

SYDNEY'S FLATS
A SOCIAL AND POLITICAL HISTORY

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a major part of the prescribed program of study.

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This thesis is my own work.

I certify that this work has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.



Ruth Thompson

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SYNOPSIS

Before the Great War Sydney was a city of cottages, modest villas and terrace houses. Most private dwellings were one or two storeys high. Almost all these dwellings had separate titles; about 40 per cent were owner occupied with the remainder rented. Australians were brought up to think that the ideal home was a detached house in the suburbs owned by its inhabitants.

After the war a new form of housing developed in Sydney, as it had already done in other European and American cities, the flat or apartment block. These new structures, usually three or four storeys high, spread rapidly around much of the harbour foreshore, some of the ocean suburbs and in parts of the inner city. Almost all were rented.

Flats became the subject of intense political debate. Local councils attempted to ban them or restrict them to certain areas and the major political parties regularly denounced them. Flats have remained at the forefront of local politics ever since. Despite intense opposition flats now constitute almost a third of Sydney's dwelling stock and one quarter of the population live in flats. About one third of all flats are now owner occupied.

This thesis traces the social and political history of this change, including the impact of flats on the urban landscape and on property investment and tenure patterns in Sydney. It focuses on the role of local

government authorities and the state government in regulating flats and on the political activities of both house and flat ratepayers and property developers in these debates. An attempt is made to identify the major developers and owners of flats. Relations between owner occupiers and tenants are examined, as is the landlord-tenant relationship and periodic rental crises. The public's changing perception of flats and their occupants, especially the controversy over 'high rise', is charted from a variety of sources.

The changing image of flats in Sydney is related to public attitudes, the vagaries of the property market and the debate about the size and shape of Sydney. The thesis concludes with an assessment of the impact of flats on the life and landscape of the city.

ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Architecture in Australia, Architecture Australia
ACOSS	Australian Council of Social Service
AFR	Australian Financial Review
AG	Attorney General
AGC	Australian Guarantee Corporation
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ANZAAS	Australia and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science
AOHP	Australians 1938 Oral History Project, tapes and transcripts to be held by National Library, Canberra
AIUS	Australian Institute of Urban Studies, Canberra
AUST	Australian
BLF	Builders Labourers' Federation
CAC	Corporate Affairs Commission
CAGA	Commercial and General Acceptance Ltd
CBD	Central Business District
CCC	Cumberland County Council
CDH	Commonwealth Department of Housing (variously titled 1945-52 Dept. of Works and Housing; 1952-73 Dept. of Housing; 1973-75 Dept. of Housing and Construction; 1975-78 Dept. of Environment, Housing and Community Development; 1978-82 Dept. of Housing and Construction; 1982-83 Dept. of Industry and Commerce, Social Security; 1983-85 Dept. of Housing and Construction)
CHC	Commonwealth Housing Commission
CPD	Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates
CRAG	Coalition of Resident Action Groups
DEP	Department of Environment and Planning
DT	Daily Telegraph
DURD	Department of Urban and Regional Development
HIA	Housing Industry Association
HUA	Home Units of Australia Pty. Ltd.

HUA of NSW	Home Unit Association of New South Wales
HUOA	Home Unit Owners' Association
IAC	Industrial Acceptance Corporation
LCHUA	Lane Cove Home Unit Association
LD	Labor Daily
LGA	Local Government Authority
LGA of NSW	Local Government Association of New South Wales
ML	Mitchell Library
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
MLC	Member of the Legislative Council
MMC	Manly Municipal Council
MWSDB	Metropolitan Water Sewerage and Drainage Board
nd	no date
np	no pagination
NSWHC	New South Wales Housing Commission
NSWPD	New South Wales Parliamentary Debates
NSWLAVP	New South Wales Legislative Assembly Votes and Proceedings
NSWRCS	New South Wales Registrar of Cooperative Societies
NT	National Times
PLRC	Property Law Revision Committee
PRS	Priorities Review Staff
RAG	Resident Action Group
REIA	Real Estate Institute of Australia
RSSS	Research School of Social Sciences, ANU, Canberra
SCC	Sydney City Council
SEPP	State Environmental Planning Policy
SMH	Sydney Morning Herald
SHT	Sydney Harbour Trust
SPA	State Planning Authority

TNT	Thomas Nationwide Transport Ltd.
UAP	United Australia Party
UCMHU	Urban Cooperative Multi Home Units
UCV	Unimproved Capital Value

PREFACE

Sydney has more flats than any other Australian city. Half of Australia's flats are to be found within the metropolitan area and almost one third of the population adopt flat living as a way of life. It is not always through choice. Sydney's flats house some of the wealthiest and some of the poorest people in our community, from the million dollar city apartments of the rich and famous to the cramped suburban boxes of the new poor, single parents and unemployed.

Despite the importance of flats to life in Sydney they have been subjected to remarkably little scholarly scrutiny. Research into the political and social history of Sydney's flats is sparse. Geographers and sociologists have contributed most to our knowledge of flats (eg. Cardew 1970; Kondos 1975) but urban historians and planners have paid scant attention to a dwelling form that attracts a growing proportion of the population. Their almost exclusive preoccupation with houses is surprising since a study of flats can tell us a great deal about the nature of landlordism in Sydney (two thirds of Sydney's flats are rented) and the distribution of investment into real property, particularly over the last twenty years. It may also shed new light on home ownership, a central issue in Australian politics, whether from the consumers who want it or the state and capital who encourage it.

The architects of Sydney's flats have been similarly reticent to commit their philosophies to paper. Robin Boyd's *Australia's Home: Its Origins, Builders and Occupiers* which first appeared in 1952 remains the best work on suburban housing but it has little to say about flats. The art deco grandeur

of Sodersteen's Birtley Towers and the concrete of Harry Seidler's Blues Point Towers make their own statement about the direction of Sydney's flat architecture.

Although flats are now a grudgingly accepted part of Sydney's housing this is a relatively recent development. In the early years of flat development, the 1920s and 1930s, bitter debates raged about the suitability of this form of housing. At the centre of these debates were the physical determinist arguments advanced by middle class slum reformers and uncritically accepted by both the labor and non-labor parties (Spearritt 1974). Conventional wisdom held that flats were responsible for every kind of social evil from causing a decline in the birthrate to fostering criminals and immoral tendencies. Living in a house and garden was seen as an essential ingredient for procreation, family life and social improvement.

Chapter 1 sets the scene for the growing anti-flat movement. After the Great War planners and politicians, influenced by British thinking on town planning, promoted the ideal of house and garden and established model settlements in the 'garden suburbs' of Daceyville and Matraville. Returning heroes took up loans from the Commonwealth Housing Commission to finance the ideal. Flats were the antithesis of that dream.

Chapter 2 analyses the physical attempts to keep Sydney free of flats and in particular to see how local government regulations were manipulated by a number of interests to this end. Considerable scholarly attention has been paid to the way in which councils used zoning regulations to keep out industry, but much less has been written about the way in which they regulated the form and style of housing and in doing so, how they also hoped

to influence the form and style - at least in terms of behaviour - of their residents.

Nearly half a century later, very little had changed. The NSW Housing Commission's early flirtation with flat building, discussed in Chapter 3, foreshadowed its grand plans to demolish 'slum' areas in the inner city and replace them with high rise tower blocks. The new flats brought forth a torrent of emotional rhetoric reminiscent of the 1930s. A number of studies written at the time, both here and overseas, supported the view that flat living adversely affected family life (Young and Willmot 1962, Stevenson et al 1967). Chapter 7 discusses opposition to both public and private enterprise high rise flats, and examines the impact of the green ban movement.

Until the publication in 1972 of M A Jones' study of the State Housing Commissions, *Housing and Poverty in Australia*, little was written about the plight of renters in the public housing sector, and even less about the much more numerous but almost invisible private renter. Despite studies in the mid 1970s which emphasised the growing problems of private renting, few of the policy initiatives suggested were taken up (eg. AIUS 1975; PRS 1975). Indeed, as Paris points out in his study *Affordable and Available Housing*, since 1976 government policies have merely exacerbated the problems of tenants (1984a, 12).

As about two thirds of Sydney's flats have always been rented, the majority through private landlords, this thesis analyses the problems faced by tenants and landlords and attempts to reveal something about the structure of landlordism in Sydney. Chapter 4 looks at the history of rent

control and Chapter 9 the position of flat tenants in the boom and bust period of flat development following the introduction of the Strata Title Act in 1961. The new Act heralded Sydney's second major flat boom. It won strong support, not least as Chapter 5 shows, from a powerful development company with a vested interest in the spread of flat ownership. Chapter 6 charts the developer-led flat boom and draws on research work undertaken by the Urban Research Unit at the Australian National University during the 1970s. The URU published a series of monographs which concentrated on small study areas in Sydney and Melbourne and did much to foster debate about Australian housing (eg. Neilson 1972; Neutze 1971b, 1971c, 1972a, 1973; Troy 1971, 1972; Johnson 1972, 1979a, b, c; Vandermark 1970; Vandermark and Harrison 1972). This data and other empirical evidence generated by the Ian Buchan Fell Research Project on Housing at the University of Sydney (eg. Cardew 1970) has been used here.

Until the early 1970s there was a dearth of literature on Australian housing policy (Stretton 1970; Jones 1972; Hill 1974). Growing interest in the question of distribution patterns in the city and the role of private and public sectors in land and housing development is reflected in Hugh Stretton's 1974 Boyer Lectures on Housing and Government, the policies of the Labor government's Department of Urban and Regional Development and in Max Neutze's *Urban Development in Australia* (1977) and its companion volume *Australian Urban Policy* (1978). Both Neutze and Stretton accept as given the legitimacy of the Australian desire for home ownership, a policy promoted by all major political parties. Neo-Marxist critics, such as Kemeny and Berry have correctly divined that the weight of public policy in Australia favours the owner occupier not the tenant. They cite government restrictions on owner occupiers housing interest rates and the small amount of money put

into rental housing as evidence (Kemeny 1983, 7-22; Sandercock and Berry 1983, 110-115). But they show very little curiosity about the private rental sector and completely ignore the extensive state subsidies extended to landlords in the form of tax concessions for a wide range of property expenses, including until recently negative gearing. Daly is one recent scholar who has taken the landlord/financier question seriously in his *Sydney Boom, Sydney Bust*. But while his book gives a good picture of the financing of inner city office property, it has remarkably little to say about the largest sector of landlord holdings in Sydney - its flats.

Chapter 8 looks at the effect of economic recession on landlords as both large and small investors withdrew their capital and redirected it to more lucrative investments and local councils made it much harder to build flats. Many councils were caught unawares by the 1960s flat building boom and when flats invaded suburbs like Lane Cove, Ryde and Eastlakes and made further encroachments into traditional inter-war flat suburbs the impact on suburban landscapes was almost universally deplored. Councils adopted a set of reactionary planning controls, setting minimum standards to protect local amenities and to safeguard the property values of local house owners. The effect of these controls was to reinforce the residential segregation of high and low income earners (cf. Paterson et al 1976).

The final chapter of this thesis looks to the future. It examines the state government's urban consolidation policy (still resisted by many suburban local councils) and its effect on residential densities. The variety of new low rise housing, in the form of town houses and villa units, indicates a trend towards 'out not up' yet a goodly proportion of the population demonstrate a continuing preference for flat life, or similar forms of medium and high density living.

Data Sources

Several data bases are used in this study. The most comprehensive is the information on dwellings gathered at each census of population and housing from 1911 to 1981. Very little analysis has been done to date on the 1981 census yet it has important implications for flat builders, flat dwellers and flat owners as well as those planners and academics with a more conventional interest in census results. The last four chapters of this thesis use the 1981 census (taken during a period of economic depression in the building industry) to complete the analysis of seventy years of flat development in Sydney and set the scene for likely trends in the eighties.

There are a number of difficulties associated with analysing census figures. At 1921 and 1933, private dwelling stock was divided into two categories, private houses and flats and tenements combined. Tenements were defined as non self-contained rooms or apartments without bathing/kitchen facilities. They did not include terraces or semi-detached houses. It was not until 1947 that flats became a separate category.

In 1947 the Commonwealth Statistician defined a flat as 'part of a house or other building ordinarily intended for occupation by a separate family group and is a self-contained unit with both cooking and bathing facilities'. Flats then were defined in household terms. At 1971 however, flats were identified by a combination of physical structure and household formation. Cardew estimates that the change in definition overstates the number of dwellings by about 3 per cent relative to previous censuses (Cardew 1980, 72). Further problems arise with the 1976 census. The categories of separate, semi-detached, terrace houses, combined dwellings

and not stated incorporate some flats which makes the final 1976 figures understated relative to the 1971 census (Cardew 1982, 82).

Sources for new flat building are drawn mainly from the NSW Housing Commission Annual Reports, the NSW Statistical Registers and comprehensive records compiled by the MWSDB. These document the number and value of new flat buildings completed in each Sydney LGA from 1911 to date and give similar details for alterations and additions to existing blocks of flats. The useful distinction made between numbers of flat blocks and numbers of flats emphasises the confusion that can arise when referring to 'flats' in general. Throughout this thesis, unless otherwise indicated, flats refer to individual flats not blocks of flats. The term home unit which came into vogue in the 1960s after the Strata Title Act made owning a flat easier seems to imply ownership whereas 'flat' may imply either. The two terms can, however, be used interchangeably though 'flat' is used throughout this thesis.

Statistics on strata title flats in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 are based on the registered strata plans held by the NSW Registrar General and computed by the Sydney University Sample Survey Centre for the years 1961-1980. Each plan consists of a location plan of the building, a floor plan and schedule of unit entitlements. From information about date of registration, address, height and type, it is possible to build up a comprehensive overview of Sydney's strata flats in comparison to other forms of strata development and to infer major trends in the strata conversion process, though the actual date of construction is not stated on the strata plan.

Data on Sydney's flat builders, flat developers and flat dwellers is

much more illusive. Any examination of local government rate and assessment books and building registers involves a herculean task of such proportion as to be beyond contemplation. In any case, results would be at best patchy, at worst inaccurate. Building registers in particular are at the mercy of their compilers for accuracy. Names of architects, owners and builders interchanged at will and flat buildings which received approval but were never built are two of the most obvious problems with this data source. The space allotted for the name of the developer on strata plans is also subject to the same vagaries and needs to be treated with caution.

Local government records are a major source for the data banks compiled by private market research companies. Cordell Building Publications receives details of building approvals and commencements from local councils and publishes *Construction Reports*, a weekly review of building activity in five categories including 'Flats and Units'. They are intended for use within the building industry giving potential tenderers information on the value of the job, the name address and telephone number of the architect and builder to contact, the nature of the development, its location and the stage it has reached, from planning through to construction. Until the end of 1984 Cordell's also published a *Quarterly Review of Construction*. This identified projects over \$100 000 in value moving into the construction stage. Projects were broken down by region, using ABS Sydney subdivisions; by type of construction including 'Flats and Units' and by private/government sector. The breakdown of 'aged units', 'flats and units' and 'villas and townhouses' as a percentage of all flat development and by region is used in Chapter 10 to illustrate the growing trend to medium density townhouse developments.

BIS-Schrapnel Pty Ltd operates in a similar way to Cordell's though it

does more long term and short term forecasting than Cordells. Their figures do not necessarily equate BIS-Schrapnel uses ABS statistics on approvals and commencements which ABS compile from figures supplied by local councils. Cordells receives its information direct from councils and publishes it as close as possible to the date received. Postal delays can mean that the data is out of line with BIS-Schrapnel's. Both companies have only been conducting this kind of research since the mid 1970s though Telesis (Aust) Pty Ltd, now Construction Research of Australia has figures dating back to the 1960s. These data sources are limited to new flat building. They reveal little about flat investment overall and nothing about flat dwellers.

Sydney Cityscope and its companion volumes Parramatta Cityscope and North Sydney Cityscope, produced by Cityscope Publications Pty Ltd, contain the only published source of who owns Sydney's flats within the geographical limitations of the commercial zones in North Sydney and Parramatta and the CBD. It is of most use in identifying ownership of flats built during the 1980s city flat boom. The text lists the name of the owner(s) and where the owner is a company the names of the shareholders; the number of flats, and number of storeys; the strata plan number and number of unit entitlements for each flat; the purchase price and when traded. The data is based on information from the Registrar General, the Valuer General, local government records, newspapers and real estate agents. It does not adequately identify tenanted flats.

Invisible Landlords

A number of data bases, including records held by the Valuer General, the Registrar General, MWSDB, Rental Bond Board and local government, have

been examined in an attempt to shed some light on the nature of investment in Sydney's flats. All have their drawbacks, the major obstacles being that they do not identify the type of dwelling or whether it is tenanted. While it is sometimes possible to infer this information by checking the address of the owner against the address of the dwelling and by making a guesstimate of the type of dwelling (2/53 Brown Street would presumably be a flat), this is a time consuming process of doubtful validity. A Torrens block of flats would be almost impossible to identify without recourse to an exhaustive physical survey of the property, 29 Arcacia Street, for example, could be a house or a Torrens block of flats.

Approaches were made to the MWSDB but Dr Peter Crawford, President of the MWSDB, suggested that the information required would be difficult to obtain, though possibly when the Board's records are fully computerised access will be easier. Correspondence with the NSW Valuer Generals Department's Chief Urban Valuer, B Moore, indicated that the Department's records only show ownership of individual land parcels and, in the case of strata title, the registered number of the strata plan. No records of tenancy details are kept for residential properties (Letter 19 Sept, 1984). Land Tax Department records indicate property owners holding land of more than \$55 000 (excluding main residence), based on the Valuer General's assessment, but again the Department is only concerned with land. It is not interested in what is on the land or, assuming there is a rental property involved, whether it is currently let or merely vacant for some reason.

Like the Valuer General's Department, the Registrar General deals with land rather than buildings. Each Certificate of Title describes the extent of the land, where it is and what mortgages and caveats have been taken out on the land and their discharge. It does not tell you what building, if any,

is on the land or whether the owner is a landlord. Registrar General's records have been of most use in tracing the ownership profile of a particular block of flats and in tracking down the portfolio of particular owners through the Purchaser's and Vendor's Indexes. As these are arranged alphabetically by surname within very limited time spans, it is only efficient to use them to find out more about particular blocks or owners. No general trends can be inferred from this source.

The Rental Bond Board again does not make any distinction between types of dwellings. Flats can only be inferred by the address. The form completed on lodgement of a bond requires the applicant (either the tenant or the landlord) to state the weekly rent, the number of rooms and whether the dwelling is furnished or unfurnished. Records do not go back as far as either the Valuer General or the Registrar General. They are only filed numerically. There is an alphabetical index but it is according to tenant's surname, not the landlords. The only records which are computerised are those of landlords for whom bonds of ten or more properties are held. While this might be useful to discover something about major property owners, most flats are owned by small landlords, that is, those owning one or two flats or blocks of flats which the computer listing would not show up. Landlords not requiring a bond do not come within the province of the Rental Bond Board thereby excluding the large and possible growing body of informal landlords. These might include inter-family lettings, for example, parents 'renting' a flat to their children at low rents to maximise tax-deductible losses and widows and single parent families looking for some help with mortgage repayments who prefer not to advertise the fact they receive income from rental property for fear of jeopardising a government pension.

A sample survey of Sydney's flat landlords was considered but rejected

because of the difficulties associated with obtaining a statistically accurate sample given the inadequate data bases. Even supposing it were possible to overcome the shortcomings of the data sources mentioned, any sample based on dwellings would be likely to have an unacceptably low response rate.

This problem faced researchers on the Australian Housing Research Council's 1978 Project 55 on 'Rental Housing Investment Criteria' in Melbourne (Yates, 1982). They decided to use local council ratebooks but, in view of the costs involved, only records for municipalities which could be machine read were employed. (Only the most recent records are on computer, making an examination of investment into flats in the twenties, thirties and sixties much more difficult). Eventually a sample of 1460 landlords was compiled and a target of 500 interviews set. Unfortunately only 271 completed interviews were conducted, an indication of the inaccuracy of local government records (21 per cent of attempted contacts no longer lived at the address supplied) and the reluctance of landlords to become involved with a survey of this nature (Yates 1982, 31).

One of the best sources on private investment in property up to the early sixties remains the Report of the Royal Commissioners on the Landlord and Tenant (Amendment) Act 1948 (1961). The Commission heard evidence from over 130 people representing a cross section of property owners, tenants, pensioners, real estate agents, builders, solicitors and public servants. Its Appendixes contain the only surveys of rented houses and flats current in 1961 based on records supplied by the Rent Control Board and the Valuer General as well as the results of investigations carried out by interested bodies such as the Perpetual Trustee Co Ltd, the Flat and Property Owners' Association and the Real Estate Institute. The evidence gathered by the

Commissioners on the sale of flats under company title due to rent control legislation is used in Chapter 4 to balance the graphic and highly emotive newspaper accounts of the landlord/tenant debate.

Inadequate and incomplete data has also limited attempts to find out more about the private rental housing sector in general. The obvious starting point is the census. While still the most comprehensive data source on tenants, it has a number of limitations especially when comparing changes over time. Definitions change, the questions change (for example, as Paris points out, the 1981 census did not include a question on tenants of employers but it did ask about tenants of other government authorities; this was reversed in 1976) and most importantly the data focuses on households not dwellings (Paris 1984a). Much of the information about tenants, for example their marital status, income and transiency would have been of greater use in this study if cross tabulated with type of dwelling. Where this dimension is not provided, it is only possible to make inferences about flat tenants based on their numerical and percentage strength in the market as a whole. Two ABS surveys, Survey of Home Rental and Ownership (1979) and Survey of Housing Occupancy and Costs (1981) suffer from an equally depressing lack of focus on dwelling type. Five tables out of a total of 24 in the two publications distinguish between types of dwellings.

Statistics compiled by the Real Estate Institute of Australia were another possible source of data. The Institute produces a monthly newsletter *Market Facts* for Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Adelaide, Brisbane and Canberra, a quarterly newsletter for Newcastle and the Gold Coast as well as an *Annual Report*. These reports include much useful information about rent levels, vacancy and letting rates and comments on financial influences on the real estate market. Their main drawback is that the information is supplied by

members on an ad hoc basis. The number of participants varies from month to month and city to city so the data is not strictly comparable either geographically or over time. It includes only properties that are professionally managed (mostly those at the upper end of the market) and ignores households that pay rent directly to the landlord. While the Institute calculates that its members represent only about 10 per cent of the total private rental accommodation, its data nevertheless represents informed analysis by a body of experts in the field and is used in Chapter 9 to give some useful indications on trends in private rental housing (cf. Paris 1984, 80-89).

To plug the gap left by these more formal avenues of approach, a number of interviews were carried out with architects, planners, developers and flat dwellers. They provide a rich source of material which helps to flesh out the account of the nature and distribution of investment in flats in Sydney.