to 32 per cent in 1933, and unlike the inner-city, most of these were built in the walk-up format. At the end of the War, Waverley had more flats (8087) than any other Sydney municipality. The streetscapes of wealthy Woollahra, including Double Bay, Rose Bay and Edgecliff, were also dominated by walk-up flats.

Eastern suburbs flat dwellers paid higher rents for their domicile than neighbouring cottage dwellers.⁷ In 1947 the average weekly rent of an unfurnished Woollahra flat was 51 shillings and 5 pence; for a cottage the average was 39 shillings. Given the existence of cheaper alternatives, there is no doubt that for these people flat living was a choice rather than a last resort. In the rush to retrospectively brand Australia a nation of home-owners, the affluent tenants of these suburban walk-ups have been forgotten. So have the landlords who profited so handsomely from them. Woollahra and Prahran, which includes South Yarra and Toorak, have long been two of Australia's wealthiest municipalities, yet their concentration of flats meant that until the 1960s they were mainly peopled by tenants, no less prosperous or 'comfortable' for this status. In Prahran – where flats were restricted to three stories in height - flats rented for substantially more in 1947 (47/9) than houses (29/3).

⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 August 1937, p.8.

⁵ Harry Seidler, 'Afterword 1979', in Robin Boyd, *The Australian ugliness*, 2nd ed., Penguin, 1980, p.255.

⁶ Henry Pollack, *The Accidental developer*, ABC Books, 2005, p.226.

⁷ *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 1947.

This was partly because walk-ups took on a different face in Melbourne, becoming the choice of wealthy apartment dwellers. *Building* observed in 1938 that Melbourne flats were 'seldom...more than two storeys in height, and stretched horizontally rather than vertically...' ⁸

That flats in South Yarra and Toorak blended almost anonymously into respectable streetscapes was in part a response to the strength of anti-flat opinion in Melbourne, reflected in council bye-laws which limited apartments to two or three stories throughout most of the affluent inner eastern suburbs.

Australian Home Beautiful noted that although 'prejudice still lingers in the minds of many people...changing conditions have revolutionised the whole meaning of the word "flat" as understood a generation or so ago'. Among these changes was architecture which 'seems to belong to some old-world cathedral square than to a street in modern flat-dom'.⁹ Garden flats with separate entrances were Melbourne's contribution to the apartment genre, and were all but unknown in Sydney. The revivalist pastiche of these apartments should not be allowed to obscure the fact that they showed the potential of walk-ups in appropriate setting, something that rarely occurred in Sydney. Wyldfel, The Chilterns and the Erskineville public housing are among the few exceptions.

Victoria's absence of rent controls meant that tenanted cottages remained the investors' preference, and supplied the majority of rental housing for working Melburnians. As a residential option, apartments remained the province of the affluent. The major exception was the apartment-friendly municipality of St Kilda, where Sydney-style walk-ups proliferated. The common failings of walk-ups were less their interior design – minimal though it usually was – than their relationship to other buildings and to public and private space generally. It was these failings that saw many councils finally begin to demand more appropriate settings for low-rise dwellings during the 1970s.

However housing choice is largely determined by demography rather than architecture – flats in general and walk-ups in particular were the preserve of single people and couples without children. Despite criticism walk-ups 'provided very affordable residential accommodation for low income groups and many young marrieds started off renting or purchasing units in three-storey walk-ups'.¹⁰

The introduction of strata title laws during the 1960s broadened the popularity of walk-ups, which became a popular and affordable point of entry to the property market. In recent years many walk-up blocks built as rental accommodation have been strata titled and renovated, gaining an unlikely desirability in inner suburbs, especially. Some walk-ups have been retro-fitted with balconies, while their blazing red texture brick was rendered in a variety of mellow shades appropriate to a fashion-conscious clientele.

Although larger elevator flats become common in suburban locations, the walk-up format has proved a surprisingly tenacious survivor. Middle-ring Sydney suburbs such as Campsie, Croydon Park and Lakemba are home to a new generation of walk-ups. Like their predecessors in the genre, these buildings occupy the majority of their site, although the consequences are significantly ameliorated by the provision of below-ground parking. In addition, the new walk-ups are notable for large balconies and complex facades, a change from the repetitively box-like structures of earlier generations of the format. Indeed, the attempt at aesthetic integration of the new walk-ups with their bungalow neighbours is perhaps their most obvious feature: banded brickwork and gabled roofs are the most common expressions of this trend.

However the walk-up demographic has also changed at the other end of the social hierarchy, extending well beyond the once well-defined childless apartment clientele. As the most

⁸ *Building*, August 1938, p.25.

⁹ *Australian Home Beautiful*, October 1933, pp.8, 12.

¹⁰ John Toon and Jonathan Falk, *Sydney, planning or politics: Town planning for the Sydney region since 1945*, Sydney, 2003, p.96.

affordable option of the private rental market, ageing walk-ups now house several distinctive sub-markets: immigrants, retirees, low-income households with children and young people.

As a result of this change, many of the suburban 'six-pack' flats built during the 1960s and 1970s have become pockets of urban disadvantage, the only form of housing available to those on the fringes of the labour market. Many walk-ups untouched by renovators and investors are reaching the end of their life-cycle, but are quarantined from change by the Strata Title laws.

According to the urban geographer Bill Randolph, strata title ownership is entrenching architectural and social poverty:

It is unclear that this framework is robust enough to deliver an acceptable product that many consumers will want to live in for a long period. These issues are poorly understood by those planning Sydney's higher-density future. Then there is the problem of what you do with a block of flats when it reaches the end of its structural life.¹¹

Although strata title legislation was successful in promoting individual ownership and investment in apartments, the system cannot keep up with planning changes and the variety of multi-unit dwellings, with the life cycle of apartment buildings needing to be part of the equation. Demolition is problematic because the ownership of most walk-ups is dispersed among several owners and/or residents. Graeme Jahn believes that strata plans should be able to be revisited twice in a century, not just in terms of site planning, but also for more technical reasons such as fire systems, air-conditioning and power. He argues that strata title legislation 'doesn't recognize that a city is dynamic, that apartment blocks are not somehow magically quarantined from the reality of change.'¹²

In 2004 the Office of Fair Trading issued a discussion paper, *Strata schemes*, and the 1996 Strata Schemes Management Act was reviewed by the NSW Government.¹³ However these changes have addressed primarily issues relating to strata schemes with more than 100 units.¹⁴ For small blocks, those for which the 1961 strata laws were aimed at, the strata laws remain fundamentally unchanged.

Despite pockets of walk-up gentrification, a class division persists between low-rise and high-rise apartments (except in the case of public housing). In Melbourne and Sydney, 'the households in high-rise flats are relatively better off compared to those in low rise flats'.¹⁵ Although the ponderous products of Meriton and other suburban developers attract more public criticism, our accumulated heritage of walk-up flats presents more pressing, and more difficult issues

¹¹ B Randolph, 'Plan for people, not just population', *SMH*, 29 November 2005.

¹² G Jahn quoted in Allenby, 13 April 2000, p.7.

¹³ Office of Fair Trading, quoted in H Grennan, 'By-laws of the jungle', *Domain, SMH*, 9 September 2004, p.2

¹⁴ A May, 'Complex feeling', *Domain, SMH*, 17 March 2005, p.2.

¹⁵ Bill Randolph, 'Higher density communities: Current trends and future implications', City Future Research Centre, University of New South Wales, 2005, p.7.