

CHAPTER I

THE IDEAL HOME IS A HOUSE

We do not think that the tenement or flat system of housing would meet the requirements of Australian workmen, and we recommend that on social and hygienic grounds workmen should be encouraged to live in separate houses in suburbs (Royal Commission for the Improvement of the City of Sydney and Suburbs 1908-1909, Vol 5 1909, NSWPP Vol 5 1909, xxviii).

When the Royal Commissioners into the Improvement of Sydney and Suburbs met in 1908 they surveyed a city with 110 000 dwellings housing about 640 000 people. Over two thirds of the populace were tenants, a little higher than Melbourne and much higher than in the other, much smaller, capital cities. Between the 1840s and the early 1900s the dominant form of housing in Sydney had been the terrace or row house. But by around 1905 this form of housing become so unpopular with intending owner occupiers, investors, landlords and even tenants - not that they had much choice - that terraces ceased to be built. The expanding suburban rail and tram networks meant that people could live some distance from the city centre and the inner industrial suburbs but still be within reach of employment. Semi-detached and detached houses, which had been rapidly spreading in every direction beyond the inner suburbs, became the measure of housing quality. They usually had both front and back yards and let in lots of sunlight. Detached houses had the added advantage of having no common walls, so they created a greater degree of privacy.

The growing suburban environments provided in places like Mosman, Coogee, Ashfield and Chatswood, where 19th century villa estates were being broken up to provide housing blocks, were worlds apart from the overcrowded slums of the inner suburbs. Between 1861 and 1881 the population of the city of Sydney municipality doubled. By 1891 it housed 108 000 inhabitants, about

a third of the total metropolitan population. The fact that most of them lived in conditions more cramped than any suburb fuelled the notion that high density living of any kind was undesirable. The worst areas were around the waterfront in Brisbane and Bourke wards, between George Street and Darling Harbour. The development of Darling Harbour gradually transformed the two wards from predominantly residential to commercial usage. New warehouses and bondstores dominated the major thoroughfares and remaining workers were crowded into relatively fewer houses and tenements (non self-contained rooms) in lanes and courts off the main streets. Despite a declining population Bourke and Brisbane wards had more people per inhabited dwelling than any other ward, city or suburban. By 1891 Bourke ward had an average of 8.2 people per inhabited dwelling, Brisbane ward had 7.2. When bubonic plague broke out in 1900, almost all the 303 victims lived in Bourke and Brisbane wards. Nothing much had changed since a report by the Sydney City and Suburban Sewerage and Drainage Board in the 1870s described the miserable squalor of Miller's Buildings, a court of 14 houses in the Rocks, each with two 11 feet by 11 feet rooms and four water closets for the 14 houses. Roughly 60 people lived in the court (NSWLAVP 1875-6, Vols 4 and 5 quoted Kelly 1978, 74).

This was not unusual. Hundreds of small terraces and single storey cottages with less than four rooms packed the alleys and laneways behind the more substantial residences of the middle class. Most of Sydney's forgotten terraces were built in the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s by subdividers with little interest in providing anything beyond the most basic shelter. Even when new they were substandard, built directly on to the street with no backyards and no running water or sewerage connections. Almost all of them were owned by absentee landlords (Kelly 1978, 66-80).

A significant proportion of Sydney's mobile working class lived in boarding or lodging houses, possibly as many as one fifth the adult population of metropolitan Sydney at 1911 (Kelly 1982, 58). The 1911 census indicated that there were 3564 boarding houses, lodging houses and 'coffee palaces' (an American term denoting large, unlicensed residentials offering cheap accommodation) in Sydney and suburbs at this time. By 1921 this figure had tripled as the middle class increasingly abandoned their once fashionable terrace houses to take up residence in the spacious suburbs north and south of the harbour. Woolloomooloo and Darlinghurst became the preserve of the rent paying worker who could afford no better.

The image of the down-at-heel boarding house immediately sprang to mind when the middle class thought of flats. They conjured up an image of seedy places, once perhaps the home of the professional man and his family who sought a well-built prestigious home close to the hub of business and commercial life, but now converted to cheap non self-contained dwellings. They were mainly occupied by workers seeking low cost accommodation in the city whose transient life-style, the antithesis of the responsible family man who aspired to a cottage in the suburbs, fed the notion that non-house dwellers were to be viewed with deep suspicion, if not outright loathing. Peter Harrison, whose mother ran several rooming houses in Kings Cross and a coffee palace owned by the Maritime Services Board in Kent Street during the twenties and thirties, said of these non self-contained 'flats',

they were seedy and noisome smelly places. There was always a fair sprinkling of new Australians in them. Mostly they were blokes from an unsettled domestic kind of background ... tradesmen working in and around the city, painters on the Harbour Bridge, wharfies, blokes on the wharfs ... I used to shudder at the whole thing. I thought the whole operation was just too sordid' (Harrison interview, 1982)

Mrs Harrison was one of the vast army of women who ran Sydney's

boarding houses. Mrs Jeannie O'Sullivan advertised 'Rooms To Let' in her classic ten roomed three storey brick house at No. 107 William Street. The front room on the first floor opened on to a flat columned verandah with simple ironwork railing, the upper windows were more elaborate with heavy frames and ornate scrolled leaf and flower patterns. Four lodgers resided there in 1916, Mary Kenny, Kate Knight, Louisa Tomlinson and James Lessels. Next door at Nos. 105 and 103, Mrs Mary Gavagan and Mary and John Quinn also took in lodgers. At one time joined together to form the private residence of Stanley Burdekin, member of East Sydney's largest property owning family, the pair of houses had seen better days. In 1916 the SCC resumed all three terraces, along with 91 others, 25 of them boarding houses, as part of a road widening scheme for William Street (Kelly 1980, 53-62, 149).

Most of Sydney's boarding houses were large three storey terraces, as befitted their former occupants. Almost half had six or seven rooms though nine or ten rooms was not uncommon. A significant proportion were even grander establishments, the former mansions of the well to do. Between 1911 and 1921 the numbers of private dwellings in NSW with ten rooms or more declined by approximately 30 per cent (Table 1.1).

In 1911 comparative 'mansions' represented 3.4 per cent of all private dwellings, by 1921 only 1.8 per cent. Over 300 were broken up, turned into flats or tenements and invaded by low income tenants (Boyd 1952, 98). Wealthy city residents, prompted by the decline in the numbers of domestic servants due in part to the war effort, began to take stock of their housing options (Census 1911, 1921). 'Sick and tired of the uncertainty of domestic help, and its scarcity', they saw the well-appointed, spacious flat with the possibility of shared domestic service, as an attractive alternative to

maintaining a large establishment without domestic help. The Sydney Morning Herald noted the advantages of living in a flat within easy distance of the city where residents

can be independent of the vagaries of gardeners, cooks and housemaids. When they desire to entertain their friends they do so at the city cafes or hotels, where they run no risk of having their evening's enjoyment marred by a piqued servant who has been required to work longer than usual (SMH 27 Feb 1919).

Table 1.1 Private dwellings in NSW, 1911 and 1921

No of rooms	1911	1921
10-14	9 427	6 573
14-19	964	626
20+	382	227
Total dwellings		
10 and more rooms	10 773	7 426
Total private dwellings	319 766	414 468

Source: Census 1911, 1921

The post-war era saw a further decline in domestic service as many girls opted for remunerative factory life rather than the drudgery and long hours of labour in someone else's home. Building magazine, organ of the Master Builder's Association, lamented the chronic shortage of servants which meant that 'even if Mary Ann were available, her price is too high,' and looked forward to the day when 'the average Australian girl can be reimbued with the idea that factory life is not half as comfortable, healthy or compensating as domestic service (12 July 1916, 97).

Sydney's first block of flats, the Albany (now demolished) built in

1905 in Macquarie Street opposite Parliament House heralded a number of mansion flats for the wealthy in harbourside locations. The grand Beulah flats at Kirribilli Point, designed by Roscoe Collins in 1918, offered tenants all 'the attributes of a private residence without the attendant worries'. Meals could be taken in the public dining room or for 6d extra served in your apartment. The breakfast menu served from 8am to 10.30am offered porridge, fried garfish or smoked blue cod, a selection of main dishes including eggs and bacon, grilled rump steak, omelette with finest herbs, Oxford sausages and chip potatoes, cold joints, York Ham, beef and lamb. Fruits or compote, strawberries and cream were 6d extra but tea, coffee or chocolate were included in the 1s 6d tariff. Rents ranged from £2.2s for a two bedroom flat to £5 for a four bedroom flat, all furnishings by Marcus Clarke & Co Ltd and fully fitted out with hot and cold baths, electric light and fans. Residents could enjoy swimming in the sea baths or playing billiards in the Billiard Room. A 'wonderful Flat Roof' of 10 000 square feet boasted uninterrupted views across to Circular Quay and Farm Cove and in the distance the Blue Mountains, Botany Bay, Bondi and Coogee Hills (Beulah c 1908, np).

Flats won increasing popularity with wealthy members of the community who wanted to remain 'in town' but held little charm for most middle class families who were keen to leave the grime and cockroaches of the city terrace for a labour-saving detached villa in the fresh wholesome air of the suburbs. Real estate developers, parliamentarians and town planners fostered the move to greener pastures. The railway and tramway expansion after 1880 made it possible. Real estate agent of Summer Hill, Richard Stanton, announced that his 'slumless, lane-less and pub-less' garden suburb at Haberfield was 'a pure and wholesome atmosphere away from the suffocating portions of the already over-built suburbs in the more immediate

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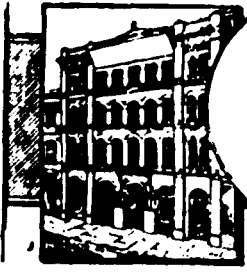


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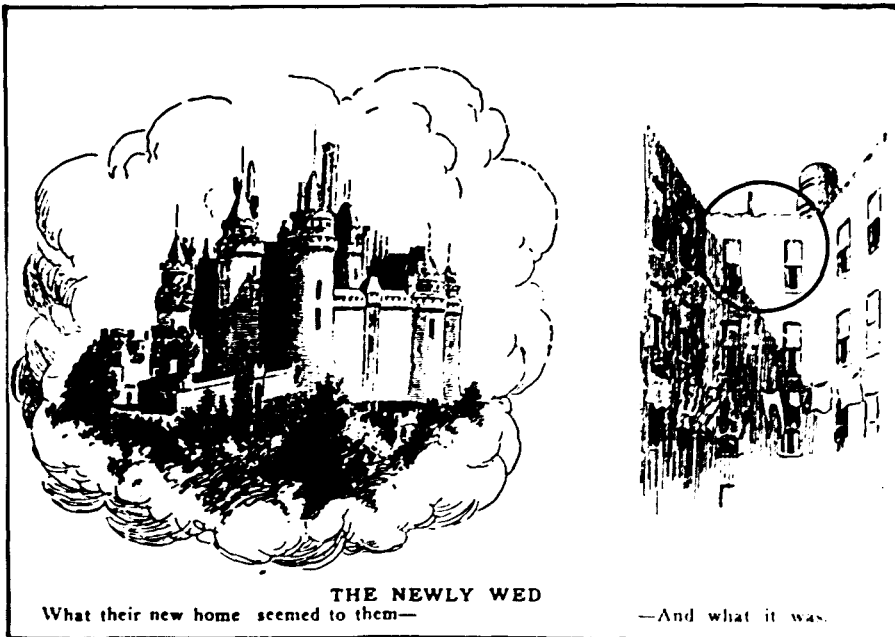
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5%
 INTEREST

Letterhead 20 Feb 1924, Dept of the Attorney General and Justice,
 State Archives 5/7776.2



The Home 1 April 1926

Fig. 1.1 'Homes That Are Homes.' Real estate agents R. Shaw & Co. of Martin Place promoted the ideal home as a house and promised 'Model Homes Built To Any Design. Every Suburb.' But the ideal remained an unaffordable dream for some Sydneysiders who faced life as tenants in often cramped flats or boarding houses, as the cartoonist for The Home depicted.

neighbourhood of the city' (Ashfield Advertiser 15 Mar 1902 quoted Crow 1978, 6).

Houses began to spread rapidly along the rail lines; the Illawarra line towards Rockdale to the south; through Strathfield and Burwood to Parramatta in the east and north from Milson's Point to Hornsby while the City's population declined from 111 255 in 1901 to 90 879 in 1929. The terrace gave way to the detached bungalow as the ideal that all decent families should strive for. If one home looked very much like another, it did not matter, owning one did. Home ownership became the dream but certainly not the reality for the majority of Sydney families. At the 1921 census 41 per cent of dwellings were owned or being purchased, by 1933 this figure had hardly changed. It is likely that owner occupation did rise in the twenties, reflecting both suburban subdivision and finance schemes, but by census night in June 1933 the metropolis was in the grip of a severe depression (Fry 1972, 9-12; Butlin 1964, 277). Many mortgagees lost their homes and few young families could afford to even contemplate buying a home (Spearritt 1978, 57). The rapid development of flats as a new form of rental housing contributed to keeping owner occupation at bay. Owner occupation varied considerably within Sydney. Canterbury and Kuringai, on the fringes of the metropolis were amongst the highest, the City of Sydney with its expensive hotels and down-at-heel boarding houses and rented terraces, amongst the lowest. The very poor had little hope of ever being able to save the deposit for a block of land or escape the wretched conditions of the rented slum dwelling. Flats and tenements became the second rate solution for Sydney's second class citizens. As the British-born architect John Sulman put it 'it is not advocated as the best, but the best under the circumstances where people must be housed cheaply in or near the heart of the city' (Sulman 1921, 200).

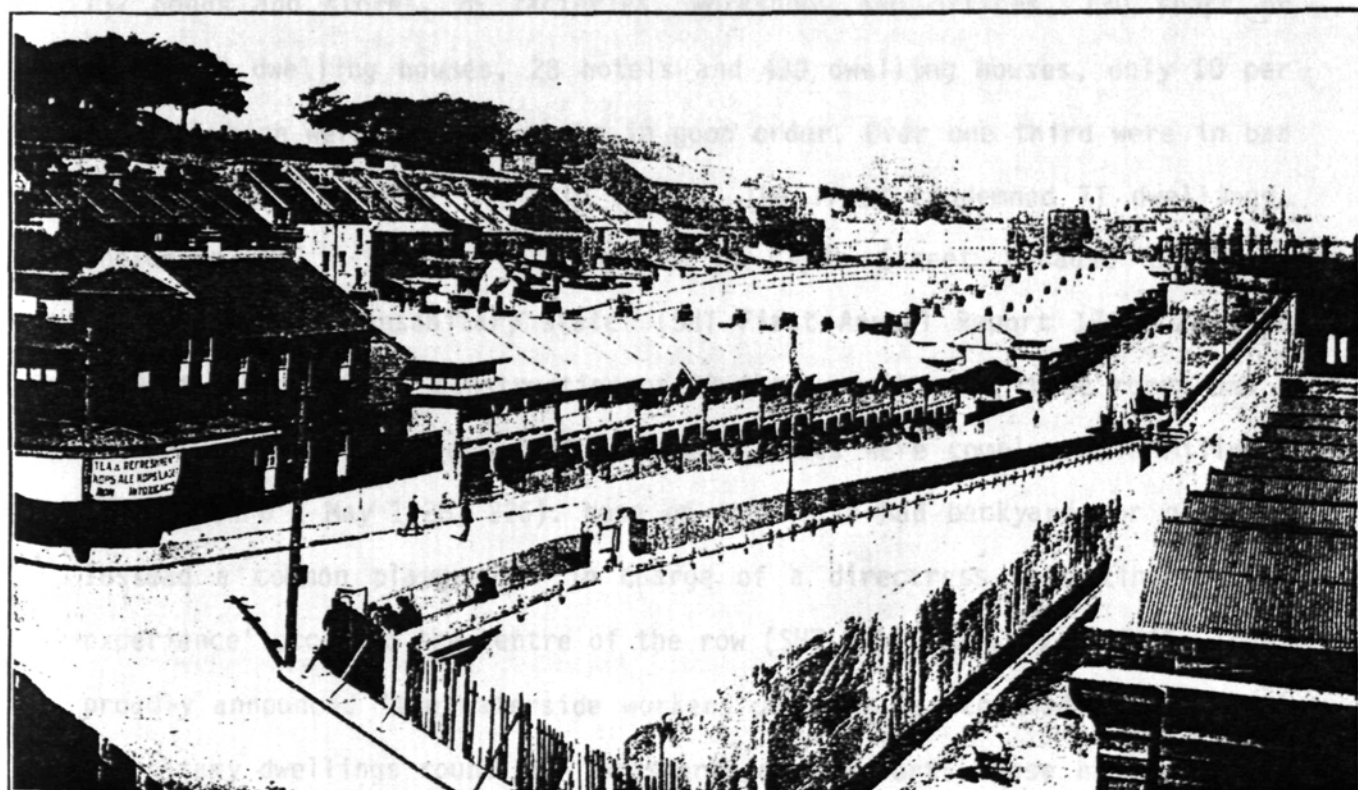


Fig. 1.2 'Waterside Workers' Flats at Millers Point' constructed for the Sydney Harbour Trust with a children's playground in the centre 'to compensate for the absence of gardens or yard space, rendered inevitable by the limited area available' (Sydney Harbour Trust 1919, 27).

The grudging acceptance of flats for workers who needed to be close to their place of work resulted in the erection of flats in the Rocks for workers on the wharves and coal lumpers. In 1901 after the outbreak of plague, the newly created Sydney Harbour Trust resumed 30 acres west of George Street and north of Grosvenor Street. It took over responsibility for 132 bonds and stores, 89 factories, workshops and offices, 130 shops or shops and dwelling houses, 28 hotels and 430 dwelling houses, only 10 per cent of which were reported to be in good order. Over one third were in bad repair, the rest only in 'fair order'. The Trust condemned 71 dwellings, including 40 in Day Street and 14 in Clyde Street because of their 'dilapidated and insanitary state' (SHT First Annual Report 1901, 28). In 1909 it began initial construction of 22 flats, each with three rooms and a kitchen. Between 1910 and 1913, 102 more flats were completed in Miller's Point (NSWPD 1 May 1928, 226). None of the flats had backyards or gardens. Instead a common playground 'in charge of a directress with kindergarten experience' occupied the centre of the row (SHT 1919, 27). By 1916 the Trust proudly announced 'the waterside workers used to be accommodated in small insanitary dwellings round the foreshores of the Port. These have all been demolished, and the Commissioners have provided in their place flats with very modern convenience and at very reasonable rents' (SHT 1916, np).

Itinerant waterside workers lived in the Model Lodging House in Kent Street established in 1882, and home to some 170 lodgers each night. Sixpence bought them a bed for the night, blankets and sheets provided, but no food. At peak periods during the year the lodging house was full to capacity. May and June were generally quieter months when many left the city to look for work in the country, shearing or on the sugar cane farms in Queensland (SHT Seventh Annual Report 1907, 57).

While non self-contained flats, tenements and lodging houses were acceptable for the few, they were never considered an acceptable form of housing for the majority. Even J D Fitzgerald, Labor stalwart and foundation member of the Town Planning Association of NSW and later chairman of the Housing Board saw them only in terms of housing for the poor and for the rich - the poor because they had no alternative, the rich because they had every alternative. He reiterated his views in evidence before the 1908 Royal Commission for the Improvement of Sydney, the first comprehensive planning review undertaken in Sydney

I do not think that there is a really good example in Sydney of a model tenement house, such as the Cadbury Trust in London are building. When I advocated model tenements I was told that the workmen would not live in them, that he preferred his little cottage with his acre of ground where he could grow his cabbages and his roses. Crickville and Lillyville were thrown open, but I believe there were only two applications for the leases. The wharf labourer, the coal lumpers & (sic) must be near the wharfs and the house that he lives in becomes a tenement house. The Hotel Australia is, after all, a tenement house on a glorified scale (NSWPP Vol. 5 1909, 126).

Slum reformer Canon F B Boyce supported Fitzgerald. He condemned slums as breeding grounds for crime and disease and favoured the remodelling of the slum areas of Chippendale, Surry Hills and the Wexford Street neighbourhood and the erection of flats to house workmen. The Commissioners cross-examined him on the strong feeling against flats in the Rocks area. He replied

some of the most aristocratic people in London live in flats ... there are some places in London where the mansions have been built and they are very popular ... the people seemed pleased with the better conditions and lesser rents (NSWPP Vol 5 1909, 111)

The Commissioners remained unconvinced. They concluded that 'separate houses in suburbs' were best for decent working men (NSWPP Vol 5 1909, xxviii). State Labor parliamentarians agreed. They saw no reason why the

working class should not have the same housing benefits as the middle class and adopted the notion of private home ownership as a means of obtaining a greater measure of equality. What they overlooked as much as the middle class reformers were the fundamental causes of inequality. They ended up treating the symptoms rather than the cause and failed to check whether the suburban ideal was realistic or even shared by the people they represented.

In 1913 a NSW Labor government introduced the first of a series of legislative measures aimed at providing finance for working class home ownership. The scheme operated through the Government Savings Bank and made finance available at 5.5 per cent over 20 years for timber dwellings and 30 years for brick with a limit of 75 per cent of valuation or \$1500 (Bethune 1977, 257). Loans were for houses only, not flats. Introducing the measure in Parliament, A C Carmichael, Treasurer in McGowan's Labor Ministry, emphasised the fact that the ideal of home ownership could be attained by all 'thrifty' Australians

The objects of the Savings Banks are for the twofold encouragement of thrift: in the first place to give a safe and sure bank where the thrifty may deposit their earnings with the expectation of receiving a reasonable return for those earnings; in the second place ... the encouragement ... of other thrifty persons who wish to make homes for themselves (NSWPD 18 July 1911,

The bank loans proved popular. The cost of finance through the Government Savings Bank was substantially less than through building societies which only lent up to two thirds of valuation over approximately ten years at 8 per cent per annum (Bethune 1977, 258). Both the banks and the building societies, in line with current thinking on flats, discouraged loans for flat purchase, though the anti-flat feeling was so widespread there is no reason to suppose a heavy demand for flat loans.

The NSW Master Builders' Federation used its official organ Building

magazine, which began publication in 1907, to produce propaganda in favour of home ownership. Under editors George Taylor and then his wife Florence Taylor, Australia's first woman architect, the journal called for 'every facility' to be given to parents to own their own homes in which to bring up children because 'children are essential to national development' (12 Sept 1921, 61). Contributors regularly produced articles on housing finance, gave advice to owner builders and extolled the virtues of 'a home for every man' (12 Aug 1916, 47). The Home Building Section appeared under the caption 'Men make houses but women make homes'. It presented women as guardians of the home, and glorified their role as homemakers.

The Commonwealth Government entered the housing field after the Great War with the establishment of its War Service Homes Scheme. Again it provided finance to ex-servicemen to buy or build houses. Interest rates were low, only five per cent per annum, with the maximum loan initially set at £1400 over 37 years for a brick home or 20 years for a timber home (Australian Housing Corporation 1976, 3). In the peak year of its operation, 1921-22, it financed one third of all investment in dwellings, proving a powerful influence on the spread of suburban home ownership (Bethune 1977, 262).

The house and garden ideal dominated Labor's public housing schemes as much as it did private investment into housing. Prior to the 1920s, only one flat block was constructed by a Labor controlled SCC. The Strickland Flats in Chippendale, built in 1914 at a cost of £49 814, contained 71 flats of two, four and six rooms and brought in rents of between 15s 6d and 35s per week (NSWPD 1 May 1928, 229). The flats were reputed to have a net population density of 600 persons per acre, about three times the density of NSW Housing Commission flats of the 1970s (Cardew 1980, 70). Building

magazine bitterly attacked the flats

No mercenary consideration or argument of expediency can justify flats from the workmen's standpoint, because flats from the workmen's standpoint are an abomination ... The flat and the tenement are only another way back to the slum conditions. While they are new they look well ... But they provide the wrong environment and produce the wrong conditions ... Away with the wretched flats! A home for every man! Then, as the generations follow, a race will arise that ... will evolve higher ideals of citizenship than those permitting congestion of humanity; poor huddled humanity, broken in spirit and weary of body, crushed into impotency and clutched by vice (12 Aug 1916, 46-47).

Conservative middle class reformers and non-Labor parliamentarians grudgingly supported the Labor sponsored model garden suburbs at Daceyville and Matraville, not least because the rents charged were calculated to yield a four per cent return on investment instead of being a drain on the public purse like the Strickland Flats (Irvine 1913, 88; SMH 7 Mar 1934).

The idea of a model garden suburb at Daceyville originated in 1912 with Labor Colonial Treasurer Campbell Carmichael and his successor J R Dacey. The garden city concept won popular appeal in England in the 1890s and 1900s through the work of reformer Ebenezer Howard who advocated the creation of garden cities as a means of improving life in the cities in the post Industrial Revolution era. His ideas were championed in Australia by J D Fitzgerald, distinguished architect John Sulman, and R F Irvine, Professor of Economics at Sydney University and Chairman of the Commission of Inquiry into the Question of the Housing of Workingmen in Europe and America (Irvine 1913).

Fitzgerald headed Labor's newly created Housing Board. It recommended the building of a garden suburb to 'provide houses of an up-to-date character at the lowest possible rental' (NSWPD 28 Feb 1912, 3251). Construction work on Daceyville began in 1912 but progress was slow. By June

1913 only 67 houses were completed from the target of 1437. Each cottage occupied a site of approximately 40 feet by 133 feet. They were mostly brick with a slate or tile roof and a verandah suitable for use as a sleep-out. Rents ranged from 14s 6d for two bedrooms, living room and kitchen combined, to 21s for a cottage with three large rooms and a separate kitchen (Building 12 Sept 1913, 119-23).

Demand for homes in Daceyville was heavy. By 1913 there were 600 applicants, nearly ten times the number of completed houses (Building 12 Sept 1913, 123). Ruthless elimination was necessary and enquiries were made 'as to the character of each applicant and the rent he is willing to pay' before admitting him to a particular ballot (Irvine 1913, 86). For the man in casual employment on poor wages, a home in Daceyville was out of the question. From this point of view, Irvine considered Sydney's model suburb a failure. 'The ordinary worker cannot afford rent up to 17s 6d a week ... Daceyville is really a suburb for the moderately well-to-do' (quoted Sandercock 1975, 65).

Construction of the Matraville Soldiers' Garden Village began in 1917 on an area of 72½ acres of unpromising sandhills beyond Daceyville. Members of the Town Planning Association, architect Sulman and engineer J J C Bradfield in particular, assisted with the layout and design but actual building work was largely the work of a volunteer labour force. Tattersall's club contributed 15 cottages. In 1921 Building magazine reported the completion of 67 cottages of varying designs now rented by

a happy grateful population of over 300 people, including many children of whom a certain number have been rescued from dismal back streets and given a chance in the fresh air of the coast (12 Sept 1921, 77).

By 1920 the ideal that the best possible housing was a house was well established. Parliamentarians of all shades of political opinion promoted the ideal as did Church leaders, town planning advocates, architect and housing reformers. There is no indication in the press of the time that any commentators disagreed with Building's 1916 dictum 'Away with the wretched flats! A home for everyman!' But despite the well orchestrated opposition of parliamentarians and professionals, flats began to appear in the more middle class sections of the inner suburbs, particularly Darlinghurst and the lower north shore suburbs of North Sydney and Cremorne. Flats also hove into view at the city's leading seaside resorts, Bondi and Manly. In a society that apparently loathed flats, this new form of housing spread with remarkable speed. Investors, architects and builders were happy to seize on this new vehicle for urban profit, which they could either sell on completion or retain and rent.

Terrace houses ceased to be built in Sydney before the Great War. In the 1920s and 1930s they came to be regarded with increasing disfavour. The railway and tramway system enabled the middle class and even some of the working class to escape to detached cottages in the suburbs, even if only as tenants. At the beginning of the twenties Sydney, like other Australian cities, seemed to have rejected all forms of attached housing. The terraces and boarding houses remained but their number would not be added to. No one at the time predicted that a new form of housing - the flat or apartment block - might take hold in Sydney as it had done in many European and American cities. But in the 1920s and 1930s flats were erected in a number of harbour and oceanside suburbs, a remarkable turn of events in a society which believed that the ideal home was a house.

CHAPTER II

FLATS AND THE ANTI FLAT MOVEMENT

Between 1911 and 1947 over 70 000 flats were built in Sydney. Almost unknown in Sydney before the Great War, flats suddenly appeared in some of the inner industrial suburbs. More noticeably they began to invade the seaside resorts of Manly and Bondi, the heights of Darlinghurst and a number of choice harbourside locations. This dramatic increase is highlighted in Table 2.1. In 1911 flats represented 1.5 per cent of total private dwelling stock. By 1947 they represented nearly one fifth. In the decade following 1911, 11 000 flats were added to the housing stock. By 1921 they represented 7 per cent of total dwellings. Between the 1921 and 1933 census the number of houses increased one and a half times but flats almost tripled in number.

Table 2.1 Flats and tenements and private housing stock in Sydney Local Government Areas 1911-47

	1911		1921		1933		1947	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Flats and Tenements ^a	1 794	1.5	13 181	6.8	36 185	12.0	72 787	17.9
Houses	116 633	98.5	179 684	93.2	264 100	88.0	334 671	82.1
Total ^b	118 427	100.0	192 865	100.0	300 285	100.0	407 458	100.0

^a At the census, private dwelling stock was categorised into a) houses and b) tenements in private houses. In 1921 and 1933 tenements (ie rooms or non self-contained apartments) were classed with flats to form the second category. In the 1947 census figures for flats and tenements were shown separately but for comparative purposes have been combined.

^b Total for houses, flats and tenements only. Excludes caretakers quarters, hotels, boarding houses, educational institutions, police barracks, stations or quarters, others and unspecified.

Source: Census 1911, 1921, 1933, 1947

Residential construction all but ceased during the depression but by the mid thirties one newspaper reported a 'general rush' of investors anxious to put money into flats (SMH 30 Oct. 1935) 'Contracts are still being rapidly let for flats. During the past 2 or 3 weeks there has been a rush effort to have plans for flats passed ...' (SMH 11 June 1935). The popularity of flats in the 1930s, later dubbed by architectural historian Robin Boyd as the 'flat building era' is reflected in the 1947 census (1952, 273). Between 1933 and 1947 approximately 70 000 houses and 36 000 flats were added to Sydney's dwelling stock. Since the war halted virtually all private housing construction, most of this increase took place during the thirties.

The ratio of new flat building to new house construction varied enormously between municipalities. In some suburbs like Kuringai and Bankstown, where the amount of subdivided land more than trebled during a decade from 2881 blocks in 1920 to 10 115 blocks in 1929, almost no flat building took place. The detached house dominated the new subdivisions and saw a high rate of home ownership in suburbs on the urban fringe. Kuringai, with 68 per cent of its dwellings owner-occupied, had the fourth highest rate of home ownership in Sydney (Spearritt 1978, 50, 69). By contrast municipalities with the highest tenancy rates at the 1933 census, apart from inner city slum municipalities, included suburbs within close reach of the city that contained the most flat stock, such as Woollahra (68 per cent), Randwick (95 per cent) and North Sydney (73 per cent). Woollahra Council records indicate that between 1927 and 1939 it received 1 180 new building applications, 58 per cent of which were for blocks of flats, though not necessarily all of them were built (Table 2.2). Investment in flats was four times as great as investment into new houses (Woollahra Council Building Records, 1927-39).

Table 2.2 Building applications for new houses and new flats
Woollahra 1927-39

	New houses		New flats		
	No	£	No. of blocks	No. of flats	£
1927	89	184 306	84	n/k	442 357
1928	59	146 311	98	n/k	664 490
1929	75	189 648	54	335	348 550
1930	14	47 195	15	61	69 100
1931	8	20 650	1	n/k	n/k
1932	15	37 408	3	20	19 000
1933	24	49 335	20	151	103 865
1934	40	88 582	55	461	378 860
1935	53	121 400	70	636	517 900
1936	34	87 224	80	767	546 360
1937	32	74 959	53	451	326 950
1938	25	52 645	62	662	513 300
1939	31	65 737	86	872	718 220
Total	499	1 165 402	681	4416	4 156 952

Source: Woollahra Council Building Records, 1927-39

The City of Sydney, North Sydney, Randwick, Woollahra, Waverley and Manly were consistently among the top six flat suburbs at each census (Table 2.3). Woollahra showed the largest percentage gain (45 per cent) of the six between 1921 and 1947. Not reflected in the numerical figures is the percentage growth of flats in Vaucluse. At 1921 7 per cent of dwellings in the suburb were flats, by 1947 this had risen dramatically to 26 per cent. The steady increase in flats in the working class suburbs of Paddington, Glebe and Balmain suggest that investors found a ready market among the inner city working class as well.

Table 2.3 Top ten LGAs for flats at the census, 1921, 1933 and 1947

Suburb	Rank according to number	No	% of total no of flats in metro- politan area	% of flats to dwellings in suburb
1921				
Sydney City	1	2 257	17.1	16.6
North Sydney	2	1 957	14.8	20.6
Randwick	3	55	5.7	7.8
Woollahra	4	693	5.3	13.6
Waverley	5	647	4.9	8.7
Manly	6	640	4.8	19.5
Marrickville	7	604	4.6	6.7
Balmain	8	528	4.0	7.9
Mosman	9	520	3.9	11.9
Paddington	10	470	3.5	10.6
1933				
Sydney City	1	6 095	16.8	38.4
Waverley	2	4 380	12.1	32.0
North Sydney	3	4 063	11.2	33.8
Randwick	4	3 796	10.5	20.9
Woollahra	5	3 333	9.2	38.6
Manly	6	1 739	4.8	30.2
Paddington	7	1 406	3.9	26.0
Mosman	8	1 396	3.8	23.0
Petersham	9	1 111	3.1	18.2
Marrickville	10	966	2.6	9.3
1947				
Sydney City	1	10 328	14.4	53.8
Waverley	2	9 277	12.7	45.0
Randwick	3	8 554	11.8	32.7
North Sydney	4	8 139	11.2	46.8
Woollahra	5	7 796	10.7	58.4
Manly	6	4 297	5.9	45.3
Ashfield	7	2 554	3.5	21.7
Mosman	8	2 361	3.2	10.1
Petersham	9	2 237	3.0	28.6
Glebe	10	1 991	2.7	35.2

Source: Census, 1921, 1933, 1947

Nowhere were flats more highly visible than in Kings Cross. Almost all the flats in the Sydney City Council area, some 6000 at 1933 representing over one third of the total dwelling stock, were in Kings Cross, 90 per cent of them tenanted. Their sheer physical dominance prompted one real estate reviewer to write 'Darlinghurst is the home of the flat dweller ... some extensive blocks of flats have already been erected there, while other blocks are in course of construction' (SMH 16 Mar 1927). For Sydney's anti-flatites Kings Cross epitomised the worst evils of flats, both their physical form and the unsavoury tenants they attracted.

Kings Cross offered some of the worst examples of flat building in Sydney, as well as some of the best. Small, dark, airless flats stood in stark contrast to the luxury of Birtley Towers, designed by leading architect E L Sodersteen and built in 1934. It had magnificent views, detailed brickwork and Spanish tile roof and offered the very latest in modern gadgets from garbage shutes to central heating and telephones. Around the corner in Darlinghurst Road dingy red brick work and dirty stucco facades rose uncompromisingly above the iron and concrete awnings of the shops and cinemas below. Between the two extremes lay a hotch potch of unrelated flat blocks, separated by the narrowest alley ways and built directly on to the street with scant regard for aesthetic design. Building magazine criticised the architecture of the flats, 'the finer points of academic design here have no place. So long as the balconies are comfortable, what matter is it if the columns are Tuscan and the strapwork is Elizabethan, while the structure is Yankee-Australian. Its mission is obviously to house as many humans as possible in a certain cubic space' (Building Ap 1925, 35).

MACLEAY STREET

STRAIGHT as an ivory arrow,
Feathered with tremulous
trees;
Straight, but in no degree nar-
row . . .
Macleay Street, driver, please.

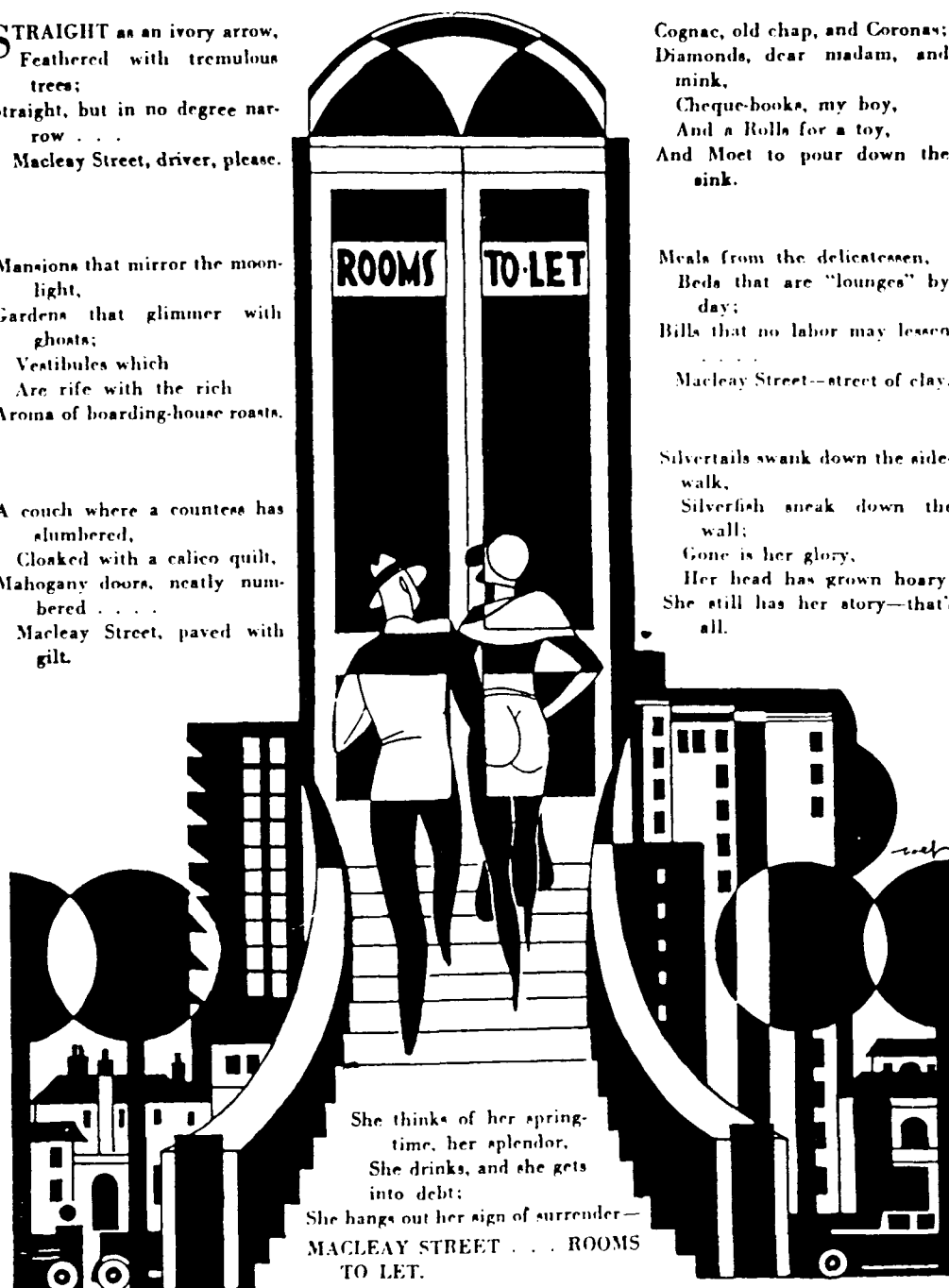
Mansions that mirror the moon-
light,
Gardens that glimmer with
ghosts;
Vestibules which
Are rife with the rich
Aroma of boarding-house roasts.

A couch where a countess has
slumbered,
Cloaked with a calico quilt,
Mahogany doors, neatly num-
bered . . .
Macleay Street, paved with
gilt.

Cognac, old chap, and Coronas;
Diamonds, dear madam, and
mink,
Cheque-books, my boy,
And a Rolls for a toy,
And Moët to pour down the
sink.

Meals from the delicatessen,
Beds that are "lounges" by
day;
Bills that no labor may lessen
. . .
Macleay Street--street of clay.

Silvertails swank down the side-
walk,
Silverfish sneak down the
wall;
Gone is her glory,
Her head has grown hoary;
She still has her story--that's
all.



[43]

Fig. 2.1 Artist and cartoonist Walter E. Pidgeon ('Wep') captures the spirit of Kings Cross in the twenties and thirties with his striking black and white line drawing of Macleay Street - a street overtaken with blocks of tall, narrow flats where former mansions of the wealthy now hang their signs 'Rooms To Let'. Pidgeon met poet and journalist Colin Wills in the mid twenties when they both worked on Sydney newspapers. They later collaborated on *Rhymes of Sydney*, (Wills and 'Wep', 1982, 43).

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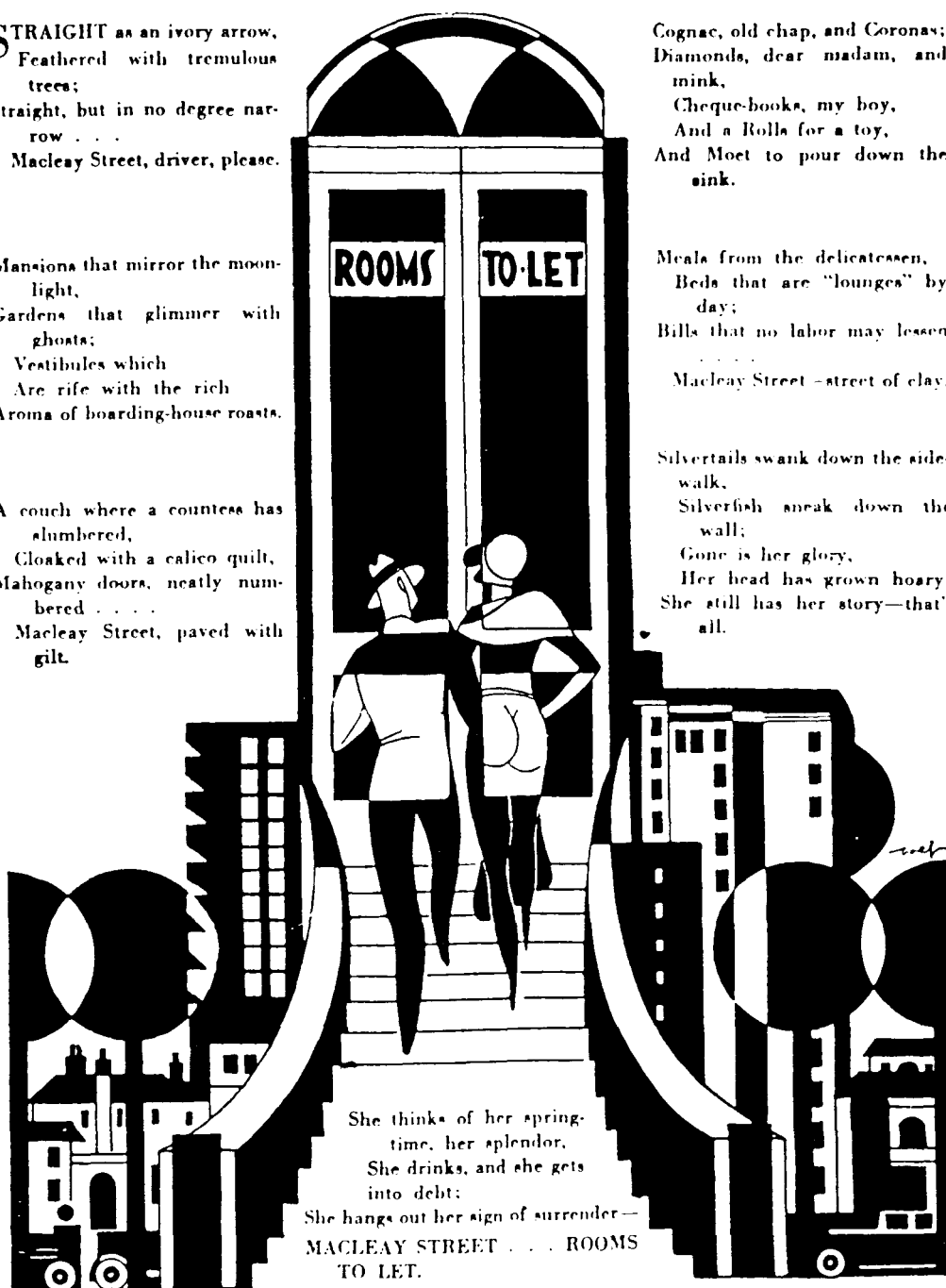
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Two hundred people per acre lived in Kings Cross, the highest density in Australia. The bright lights and flashing neon signs, the noise and bustle of the streets, the gaudy nightlife and the shops described in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as 'exotic little places, full of gay, frivolous nonsense' attracted the flamboyant, bohemian characters so mistrusted by anti-flatites (*SMH* 20 Ap 1929). Poet Kenneth Slessor, who moved into a flat in Woolcott Street in 1922 when he was 21 years old and stayed for most of the next 40 years, described life in Kings Cross in the twenties and thirties with a tinge of poetic licence:

Its plan of living represents a cut across the organic structure of the Sydney ant-heap.hovels are wedged between palaces. Millionaires look out of their 'luxury apartments', their silver and velvet suites, at the slum-world looking at them from the tenement next door or across the street. Among the termites of the yelling flat-blocks, ladies of unimpeachable virtue lend aspirin to ladies who come home barefoot with hiccoughs ... Cheeks blush at jowls as they squeeze together in the most thickly populated, and certainly the most noisily infested, square mile of the metropolis (Slessor 1950, 9-10).

Slessor enjoyed the eccentric antics of his fellow flat tenants:

I never saw the spirit of the Cross more charmingly demonstrated than one night long before the war when I was living in a balcony-flat directly over the waters of Elizabeth Bay. I had come home late from the theatre and stepped on to the balcony to enjoy the silence of the Harbour, glittering with reflected lights. Suddenly I became aware of a regular plopping noise, followed by soft thuds and hisses. Gazing up, I was delighted to find that someone on a balcony above was engaged in sailing large white dinner plates into the moonlit air. They soared out into the night, glimmering for a moment and splashed into the water below. But what was the hissing noise? Peering farther up, I was even more delighted to observe that someone on another balcony was taking advantage of these targets from Heaven by firing an airgun at them (*Bulletin* 20 Apr 1963, 31).

Others were not so amused. Kuringai Alderman McFadyen roundly condemned the flats of Kings Cross and their inhabitants. He feared that the advent of the flat in Kuringai would bring 'the flotsam and jetsam of Darlinghurst and other undesirable localities into our area. The flat dweller belongs to the

floating population of the big cities and is of no value to the community, as a flat is not a home' (Hornsby Advocate 7 June 1929).

The pimps and prostitutes of Darlinghurst's Dirty Half Mile were not typical flat dwellers yet the perceived immorality of their lifestyle rubbed off on all flat dwellers despite the fact that as the 1933 census showed, the majority of them (71 per cent) were married. The respectable veneer that marriage usually afforded never really outweighed the stigma of choosing a flat to live in rather than a manicured house in the suburbs like most decent couples. Alderman McFadyen accused flats of striking at the very root of domestic happiness. In June 1929 readers of the Hornsby Advocate, living on the very fringes of the city where market gardens were more common than houses, awoke to discover that McFadyen viewed flats as

a large contributing factor to the ever-increasing number who are knocking at the divorce door for relief from the family tie. Women are sheltering and refusing to discharge their domestic duties by locating themselves in flats. They are the nightbirds who spend most of their time in cabarets. Most of the tragedy mentioned in the daily press is to be found within the walls of flats (Hornsby Advocate 7 June 1929).

His tirade against flats and divorce made headlines but had no basis in fact. Only a tiny percentage of household heads of flats were divorced (2 per cent) and it was not until divorce became more acceptable and easier to obtain that the figures increased. At 1966, for example, 10 per cent of household heads of flats were divorced or separated representing about 15 000 males and females, considerably more than the 800 out of a total of some 35 000 at 1933. Neither did as many young people live in flats in the thirties as they do today. The age group who might be accused of holding riotous parties or coming home in the early hours banging doors and flushing toilets simply could not afford to live in a flat.

Advertisements in the newspapers of the day give a clear indication that flats were not a cheap alternative to houses and that flat dwellers paid a premium for convenient location and low maintenance living. In Woollahra for example the average weekly rent for a house was 33s 10d, a flat cost 38s 2d; a house in North Sydney cost 23s 7d, a flat 26s. The City of Sydney showed the greatest disparity in rent levels, 18s 10d for a house, 30s 7d for a flat. The cheapest flat close to the city could be found in St. Peters where 11s 4d paid a weeks rental in comparison to 17s 4d for a house but such flats were only to be found in converted and now down at heel terrace houses (Census 1933). Rents for flats in popular beachside suburbs like Bondi and Manly were also likely to be higher than for houses, even in the winter. In May 1936 Harold Bray, real estate agent of Campbell Parade, Bondi advertised a spacious three bedroom cottage with two living rooms, wide verandahs and all offices, only two minutes from the tram, beach and school for 35s. The same day a rival agent offered a considerably smaller flat with only one bedroom in Silva Street also minutes from the tram, beach and shops for a winter rent of 37s 6d per week (SMH 2 May 1936). In peak summer months flat rents in Bondi and Manly soared as families came down from the country to spend their annual holidays in Sydney and competed with city dwellers for holiday accommodation.

The popular image of the evil flat persisted. A frequently heard opinion held that flats negated family life and contained, as Robin Boyd later put it, 'an implied assault on the family circle' which threatened to destroy the very foundation of the Australian way of life (1968, 21). State Labor member for the working class industrial suburb of Alexandria, W J Ratcliffe spoke for a majority of Australians when he said 'flats are no good for family rearing. I do not know how people can bring up their families in flats' (NSWPD 6 Nov 1928, 1563).

Flats also shouldered the blame for the declining birthrate, despite the fact that Sydney managed to maintain a higher birthrate throughout its flat building era than either Melbourne or Adelaide (Boyd 1968, 292). Cramped, confined flats set in the heart of a noisy city allegedly induced couples to restrict their families. Dr J B Nash, a member of the Royal Commission on the Decline of Birthrate (1904), MLC and father of six daughters told the House during the 1919 Local Government Bill debate 'flats are inimical to the birthrate'. He theorised that prosperity stopped people from having large families and since 'nearly all the people who live in them [flats] are prosperous'. Councils and individuals should be prevented from building flats (NSWPD Vol 75 1919, 262).

Cramped flats were not the places for healthy young people to be raised. Although European children appeared to emerge unscathed by flat life, Australian children apparently needed the space and safety of a house and private yard to play in. Flats increased the likelihood of children playing on the streets and consorting with undesirables. The editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* received a steady flow of correspondence which opined that flats were breeding grounds for crime and immorality. One 'Anti-Flatite' from Ashfield said 'I have seen older boys take little girls just able to talk and offer them pennies, and sweets to repeat foul language' (SMH 28 Oct 1935). Public opinion had the unimpeachable authority of vigorous research behind it. An enquiry into the background of Long Bay inmates revealed that 53 per cent had experienced no proper parental control or home life. The researchers confidently concluded from flimsy evidence that 'the notably increasing flat life in Sydney was undoubtedly aiding the development of crime' (SMH 15 Aug 1930). The only apparent solution was the detached family cottage on a quarter acre block. Home ownership became the dream, if not the reality, for all Australian families.

Successive governments at State and Federal level nurtured their aspirations. Both major political parties agreed that home ownership made economic sense; for conservatives it was a means of maintaining the status quo, for Labor it was the way towards improving housing conditions and ensuring electoral popularity. At no stage did any government of the 1920s or 1930s seriously consider flats as an alternative form of housing. Even though flats were built as part of the Erskineville scheme Premier B S B Stevens admitted that 'individual houses would be better' but argued that flats were the only dwelling which could be provided at a suitable rental (Bland 1938, 81).

Labor-initiated moves to provide cheap finance for housing in 1913, together with loans to ex-servicemen after the war, greatly facilitated the spread of home ownership during the 1920s. Even during and after the depression when lending funds dried up and real incomes declined or remained static home ownership was still promoted as the ideal. Concern over the shortage of housing and worsening slum conditions prompted the NSW government to examine means to alleviate the situation. In 1936 it passed the Housing Improvement Act which extended the operation of building societies loans between 80 per cent and 90 per cent of property valuation. It specified that loans must be for owner occupied houses, a further impetus to house ownership at the expense of flats. As a result of the scheme the number of building societies increased rapidly. At June 1936 there were ten registered, a year later this reached 75 and by the end of June 1938, 175 building societies were registered in NSW (Bethune 1977, 281). Their reluctance to provide finance to buyers of flats was not overcome until the passing of the Strata Titles Act in 1961.

For most of the period up to 1961 less than 10 per cent of Sydney's flats were owner occupied. By comparison house ownership shot ahead after the Second World War to nearly 60 per cent at the 1954 census and nearly 70 per cent at 1961. Even during the 1920s and 1930s the most static period recorded, over 40 per cent of all houses were owner occupied. At the 1933 census 48 per cent (127 875) of all houses were owned or being purchased compared to only six per cent (2252) of all flats (Appendix C).

While parliamentarians agreed that owning a house in the suburbs was the ideal, the Labor party advocated some flats in the city to house wharf workers. When the party gained control of the SCC it embarked on a series of flat building projects, evidence of its commitment to social welfare policies. The SCC was the only council to take advantage of its power under the 1919 Local Government Act to undertake housing schemes. The Act made particular reference to workers homes for non-owners but one obvious solution, flats for workers, fell on deaf ears as far as the majority of more conservatively minded councils were concerned.

In addition to the Strickland Flats built in 1914 the SCC undertook three major flat projects between 1925 and 1927; the Dowling Dwellings (Duke St), the Pyrmont Dwellings (Ways Terrace) and the Alexandria Dwellings (Pyrmont Bridge Rd). The fact that all the flats were situated in poor Labor controlled wards raised the question of Labor's motive in supporting flats for workers. One Nationalist member brought the matter to the attention of the State parliament.

I know that from the point of view of some hon. members it is desirable that workers should occupy tenements in the more congested parts of the city because it is upon the occupants of such tenements [sic] that they depend for their votes. Many of the Labour [sic] aldermen did the same things (NSWPD 2 May 1928, 278).

Metropolitan Health Officer, J S Purdy hailed the SCC's flat scheme as 'a splendid lead to other authorities' but none were keen to follow the City's example (1924, 10). Experience proved to councils that housing projects were costly ventures, fraught with administrative difficulties for very little return. They preferred to put their money into beautification schemes and leave low-cost home buyers to explore other sources of finance such as friendly and co-operative societies. The example of Daceyville, originally intended by the Labor Government to be the model for local council inspired schemes, and allegations of malpractice in the Housing Board (subsequently abolished in 1924) were a sufficient deterrant. Even councils in working class areas, other than the SCC, where demand would have been highest, showed little interest in satisfying the housing needs of workers.

The Civic Reform group dominated city politics from 1927 to 1948. No publicly financed house or flat building took place in the city during that period. As a party responsive to powerful property and business interests in the city, it disliked the idea of unprofitable housing schemes, especially flats. In 1922 it inherited the Strickland Flats and immediately pressed for increased rents. Lord Mayor William McElhone demanded that the flats should show a profit rather than the average loss of £574 per annum they had incurred in the eight years since construction. He said 'we were returned to office to effect economies and we are determined that the business undertakings of the City Council shall at least pay their way. I cannot understand what reasonable objection any Citizens' alderman can have to such a proposal' (SMH 3 Feb 1922). By 14 votes to nine the Council approved increases ranging from 20 per cent to 30 per cent. The rental on a three room flat rose by 4s to 16s to 20s, a typical six room flat now cost 33s 6d as against 26s previously (SCC Proceedings 1922, 76). Norman Thomas (MLA

Bondi 1932-41), an investor and property owner, claimed that in 1933 Council owned flats in the city built under Labor was costing ratepayers over £9000 in lost revenue (Table 2.4).

Table 2.4 Income and expenditure for SCC flats 1933

	Total expenditure 1933	Total income 1933
	£	£
Strickland Flats	5 378	1 745
Dowling St.	2 765	1 565
Pymont	3 892	1 063
Alexandria	2 869	1 175
	<hr/> 14 904	<hr/> 5 548

Source: SMH 7 Mar 1934

Civic Reformers supported Thomas' contention that flats should be made viable economic propositions. In addition to higher rents, they pressed for increased charges for sanitary services to flats in the city arguing that the rates did not produce a revenue commensurate with the services given by the City Council to flats occupied by 'scores of tenants' (SMH 11 Feb 1922). They successfully quashed a proposal in 1928 to build a second block of flats in Woolloomooloo on land bounded by Dowling, McElhone and Pring Streets and Sydney Place at the total cost of £47 000 (SCC Proceedings 1928).

Labor had a much more permissive attitude to flats, even those built by the private sector. In the two years 1924 and 1926, the SCC under Labor sanctioned 719 new blocks of flats in comparison to Civic Reform's 127 in

the following three years (Table 2.5). The peak year was 1926 when nearly all new dwellings in the City were blocks of flats. Kings Cross accounted for the majority of the City's blocks of flats; 48 per cent in 1926 and a massive 92 per cent in 1928. The enormous popularity of Kings Cross with investors caused one real estate reviewer to write in 1927 'Darlinghurst is the home of the flat dweller ... some extensive blocks of flats have already been erected there, while other blocks are in course of construction' (SMH 16 Mar 1927). The trend towards flats in the suburbs snowballed in the mid and late twenties. Canterbury, for example, increased its housing volume by 634 flats in the year 1927-28 surpassing even the growth rate of Kings Cross (Nittim 1972, 126; SMH 28 June 1928).

Opponents of flats were most vociferous in the principal suburbs in which flats were built. Conservative house owners in Woollahra, Randwick, Vaucluse, Waverley and Mosman grew increasingly militant and began to form pressure groups like the Bronte and Waverley Progress and Ratepayers Association. Motivated by self interest they demanded the end of unsightly blocks of flats which obliterated views and caused property prices to plummet. Other middle class suburbs, as yet untouched by flats, were willing allies, anxious to preserve the domestic character of their streets. Ryde Council, for example, was proud of its 'model suburb' and took 'the greatest care before allowing the indiscriminate turning of residences into flats' (SMH 25 June, 7 May 1935). The 1938 jubilee history of Lane Cove commented on its good fortune 'in that very few flats have been built in the municipality. The Council as constituted is strongly opposed to flats, and it might be easier to attempt to pass an Alderman through the eye of a needle than to get the Civic Fathers to relax on building restrictions' (Lane Cove Municipal Council 1938, 92). Undoubtedly many suburban blocks of

flats were poorly designed. Most blocks were too small for their builders or developers to consider it economic to engage the services of the leading flat architects of the day though such was the opposition to flats that suburban property owners would have objected regardless of architectural merit (cf Crestani 1983,129).

Table 2.5 New flats and new dwellings^a in Sydney 1924-1930

	City of Sydney		Suburbs		Total	
	No of blocks of flats	% flat blocks to dwellings	No of blocks of flats	% flat blocks to dwellings	No of blocks of flats	% flat blocks to dwellings
1924	198	83.5	654	16.3	852	8.7
1925	na	na	na	na	na	na
1926	521	96.5	640	6.2	1161	10.6
1927	30	73.2	174	1.8	204	2.2
1928	55	69.0	579	5.5	634	6.0
1929	42	88.0	605	6.3	647	6.7
1930	22	66.7	341	4.7	363	5.0

^a ie excluding 'business premises' and 'miscellaneous'

Source: MWSDB records

Local councils, wary of antagonising ratepayers, responded to mounting criticism by demanding greater control over flat development. Until 1928 councils had very limited powers. Even the introduction of comprehensive town planning powers in the Local Government Act of 1919 which permitted councils to regulate housing density, building and subdivision, resume land and control new roads, did not adequately provide for flat controls. The Act contained the first definition of a residential flat building which it described as 'a building containing two or more flats', a flat being 'a room

or suite of rooms occupied or designed, intended, or adapted to be occupied as a separate domicile', but it laid down only minimal requirements for flats (NSW Rules Regulations Bylaws Ordinances Etc. 1921, 503). Ordinance 71, proclaimed in 1921 in accordance with Part XI of the Act, provided for minimum side boundaries, maximum site coverage, height and plot ratio. All were very basic especially in comparison to later flat codes. The high rise flats of Kings Cross built after the Great War are evidence of how ineffective the ordinances were in controlling flat development. Suburban councils, 'terrified of the new collosi' made moves to limit the height of flats (Nittim 1972, 135). Municipal councils had differing articles and powers to the SCC (incorporated 1844). Kings Cross, as part of Fitzroy Ward, came under city flat regulations which were much more liberal than many suburban councils would wish.

In 1925 Woollahra Council passed a motion that no flat building should be more than two storeys or more than five feet above an existing building, the regulation to apply for 20 years (SMH 27 Oct 1925). Other councils passed similar regulations but it is doubtful if councils had the power to enforce them. A R Bluett, Secretary of the Local Government Association, commenting on the legal validity of a proposal by Kuringai Council to prohibit flats in 1921, said that every decision by Council was subject to a District Court judge who had to determine the case according to the needs of the case and the public interest (SMH 29 Nov 1921). The onus of proof rested with councils to show that there were objections on the grounds of public convenience or safety to using flats as residential buildings.

Residents approved the stricter height controls. A property owner in Old South Head Road complained that high rise flats shut out the sunlight.

'We might as well live in deep, dark caves in winter. Many have been forced to think of moving where they can get "a place in the sun"' (SMH 11 July 1935). The Sydney Morning Herald reported 'the boom in the building of blocks of flats in the eastern suburbs is causing considerable alarm among property owners, because the panoramic views from some of the old homes are being built out by the erection of three and four story [sic] flats around them' (SMH 12 July 1935). Letters to the Editor record the dissatisfaction of Balmoral residents over the 'indiscriminate building of flats' which blocked the sun and impinged on views (SMH 4, 7 Mar 1929).

During the early 1920s the flat debate focused on the residential district provision of the Act. Under Section 309, local councils could declare a defined portion of its area a residential district and prohibit industries, trades, manufacturers, shops, places of public amusement and the erection or use of advertisement hoardings but not flats. (Statutes of NSW 1919, 488). Fitzgerald claimed that Section 309 would mean 'no one will be able to intrude into that district, without the permission of the council'. He warned of the dangers of locating industry in residential areas. North Sydney Gas Company's works and the Burwood brickworks had caused a fall in land values and severely affected local amenities. 'If we had had a system of planning they would have been placed in a suitable locality ... but at present they are dumped down in the midst of a residential area' (NSWPD 21 Aug 1919, 137; cf Spearritt 1978, 21).

Middle class suburbs with the most residential amenities to protect were quick to see the potential of the new provision. Waverley and Woollahra councils both proclaimed residential districts by June 1920. Lane Cove, Hunters Hill, Kuringai and Willoughby on the north shore; Ashfield,

The Era of The Flat

CREMORNE
THE HOME OF FLATS
From the Shell Cove Mansions,
Kurraba Point

Now-a-days a large section of Sydney people are turning their attention to flats and apartments. With decided convenience and advantages, many prefer a comfortable flat in the bungalow or the larger home. It is quite evident that flats have come to stay. And there are great possibilities for comfort and contentment in the modern flat, provided the right steps are taken in furnishing. In the beautiful Mosman-Cremorne district, as well as in all the Flat sections of Sydney, many luxurious flats have been FURNISHED BY CRAFTSMAN.

Here is an example of a Dining room and a Bedroom of a flat in the Shell Cove Mansions, recently furnished by CRAFTSMAN. Great taste has been displayed, comfort has been conserved, space saved, distinctiveness and quality are apparent. Without a doubt Craftsman Furniture is unapproachable for your flat. Inspection of recent flat productions, your privilege.

Craftsman FURNITURE CO.

41 BOWEN ST.
George Street

215 W. FACTORY
BOWEN ST.
Redfern

Fig. 2.2 Sydney furniture manufacturers, Craftsman, recognised 'The Era of The Flat' had arrived - at least in the Mosman - Cremorne area - and in 1920 advertised one of its 'space-saving bedroom and dining-room suites which now furnished a flat in Shellcove Mansions, Kurraba Point (The Home Dec 1920).

Strathfield, Burwood and Drummoyne in the inner west; and Vaucluse to the east, had followed suit by 1922. Willoughby Council used the new powers to protect Walter Burley Griffin's 'picturesque waterside suburb' of Castlecrag as a 'first class, safeguarded, homogeneous, residential waterside suburb' (Australian Home Builder Aug 1922, 50-52).

While Councils welcomed the extension to their powers, they expressed concern that the Minister retained the right to institute an enquiry to hear objections to a proposed residential district and demanded powers to exclude flats from residential areas. Vaucluse and Woollahra put up the most determined fight of all councils but could not agree on the extent of control required. Vaucluse favoured total prohibition, Woollahra wanted to regulate for improved design. In 1924 its Mayor, Alderman W F Foster, recommended that the Institute of Architects and Master Builders Association, of which he was a member and past President, each nominate a technical representative to advise councils, in an honorary capacity, on flat design (SMH 16 July 1924).

Not all councils agreed with flat prohibition in residential areas. Aldermen of Glebe, representing an industrial suburb close to the heart of the city, refused an invitation to join Woollahra and Vaucluse in a deputation to the Minister for Local Government in 1925, believing that its future lay with the City of Sydney. Since Labor controlled the SCC (1924-1927) and favoured the erection of workmen's flats, Glebe aldermen agreed it would be acting against SCC policy and thus prejudice its chances of becoming part of the SCC if it joined the deputation. 'It was all very well for the people at Vaucluse to oppose flats but proper workmen's dwellings as were contemplated by the City Council were a national necessity in industrial suburbs like Glebe' (SMH 9 Jan 1926).

Continuous representations and deputations met with assurances that a clause to allow for flat prohibition in proclaimed residential areas would be included in a future bill to amend the Local Government Act. Finally in 1927 when the Nationalist party returned to office under Premier T R Bavin (1927-30) it set about fulfilling its promise. The Local Government (Amendment) Bill 1928, introduced in the house by M F Bruxner, Minister for Local Government, allowed councils to 'prohibit the erection or use in a district for the purpose of a residential flat' (Statutes of NSW 1928, 391). It met with strong party support especially from the ultra-conservative upper house. J Ryan (MLC) observed that 'flat life is not family life; it is the negation of it'. Former Premier and real estate speculator Sir Joseph Carruthers (MLC) condemned flats as 'a menace to public morality' while the members representing Woollahra and Vaucluse not surprisingly argued in favour of the proposal (NSWPD 21 Nov 1928, 1953). Woollahra Alderman (1897-1928) W F Latimer, MLC (1920-34) and erstwhile MLA for Woollahra (1901-20) expressed the view that 'children who live in flats are not going to be healthy children. The environment is unhealthy and immoral'. He concluded 'there is no public desire for the erection of flats. There has been no outcry for residences of that kind, the people have been driven against their will to occupy flats'. Latimer had no objection to flats if they were in the city in a main street but 'in a residential area such as we have at Double Bay and other portions of Woollahra flats are a menace to the moral welfare of the community' (NSWPD 21 Nov 1928, 1952-53). In the lower house, the member for Vaucluse (1927-1936) W F Foster believed the Bill did not go far enough,

most hon. members regard as wise the provision which empowers a municipal council, subject to the approval of the Minister, to prevent the building of flats, but in view of the fact that flat buildings have been erected in many high class localities councils may have some difficulty in administering the provision (NSWPD 7 Nov 1928, 1609)

Labour MLC, M J Buzacott sided with his colleagues in the Nationalist party on the flat question

I congratulate the Government upon making that provision [to prohibit flats in residential districts]. I have heard many complaints from people living in residential areas that large flats have been erected almost adjoining their homes and in some cases right in front of them. All classes of people live in those flats. They continually come and go and they overlook people in other houses in the vicinity. Householders complain that this depreciates the value of their home sites. In my opinion the erection of flats should be prohibited in residential areas (NSWPD 21 Nov 1928, 1939).

Buzacott's criticism of flats reflected his activities outside Parliament. The owner of a real estate business in Newtown and alderman for Newtown (1918-24) and later for suburban Canterbury (1928-31), he frequently warned fellow councillors that 'flats would be a meeting place of undesirables'. Canterbury did not want an area where 'birds of passage come for a few weeks and left' (SMH 6 Feb 1929). The flats amendment had a trouble free passage through Parliament. Aside from Union official D Clyne's stand on flats for workers (he was Labor member for King which included the Rocks area), Labor strongly supported the scheme. Member for Alexandria W J Ratcliffe summed up Labor's case. 'I am pleased to see included in the bill that councils shall have power to control the building of flats ... I endorse the saying that the flats of today will be the slums of the future' (NSWPD 6 Nov 1928, 1563).

After the passing of the 1928 Local Government (Amendment) Act, local councils rushed to take advantage of the residential district provision, their speed matched only by the flurry of flat builders inundating councils with plans in anticipation of a prohibition. Woollahra Council received 98 applications for new flat blocks in 1928, the highest number in any year from 1927 to 1939. The majority were from small time flat builders and

owners who built or caused to be built only one block. Five builders applied for permission to construct between two and four blocks in that year, listing themselves as owners though the accuracy of this information is open to question (Woollahra Council Building Records, 1927-39).

Councils theoretically had no right to refuse applications in the 40 day lead up period before a proclamation became effective but master builder, Harry Huffel complained that councils were employing deliberate delaying tactics. In a letter to the editors of *Construction*, official journal of the Master Builders Association and Builders Exchange, he complained about Vacluse Council,

It was evidently the firm intention of a majority of the Aldermen to carry out this 'flat' fiat by hook or by crook. Their proposal is to 'hang up' plans for forty days, in the fond hope that a proclamation making their regulation law will issue in the meantime. Failing the issue in time, and blemishes found on the applicant's plan will result in their amended plans being held up for forty more days. Pity the poor applicant's finance arrangements and the poor builder's long, long trail (*Construction* 20 Feb 1929, 15).

Out of the 21 councils whose proclamations were approved in the two years 1929 and 1930, one third were under immediate threat from flats, namely Manly, Woollahra, Vacluse, Waverley and to a lesser extent Ashfield, Glebe and St. Peters. The remainder either had cause to fear a flat invasion or wanted to protect their residential amenities, for example Willoughby, Kuringai and Bexley. Residential proclamations in Burwood and Strathfield effectively confined flat development to within a short walk from the railway and shops (Cardew 1980, 77).

Despite the amendment to the Local Government Act, the number of new flats in Sydney escalated during the thirties. Table 2.6 indicates the remarkable growth rate in flats particularly during the mid to late thirties

when heavy demand for cheap accommodation in the post depression period resulted in a burst of flat building. The spatial pattern of flat development established during the 1920s remained constant during the 1930s (Table 2.3) though Cardew notes a slight trend for developers to move away from the heavily populated flat suburbs of the eastern suburbs and lower north shore into areas which still combined high amenity with easy access to the city (Cardew 1980, 77).

Flats began to spring up in clusters near the principal commercial centres along the main railway lines; Waverton to Chatswood on the Northern line, Rockdale, Kogarah and Hurstville on the Illawarra line and Ashfield and Burwood on the Western line. Suburbs with the smallest increase in flats were those with the least investment potential, either because they were a long way from the city where there was little demand or because they were inner city suburbs where industry competed with flat development for what little vacant land was available, forcing costs up to make flats an uneconomic proposition. Alexandria, for example had 42 flats or tenements at 1933 and only 18 at 1947. At 1933 Woollahra still contained the highest proportion of flats (38 per cent) of any Sydney suburb.

Table 2.6 New building in Sydney 1931-40

	No of flat blocks	No of houses	% flats to total dwellings
1931	111	1939	5.4
1932	27	490	5.2
1933	63	930	6.3
1934	137	1177	10.4
1935	na	na	na
1936	na	na	na
1937	405	5123	8.9
1938	366	5200	6.6
1939	397	6925	5.4
1940	526	6709	7.3

Source: MWSDB records

What made flats so attractive to investors when popular opinion apparently loathed them? Very simply, they offered a better rate of return for the capital outlay than other forms of property investment. Until the twenties and thirties, detached houses and retail and central city property absorbed the bulk of investment capital but soaring land values in the city forced small and medium scale investors to look for other forms of investment. They readily seized on flats as the major new medium for urban profit.

Very little new building of houses for rental took place in the thirties. Investors reasoned that six or twelve flats took up no more room than a single dwelling, generated a much more attractive rate of return and were likely to be cheaper to maintain than a detached house. Mosman, for example, had 2282 rented houses at 1933 and very few more at 1947 (2302). The number of rental flats, however, leapt from 1164 in 1933 to 1858 in 1947. Less expensive land further away from the city did not persuade investors to build houses instead of flats. In Lane Cove very few flats were built (96 at 1933, 297 at 1947) but neither were houses built to rent or established houses put on the rental market (1443 at 1933, 1495 at 1947). It was a suburb where home ownership had taken a firm hold. About 2000 detached houses were owned or being purchased at 1933 compared to 3000 at 1947.

The withdrawal of investment support for houses generated a natural demand for flats which owners exploited by demanding high rents. In most cases they could expect a greater return by investing in a Torrens title block of flats than by renting out a house. The 'Houses and Land For Sale' column in the Sydney Morning Herald regularly advertised blocks of flats returning 13 per cent per annum gross, while houses returned 10 or 11 per cent per annum. J A Somerville & Coy., real estate agents of Ashfield, took

THE LOCALITY AND SURROUNDINGS OF TO-DAY

In the history of Sydney's Real Estate no centre has been more rapid in transformation and in rise of values than King's Cross, Darlinghurst, extending to Elizabeth Bay. The interchange of properties has recorded figures that have bewildered many experienced speculators in Real Estate.

This remarkable development is not a transitory one, but is due to the very reasons that have stabilised and influenced Real Estate in other similar centres of the world. No centre could be more peculiarly adapted for high-class flats and apartment buildings in Sydney than Darlinghurst and Elizabeth Bay.

King's Cross is perhaps the apex of the movement so obvious in the whole district. As a junction of motor 'bus, tram and motor traffic, the activity of seven thoroughfares converges upon it. This is the main trading centre of the Darlinghurst territory, and the changes over the short period of even two years (commencing with the transformation of the well-known "Alberto Terrace" property) have been more than remarkable.

Bayswater Road, close by, receives the traffic leading to Rose Bay, and on this thoroughfare, as well as on the branch roads leading from it, many residential establishments and apartment blocks are built. Many of the latest apartment buildings are to be seen in Springfield Avenue, Macleay Street, Onslow Avenue, and Elizabeth Bay Road, and their importance may be gauged by the sales of such buildings recorded during recent months at figures exceeding £75,000, for certain individual buildings.

In the minds of those experienced in such matters this centre of Sydney is the most logical for the purpose of the present trend of development, and compares more than favourably with other centres in London and New York adapted for apartment localities. It is also a fact that the modern flat buildings in the King's Cross-Elizabeth Bay area are readily tenanted at rentals ranging from £3/3/- to £5/5/- per week for the moderate sized flat, and many apartments are rented at from £6/6/- to £10/10/- per week, where the accommodation and appointments conform with modern requirements.



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Fig. 2.3 Real estate agents Stanton and Son Ltd. and Richardson & Wrench Ltd. of Pitt Street, Sydney, stressed the potential for flat development in the Kings Cross area when they offered the Elizabeth Bay House Estate, including the residence and fifteen allotments, for public auction on 17 September 27 (Advertising brochure, private copy).

out a nine line advertisement headed 'INVESTMENT INVESTMENT' to extol the qualities of four new flats at Croydon. The well-constructed, attractive flats and 'Good letting position. Soundproof. Price £2850. Rentals £351. We recommend keen investors to inspect this somewhat different offering.' At the same time Somervilles had a pair of semi-detached cottages on their books, also in Croydon, but managed to confine their description to one and a half lines. With an asking price of £1800 and a likely return of £182 per annum (10 per cent gross) the cottages had less appeal to investors than the flats returning 12 per cent per annum gross (SMH 2 May 1936).

Investors with a bit more money to spend could look at larger blocks in a more exclusive area. Arthur Wigram Allen, of the prestigious firm of city solicitors Allen Allen and Hemsley, bought a three storey block of 12 flats in 1926 for £9250. The Eversley flats, which occupied a prime location near the Post Office at 232-238 New South Head Road at the junction with Ocean Avenue, Ocean Street and Edgecliff Road, Edgecliff, fetched rentals ranging from £1 5s to £2 per week in 1939. In a letter to the Valuer General Allen expressed his satisfaction with the return, 'over a period of years that Capital sum has produced nearly 6 per cent net, thus proving a profitable investment' (Letter dated 17 Sept 1941, Valuer Generals files 19/9183). A smaller block than Eversley but still in a sought after location in Bellevue Hill sold for £4600 in 1936 and with annual rents of £676 (15 per cent gross return) the six flats and four garages represented an excellent buy. A typical, middle of the range block of four flats each with four rooms at Bondi went on the market at £3000. It returned 14 per cent per annum gross, considerably better than the 11 per cent return on a pair of double fronted cottages in the same locality (SMH 2 May 1936).

The popularity of flats with investors prompted owners of boarding houses and residentials to re-examine their potential as self-contained flats. Between 1921 and 1933 half of all boarding houses, more than 6000 in all, were converted to self-contained flats. It meant a significant loss of a cheap form of housing for low income earners but for investors it meant a higher income and certainly a more stable one. Working class occupants of boarding houses were hard hit by unemployment during the depression and many fell behind with their rent. In turn lessees found it hard to let rooms and keep up payments to the owner. Many complained of unrealistically high leases and bonuses extracted by landlords. Mrs. Florrie Smith, lessee of 'The California', a 14 room residential at 60 Flinders Street, Darlinghurst appealed to the Attorney General for legislation 'to enable Residential and Flat Keepers [to] be given a chance to save themselves from grasping landlords'. Mrs. Smith paid £100 for the lease and £11 per week rental to Margeret [sic] Maynard, owner of several properties including 371 Liverpool Street, Darlinghurst, 326 Victoria Street, Darlinghurst, 84 Flinders Street, Darlinghurst and 24 Park Road, Moore Park. During the depression Mrs. Smith found it impossible to meet her obligations and was 'in danger of loosing [sic] all.' The owner refused to reduce the rent or allow her to sell the lease unless she paid a bonus of £30 (Attorney General and Justice File 5/7783.1).

The numerous complaints received by the Attorney General indicate the depth of feeling aroused by boarding houses and residentials among mutually antagonistic owners and occupants. Their claims and counter claims received wide press coverage and did nothing to improve the popular image of the evil flat, especially non self-contained flats. Certainly some owners allowed their residentials to deteriorate claiming the rents were not high enough to

cover repairs and maintenance but not all flats were bad. Few commentators made any distinction between self-contained and non self-contained flats. All flats assumed the characteristics of the worst of their kind, fuelling the idea that flats were slums or soon would be.

The peak years of flat building in Sydney, the mid thirties, coincided with mounting public agitation over appalling slum conditions that existed in parts of the inner city. In a front page article headlined 'Sydney's Human Warrens & Slums' the Labor Daily quoted leading slum reformer A J Dalziel, secretary of the Combined Churches' Debating Federation, who said in a radio broadcast

Sydney, Queen City of the south with all its boasted beauty, has, in areas adjacent to the city proper, a shocking and ghastly state of housing which is a reproach to our civilisation ... Row upon row of dark hovels in evil-looking lanes and alleys groups of ill-clad and undernourished children, playing in their only playground - the gutter - the heroic efforts of parents struggling on bravely and silently in surroundings of squalor ... (LD 24 June 1935).

Flats and slums were synonymous in the public's mind. 'Flats of today will be the slums of tomorrow' was the common catchcry. Councils and ratepayers subscribed to the 'coals in the bathtub' legend and attributed to flat dwellers the so-called characteristics of 'slum dwellers.' A Woollahra resident complained 'flat dwellers take no interest in the streets or their upkeep. They use vacuum cleaners, and shake the dust out of the top window on those below' (SMH 11 July 1935).

Local councils feared that by allowing flats, their sedate neighbourhoods would turn into slums. Concord Council, conscious that 'the construction of flats leads to the development of slum areas in varying degrees of frowsiness, and has the effect of concentrating undesirable

people within and about their neighbourhood, set about obstructing flat development' (SMH 6 June 1929). Even Mosman, with its high rate of house ownership at 1933 (49.3 per cent), was not immune. Councillors were astounded to find out that the many large old homes divided into residential and non-selfcontained flats had fallen into such disrepair over the years they were virtually slums (SMH 11 Nov 1936).

Spearheading the slum campaign were middle class reformers drawn from professional, charitable or church organisations, much in the same way that the early town planning movement had attracted men like Fitzgerald and Sulman (Spearritt 1974). They saw slum dwellers as victims of their environment who 'would lead entirely different lives under better conditions' (Dick 1935, 83). In July 1933 the NSW Institute of Architects called on Premier B.S.B. Stevens to allocate funds for the reclamation of slum areas (SMH 8 July 1933). The Protestant Churches' Debating Federation followed its lead and forwarded a report on slum conditions in Sydney to the government. One of its members N H Dick, a member of the UAP and resident of Darling Point, published an article entitled 'Housing and Slum Clearance in New South Wales' in which he urged the wholesale demolition of slum areas and a rehousing scheme under the auspices of a non-political commission (1935, 81-85).

Labor parliamentarians accepted the middle class slum eradication ideology. They seized on the opportunity to end the exploitation of working class tenants in flats and houses by the landlord owning class. Evictions by 'rapacious' landlords were a daily occurrence. In 1935 five and a half thousand Orders of Ejectment were made in New South Wales courts, less than the peak years of the Depression but enough to indicate the still desperate housing situation particularly amongst the unemployed (Wheatley 1980, 209).

Labor concurred with the Government's belief that the answer to the slum problem and the housing shortage lay in dispersing the population to the suburbs and fostering home ownership. The working man and his family had as much right to a house on a quarter acre block as a middle class family. The other alternative, rehousing on the spot in flats was not popular. Leading Labor spokesman on slum eradication and rehousing, William McKell, member and resident of the inner suburban electorate of Redfern, bitterly opposed landlordism especially since his eviction from a Redfern terrace in 1917 and called flat building 'a social tragedy for Australia' (NSWPD 9 May 1940, 8413). He remarked that

One block of flats in Erskineville does not even make an appreciable dent in this city's slum problem ... Scarcely a day passes without the newspapers publishing some item or items relative to the appalling slum conditions under which families of this State are living ... The home life of the people is the real basis of our society (NSWPD 1 Nov 1939, 7168).

Even leading middle class slum reformer, Dr C E W Bean, founding member of the Town Planning Association and official war historian, did not advocate flats in the suburbs to replace slums. He maintained that the slum problem would in fact be compounded if flat building in the suburbs went unregulated. In a letter to the Sydney Morning Herald he wrote

No one who has visited the suburbs in which mushroom flats of 2 or 3 stories [sic] are springing up, could fail to observe the danger to our future citizens. The mere forcing of the children to play in the streets has already turned some of these areas into something resembling slums, although their mortar is barely yet dry (SMH 27 Mar 1929).

As a founding member of the Parks and Playground movement in 1930 which urged the endowment of more playing space for children and gave impetus to the slum reform campaign, Dr Bean was the natural ally of those councils that wished to see more open space around blocks of flats. Provisions under

Part XI of the 1919 Local Government Act, concerning 'the proportion of the site to be covered by the building and the provision of open spaces and light area' (Statutes of NSW 1919, 490) were inadequate and, moreover, proved to have a glaring loophole. The Ordinance provided that a residential flat building should not occupy more than 50 per cent of an allotment unless the building was not more than three storeys or had a flat roof in which case it could occupy two thirds of the allotment (NSW Regulations, By-Laws, Ordinances Etc. 1921, 523). As far back as 1923 Woollahra Council had written to the Minister for Local Government requesting a new Ordinance to prohibit flat roofs (except for balconies and 'reasonable' promenades) but it was an uphill battle (SMH 19 Apr 1923). Only persistent council pressure and a persuasive campaign by slum reformers motivated the Government into setting up the Building Regulations Advisory Committee to enquire into improved methods of controlling residential flat buildings.

The Committee handed down its findings in 1936. It recommended drastic changes to the existing means of control and proposed four classes of flats, graded A,B,C and D. Standard maximum area and distance from the boundary line were set out for each class. Councils could decide to which class various portions of their area, or individual allotments should belong. It was an attempt to regulate the types of building to be erected without altogether banning them. Class D flats had the most stringent limitations. Maximum coverage was 35 per cent (compared to 50 per cent Class A), maximum height three storeys and minimum area of land to each habitable room 250 square feet. (200 feet for Class A). Class D flats were in the 'luxury' category. As Building magazine pointed out 'certain of these zones would not be an economical proposition, unless the tenants are prepared to pay extremely high rentals. They must come under the heading of "Luxury Flats"' (12 Feb 1936, 93).

The recommendations generated a heated discussion. The Master Builders Association declared its members were put to 'great inconvenience' through the interpretation of the Local Government Act and ordinances and put forward its own 12 point plan for flat control (Building, 12 May 1936). Builders maintained that the new regulations meant that a builder could not buy a block of land without submitting it to the council to see if flats would be allowed. He would need to obtain an option over the land and 'that would make the purchasing of land for flat purposes very cumbersome ... every additional burden put on the flat builder must mean that people will be put out of work in the building industry'. Real estate agents were emphatic that the discretionary powers given to councils might be 'mischievous', but the Mayors of North Sydney, Woollahra, Mosman, Waverley, Willoughby, Strathfield and Kuringai, all regarded the recommendations as a step in the right direction though they would have preferred even greater discretionary powers. The Institute of Architects also approved. President Mr A W Anderson stated that 'some restriction on the class of flats being erected in some parts of the city was absolutely essential to ensure the future health of a metropolis which was expanding so rapidly'. He called upon the Government to put the recommendations in force at the 'earliest possible date' (SMH 11 Feb 1936).

Four years were allowed to elapse before the Local Government (Regulation of Flats) Act was eventually passed in 1940, after a year's deliberation in the House. It contained the most rigorous flat legislation to date. Architect of the bill, UAP member for Ryde (1932-40) E S Spooner, Minister for Local Government in the Stevens' Ministry wanted to balance the extremes of public opinion seesawing between total prohibition on the one hand and an uncontrolled free for all on the other. He sought the middle ground, allowing flats to be built but only in certain zoned areas and to

specific design standards. Professor Irvine had recommended much the same measures in his report on working men's housing in 1913 but it took Sydney nearly 30 years to accept the reality of flats.

The Bill drew widespread popular support. The Sydney Morning Herald reflected that

throughout the metropolitan area the uncontrolled construction of flats, especially during the recent building boom, has already wrought irretrievable damage ... Devoid of any planning, this growth, which has spawned with a mushroom rapidity in recent years, has ruined residential areas where flats are entirely out of place ... only too often the necessities of light, air and surrounding space have been disregarded in the new buildings. (SMH 18 May 1939).

The Local Government Association also backed the new legislation but lamented its late appearance. Association Secretary A R Bluett remonstrated 'if the Councils had these powers before the recent boom ... the flat buildings erected in the suburbs of Sydney would have been entirely different' (SMH 18 May 1939).

Both major political parties agreed on the need for flat control. Labor still espoused the virtues of suburban home ownership and opposed flats, despite its perennial dilemma of housing for city workers. MLA for Canterbury, A Tonge and T J Shannon representing the Phillip electorate, proposed a way out of the predicament. They backed a system of zone ^zfores to 'force' people to live in the outer suburbs and use cheap rail transport to travel to the city (NSWPD 16 May 1939, 4639). As a real estate agent with an interest in subdivision, Shannon suggested that there were hundreds of acres of land in Hurstville on the Illawarra line on which cottages could be built while Tonge told the House that 'the government would do more for the people of Erskineville, Alexandria, Newtown and other congested areas if it

facilitated the purchase of weekly tickets for 2s 6d on which workmen could travel to their employment and to homes in the outer suburbs' (NSWPD 16 May, 1939, 4641).

The most contentious issues in an otherwise non party measure were the clauses pertaining to the 'Class D' flat and the conversion of large homes to flats. The bill provided for four classes of flat, similar to the Building Regulations Advisory Committee's proposal in 1936 except in reverse. Class A and B flats could not exceed three storeys, Class C and D could go higher provided they were stepped back to give adequate air space and light. All one storey flat buildings could not occupy more than 50 per cent of the land, two storey not more than 40 per cent and three storey not more than 35 per cent. Class A flats must be not less than 20 feet from the side boundaries; Class B not less than 10 feet on one side and 7 feet 6 inches on the other; Class C not less than 7 feet 6 inches on each side; Class D boundary was reduced even further to not less than 5 feet.

Labor leader of the Opposition, W J McKell, introduced an amendment to eliminate Class D flats, calling them 'a curse on the community'. In terms more reminiscent of his conservative colleagues than the Labor left, McKell disagreed with those who claimed that people lived in flats and terraces because they could not get cottages. Flats on the waterfront rented for up to £20 a week and 'anybody who is able to pay such a rental could obviously well afford to construct a home for himself if he were so inclined'. He argued that 'the inclusion of class "D" will bring about an undesirable type of building in certain parts of the metropolitan area. We know perfectly well that the class "D" flat will not be built in a first class residential area' (NSWPD 9 May 1940, 8415). Even the Minister for Local Government (1939-41), L O Martin had reservations about what he called the 'slum making

provision' of an otherwise excellent bill and feared there was 'a grave danger' that councils would declare class D for the whole of a municipality (NSWPD 14 May 1940, 8478-79).

Building contractor and former alderman and Lord Mayor of Randwick, UAP member for Randwick (1932-41) A H Moverly disputed Martin's case against Class D flats. In his electorate and in other suburbs ravaged by past flat building, the present 40 feet allotments between flats made it impossible to 'infill' under Class A or B regulations. Flats could only be erected under Class C or D (NSWPD 14 May 1940, 8482-83). Despite Government support and a 'no' vote from UAP member for Gordon, H B Turner, McKell's amendment suffered a narrow defeat by a margin of ten votes. When Labor resumed office Class D was repealed in 1945 and Class C became the minimum standard.

The intention behind the second point in debate (allowing large homes to be converted into two flats even in non-flat areas) was to ease the pressing burden of rates and taxes felt by the often elderly owners of large and high maintenance old homes, at the same time alleviating the war time shortage of accommodation. Strong resistance from both sides of the House quashed the move. McKell regarded it as 'a deliberate and distinct breach of faith with all the people who live in residential areas'. For once his old adversary Moverly came to the same conclusion and denounced the scheme as a 'tragedy' which nullified the whole spirit of the Act (NSWPD 9 May 1940, 8415-16). However, a determined effort by local councils, Mosman in particular, who feared that homes would be transformed into 'rabbit warrens' of residential over which they had no control, led to the re-introduction of the measure under the Local Government (Regulation of Flats) Act of 1949.

Over a period of twenty years State legislation gave councils ever increasing powers to control flats yet by the end of the 1930s, flats and tenements comprised nearly one fifth of Sydney's total dwelling stock, compared to a mere 1.5 per cent at 1911. The enormous public antipathy and council hostility to flats did not succeed in checking their spread throughout the inner suburbs and even in some more distant localities.

CHAPTER 3

THE COMMISSION'S COMPROMISE: HOUSES AND FLATS

The fighting troops, through their widely circulated journal *Salt*, were told that they would be coming back to a society committed to better housing. But improvements took time. The lack of home construction during the war and the demand for separate dwellings due to war-time and post-war marriages created a severe housing shortage. Advertisements inserted by demobbed soldiers appeared regularly in the classified sections of the daily press. 'Ex-AIF living apart from wife, baby, owing to lack of accommodation, urgently requires Flat or Cottage' (SMH 12 Jan 1946). Homeless ex-servicemen resorted to squatting as a means of protest about their living conditions. Squatters moved into the gutted remains of the Kings Cross mansion 'Maramanah' and two days afterwards another group seized a 100-room, four storeyed apartment house at Bondi, claiming that they and their families were living in conditions of extreme hardship (Spearritt 1978, 87). McKell's Labor government responded to the angry protests of ex-servicemen and the increasingly strong pressure from slum reformers, town planners and the left-wing press by reaffirming its commitment to government housing programmes and slum clearance. In the 1947 election the new Labor Premier McGirr promised that the government would build 90 000 homes for the people of NSW within three years (SMH 2 May 1947).

The housing shortage and the need to eradicate inner city slums were among the chief concerns of the post-war reconstruction advocates. In April 1943 J B Chifley, Minister for Postwar Reconstruction, announced the appointment of a Commonwealth Housing Commission to study the existing housing situation in Australia and to recommend future housing requirements.

Its comprehensive reports, based on testimony from 948 witnesses, became a platform for advocates of government intervention in housing. The Commission pointed out the poor standard of housing especially for low income earners and proposed a plan to provide 'a minimum standard of good housing [as a] right of all Australians' within ten years (CHC Final Report 1945, nos.8-11). It estimated that by 1945 there would be a shortfall of 300 000 dwelling units, a rise of 180 000 over the immediate pre-war figure quoted by W R Bunning, architect and executive officer of the CHC. The CHC estimated that 700 000 dwellings would be required by 1955 necessitating coordinated action between commonwealth, state and local governments and private enterprise if the target rate of 80 000 units per annum by the end of third post-war year was to be reached. By improving the quantity and the quality of the housing stock the CHC hoped to achieve the reconstruction objectives of higher living standards and social security for all Australians.

The Report recommended the setting up of commonwealth and state planning authorities and favoured the nationalisation of land though this radical notion failed to come to fruition. The Commission also proposed a degree of public participation in planning though ignored the practical difficulties involved and failed to anticipate, as Lloyd and Troy (1981a, 28) point out, possible public antagonism towards one of the keystones of the Report, slum clearance. The conservative Commissioners, including three architects and two members associated with social welfare organisations, adopted the physical determinist arguments of the middle class slum reformers. Rather than explore the possibilities of inner city renovation, they advocated wholesale demolition of 'slum' areas on moral as well as aesthetic grounds. The Commissioners went on to recommend the construction of multi-unit

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dwellings on the cleared sites partly to make best advantage of high cost inner city land and partly to allow the existing population to be rehoused, but at lesser densities, on the same site.

Before reaching a conclusion, the Commission heard considerable evidence against multi-unit dwellings. J R Firth, a local government representative from NSW, denounced the evils of flats in the same rhetorical terms as his counterparts of the thirties. He said that

To allow children to be brought up in semi-detached cottages and flats is simply damnation ... I have seen babies of two years of age in the streets ... The street is dangerous enough so far as motor cars and other traffic is concerned but the worst danger is bad companions (CHC Transcripts, Box 1, File 1, 87ff quoted Lloyd and Troy 1981a, 18)

He described bachelor and spinster flats as 'most unnatural', though elderly bachelors and spinsters were apparently excluded on unspecified grounds. The CHC did not, however, follow Mr Firth's advice, but recommended a variety of dwelling types including detached and attached cottages, hostels and flats. It argued in favour of flats for single people, married couples without children and the aged though did not exclude flats for families in certain 'unavoidable' circumstances. In its second Interim Report (1944) the Commission made the following statement on multi-storey dwellings

The important factor is not the size of the site, but the amount of the site which is covered by the buildings ... the siting of all dwellings above two storeys in height shall be considered in relation to density and angles of light in accordance with town planning principles. This will avoid the evil of lack of light, and, to a larger extent, provide space for recreation (CHC 1944, 18).

In its Final Report the CHC recommended that in areas of multi-storey dwellings of more than two storeys, the maximum net density should be 40 dwellings per acre. The proportion of the site covered should not exceed one

third; windows must admit at least one hour of sunlight between the hours of 9.00 am and 3.00 pm; and minimum distance from the street alignment to be not less than 15 feet, and from the side boundaries not less than 20 feet. Much to the consternation of suburban councils, the location and siting of flats were to be subject to approval by a 'State Planning Authority' , not local government as was the case with privately developed flats (CHC Final Report 1945, para. 233).

Many CHC recommendations floundered because the commonwealth government had no power over regional and town planning and could not control peacetime production, allocation or distribution of materials or decide housing priorities. Labor's attempt at the 1944 referendum to secure additional commonwealth powers resulted in a sweeping defeat. With the states reluctant to cede their independence, the commonwealth had no alternative but to seek a role of encouragement and cajolment by setting down principles and conducting research (cf Lloyd and Troy 1981a, 42; Sandercock 1975, 99-106). Given the constitutional limitations, the Commonwealth/State Housing Agreement of 1945 represented a remarkable degree of cooperation, compromise and conciliation. Its greatest achievement lay in implementing CHC proposals for low income rental housing. The commonwealth agreed to provide loans to the states at 1 per cent less than the long term bond rate for 53 years for the erection of low cost housing, half of which went to servicemen or ex-servicemen or their widows. Rents were means tested and fixed at no more than one fifth of income. The cost of rebates was to be shared between the commonwealth and the states on a ration of six to four.

For slum reformers the 1945 Agreement did not go far enough. It failed

to meet CHC proposals for massive clearance and rebuilding schemes by not allowing a commonwealth contribution to the acquisition costs of slum sites which were especially expensive in the early post-war years as optimistic landlords held out for non-residential rezoning. Dedman, Minister for Post War Reconstruction, explained the omission in his second reading speech. 'In a housing crisis of the dimensions of that now on our hands it would be folly to pull down houses on a large scale except those which actually cause disease or danger to life' (CPD 13 Sept 1945, 5386).

With no commonwealth support, the entire burden of slum clearance fell to the state governments. Local councils, which were expected to share in the costs of providing community facilities, all too often found more urgent priorities especially in suburbs where ratepayers' opposition to Commission flats and houses was strongest. The earlier experiment at slum clearance, completed just prior to the outbreak of war in the inner city suburb of Erskineville, and intended by UAP Premier Stevens as a persuasive demonstration of the possibilities of state-local government cooperation, did nothing to overcome local councils' reluctance to participate in slum clearance schemes.

The Erskineville project grew out of a widely held belief that the solution to the housing problem lay in a two pronged attack, encouraging home ownership in the suburbs for those who could afford it and providing government rental housing for the poorest paid workers and the unemployed near the city centre. The evident reluctance of private enterprise to enter the unprofitable field of low rent homes or undertake slum clearance convinced Stevens that an 'Erskineville' was necessary to fill the gap. With a general election looming it was also an attractive opportunity to create a model slum scheme to present to electors.

In 1936 the State government passed its Housing Amendment Act. The Act allowed the development of cooperative building societies as a means of making finance available to those in regular employment on a reasonable income; set up the Housing Improvement Board and gave councils power to undertake demolition and rehousing in slum areas. The Housing Improvement Board's primary function was to investigate slums and advise councils on possible schemes. It could not act independently and had none of the power of its successor, the NSW Housing Commission. Members of the Board included master builder and Mayor of the Sydney City Council 1936-37, Sir Archibald Howie (Chairman), G R Gerlach, architect and former vice-chairman of the Housing Conditions Investigations Committee who became closely associated with the Erskineville scheme as the Board's Executive Officer and building contractor A H Moverly, prominent government spokesman on housing and MLA for Randwick 1932-41.

Erskineville immediately presented itself as the ideal location for a model slum scheme. The Housing Investigation Committee's 1936 slum report had already identified Erskineville as one of the worst slum areas. Moverly, himself a member of the committee, restated its findings in Parliament

... of 1552 occupied dwellings, 185 were weatherboard, and 1367 brick and 882 were without bathroom and laundry ... The weatherboard houses were particularly dilapidated. On a conservative estimate 80 per cent of the brick dwellings were without damp course, and were condemned. Windows and floors that were not waterproof, broken plaster, peeling wallpaper, discoloured and cracked ceilings, faulty floors and sagging doors, and windows which refused to open were common features (NSWPD 8 Dec 1937, 2413).

Construction could begin immediately on a large piece of parkland at the edge of Erskineville, a ready solution to the problem of what to do with residents whose houses were demolished and cheaper to resume than private

housing. The original scheme envisaged over 200 flats, the majority with two bedrooms in two and three storey blocks with provision for gardens, playgrounds, laundries, pram sheds and day nurseries (SMH 24 Aug 1937). Considerable debate took place over the merits of flats versus the more popular cottages. There was general agreement in government circles that cottages were better but that flats were inevitable. They were the only form of housing which would relieve congestion without dispossessing a large number of local residents. As it turned out the flats did not replace any slums. They merely took away public parkland which was never returned as originally promised and they actually added to the population density of the area.

Real estate agent Alderman A P 'Pop' Henry, a key figure in the local Labor machine, led a vociferous campaign against the flats. He organised a petition signed by 1700 residents, that stressed the preference for cottages. It read:

WE the undersigned RATEPAYERS and RESIDENTS of ERSKINEVILLE desire to protest against the proposed erection of FLATS in ERSKINEVILLE PARK, and wish to emphasise [sic] that if any rebuilding scheme is carried out the people shall be supplied with semi-detached cottages or such other designs of building that will give each family a definite form of homelife embodying a backyard to each home (Erskineville Council Letters File No. 78, ML cited Volke 1981, 37).

The objections listed in the petition repeated the popular stereotypes about flats. They were not conducive to home life, had no private backyards for children to play in, were harmful to health and moral welfare and would lead to a decrease in population, an objection likely to appeal to Catholic and even some Protestant objections to birth control. Communal washing and drying facilities caused considerable anguish. Objection No. 4 stated:

Community ground for drying clothes as washing day takes away the homelife which families have been used to and is foreign to

industrial classes who have always had their own drying grounds. The washing and drying of womens' private garments (personal hygiene, etc.) demands the amount of privacy every female is entitled to (Erskineville letters File, No. 78, ML, cited Volke 1981, 37-38).

Labor member for Newtown, Frank Burke, took up the communal washhouse theme in Parliament and raised the question of allowing children in the flats.

A beautiful picture is painted by the Premier about the flats to be erected in Erskineville Park. They are to have communal wash-houses, communal playgrounds, and all the amenities of life at a rental of from 7s.6d to 15s a week. Let me analyse that proposition. What a beautiful and peaceful little retreat such a communal playground will be! Children from fifty-six flats will gather there, and throughout the day the mothers will be separating them from the inevitable 'scrapping' which will take place ... And what will happen in the communal washhouse? Naturally a communal laundry will serve the fifty-six flats, the occupants of which must arrange their turns at the troughs. When Mrs. Jones says on Monday that she is not well enough to wash, arrangements will have to be made for Mrs. Simpson to take her place. From the very outset there will be such confusion in the laundry that a 'scrap' will take place very quick and lively ... (NSWPD 9 Dec 1937, 2494-5).

The government reassured anti-flatites that the Erskineville flats would set a 'new standard' in flat design (SMH 28 July 1937). Government spokesmen inferred that private enterprise erected 'bad' flats which lacked light, were overcrowded and had no private recreation space, while the government erected 'good' flats that were healthy, spacious and private. Alderman Howie stressed that no flat was more than two rooms deep so that every room had sunlight for some part of the day, they were soundproofed and provided with modern cooking and sanitary equipment to make them healthy and convenient places to live. A kitchen, bathroom, toilet and built-in cupboards were all standard features. The flats were surrounded by generous open spaces laid out as gardens and playgrounds. 'The conditions of light, air, and open space would be far better than in the case of many flats in wealthy suburbs, and so many so-called individual cottages' (SMH 28 July 1937).

A sub-leader in the Sydney Morning Herald headlined 'Flats or Slums?' strongly supported the government's contention that flats were the only practical, economic type of building for rehousing and that criticism about the poorly designed flats of the past was not applicable to the Erskineville flats.

Flats can be either good or bad, and bad flats, privately erected, can reproduce their own type of slum congestion. Furthermore, they often have no provision for children, and so are obstacles to family life and a healthy birthrate ... Are these facts convincing in the case of Erskineville? The answer must be that they are not, since conditions are different ... The flats under the Housing Board plan are designed to avoid the evils of privately erected flats. They will have different types of accommodation, and provision is made for children and family life. At present children have to play in the streets; in the remodelled area they will be able to play in proper playgrounds. The flats will be surrounded by grounds which can be utilised for gardens, and the buildings will have plenty of sunlight and fresh air (SMH 27 Aug 1937).

Secretary of the Legion of Christian Youth, slum reformer A J Dalziel wrote in support of the Herald's comments and stressed the distinction between 'the carefully designed proposals for rehousing the lower paid worker and his family, under the experienced hand and guidance of experts in this class of housing, and that of purely commercial propositions which seek to erect as many flats as possible on the smallest of allotments, with a view to a quick sale and a handsome return' (SMH 20 Aug, 1937).

Dalziel, along with other slum reformers, town planners, building unions and the press attacked Erskineville Council's erratic opposition to the new flats. The Council secured a number of concessions from Premier Stevens who was anxious to get the scheme under way before an election campaign began. He agreed to reduce the height of the blocks to two storeys and build the first stage, 56 flats in seven blocks on three acres of Erskineville Park, as a demonstration project at no cost to council on the understanding that if proved successful, the council would cooperate in completion of the rest

of the project. Council rejected the proposal but the wave of adverse publicity prompted a change of heart. It accepted the government's offer to finance the first stage but gave no assurances that it would support any future plans. It was clear that full cooperation would never be forthcoming. (Volke 1981, 40-41).

Stevens reacted by announcing drastic new powers for the Housing Improvement Board to make it independent of councils. He introduced the Housing (Further Provisions) Bill into Parliament on 7 December. The new bill allowed the Erskineville scheme to go ahead with or without council's approval but gave the Board no statutory powers. The government was obviously reluctant to set up a powerful central housing authority despite pressure from the church and planning lobbies. Building work on the Erskineville flats began early in 1938. The first tenants moved in just before Christmas. Pix magazine allotted a five page spread to praising the model scheme. It hailed the flats as an 'important social development' which on a larger scale would 'practically solve Australia's slum problem' (Pix 7 Jan 1939). The new tenants were reported to be delighted with their accommodation.

The Board's strict selection criteria weeded out all but the most desirable of tenants. Low income slum dwellers, for whom the flats were originally built, were unlikely to meet the high standards adopted by the Board in its effort to ensure that the demonstration scheme was a success. Tenants had to be in regular employment earning a maximum of £4 2s 6d a week which was eventually stretched to £5 a week, well above the state male basic wage of £3 19s (at March 1938). They had to be parents of two children but not many more and had to sign an eight page memorandum of agreement which committed them to cleaning all their windows at least once a fortnight,

Fig. 3.1 Erskineville Flats

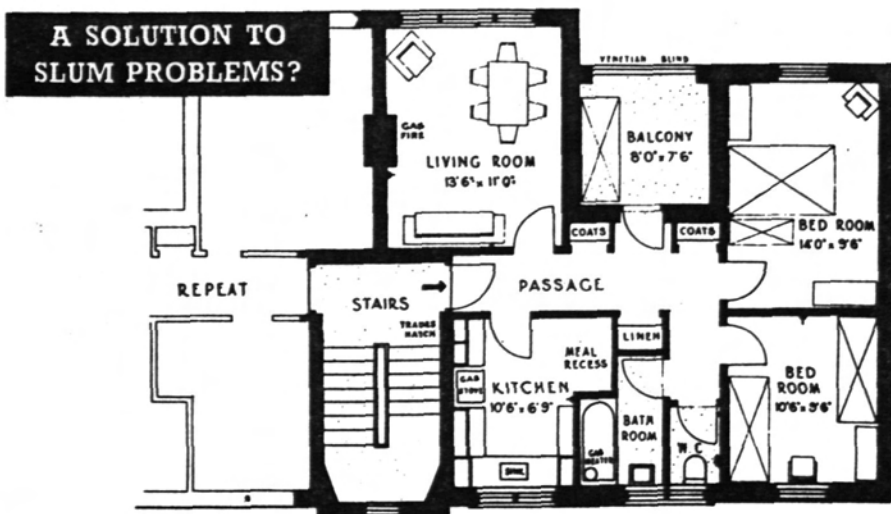
'Old Entrance'

'Old Entrance The Bedroom opened on to the street in Mr Casey's old home. With the furniture there was little space to move around. If the door was closed on hot days ventilation was restricted ...'



'New Entrance'

'New Entrance There is An Attractive Entrance to each block of flats in striking contrast to the former Casey home ... In this picture is Mrs. T Bates, one of the new tenants. Her husband is a storeman, their baby is 18 months old ... A provision at the flats which always brings exclamations of surprise and admiration, is a special garage for perambulators.' (Pix 7 Jan 1939, 5)



'Experts Declare'

'Experts Declare That The Erskineville Slum Clearance Scheme increased a thousandfold would practically solve Australia's slum problem. It is advanced as the most practical project that has yet been adopted in any part of the world ... Plan above shows the layout of the flats. They are planned to meet every requirement of flat life' (Pix 7 Jan 1939, 7)

keeping the w.c. and all pipes regularly cleansed, looking after an allotted portion of the garden and grounds and keeping children under control. Pets were not allowed, neither was singing, playing a radio or musical instrument between 11.30 pm and 6.30 am. (Housing Improvement Board of NSW Tenancy Agreement, cited Volke 1981, 49).

With the completion of the Erskineville flats the Housing Improvement Board found itself without a job to do. Its recommendation of a large scale central housing authority met with little response from the government which clearly found the Erskineville experiment too expensive and too controversial. At the same time it could not abandon slum clearance altogether. When the new Premier Alexander Mair, member for Albury, inspected the flats in 1940 he spoke optimistically about putting up another 56 flats but carefully avoided any positive commitment and said that cottages were preferable so that a tenant could have 'the pleasure of growing his own flowers and vegetables' (SMH 6 Jan 1940).

In 1941 McKell, leader of a new Labor government and Labor's most persistent campaigner against slums, created the NSW Housing Commission. Under James McGirr, member for the outer metropolitan working class area of Bankstown, the new body promised to eliminate sub-standard housing and construct permanent dwellings for low income groups. The war prevented a start being made on permanent dwellings; instead the building programme concentrated on providing hostels and temporary houses for war-workers, many of which were later used to house the post-war influx of migrants. By 1944 the Commission proudly announced the completion of 996 temporary flats and five hostels which were handed over to the commonwealth under the War Workers' Housing Trust (NSWHC Annual Report 1944, 3).

The Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement of 1945, based on the recommendations of the CHC, allowed the Commission to undertake its first large scale programmes of welfare housing. The Commonwealth agreed to meet three-fifths of the losses on any scheme, the balance was the responsibility of the state government. All dwellings were for rental at one fifth the basic wage. The Commission took on the task of providing housing for low income earners within the framework of a deep ideological commitment to suburbanism and a new social order where poor housing standards and high unemployment of the inter-war period would never be repeated.

Post-war reconstruction advocates stressed the ideal of a house in the suburbs for all. Walter Bunning's *Homes in the Sun* (1945) echoed prevailing opinion when it outlined the future ordered development of cities. In contrast to the unregulated chaos of the past, new houses, more functional than ever before, would take advantage of the environment and allow sunlight to penetrate in the winter, blocking it out during the hot summer months. The Commission published its own concept of the ideal in a 1949 booklet *Homes for the People*. It featured house plans, pictures of exteriors and interiors and construction details and proudly announced that the high standards adopted by the Commission (including minimum lots of 6000 square feet with frontages not less than 50 feet and a minimum distance of 14 feet between adjoining dwellings) made it 'impossible for sub-standard conditions ever to develop' on its estates (Spearritt 1978, 99). Flats did not rate a mention in the new housing ideal.

The Commission regarded flats a poor second to houses. Nearly 90 per cent of the permanent dwellings it constructed in Sydney and suburbs up to 1954 were houses (Appendix B). Many were situated on large housing estates at Dundas, Rydalmere, Villawood and Bexley. Villawood, the Commission's

largest 1940s estate, planned to provide 1200 homes, two shopping centres, a community centre, adequate parklands, playgrounds and sports area. It formed part of the CHC scheme for displacement of industry from the central city area (NSWHC Annual Report 1951, 6). Unfortunately many of the community facilities incorporated in these model schemes failed to materialise. The Commission had no power to build them and private enterprise and local councils were often reluctant to do so.

Flats had no place in the Commission's interpretation of the suburban ideal and only won grudging acceptance as a short term housing alternative to ease the acute demand for housing or as part of a slum reclamation scheme. A 1950 article in the Commission's staff bulletin entitled 'Flats and Shops' reassured staff in the opening sentence that its activities were 'devoted primarily to the erection of detached cottages' but admitted that some flats were necessary as a 'compromise' (NSWHC 1950, 1).

In the immediate post-war years the Commission provided over 2000 flats as part of an intensive programme to convert war-time establishments to temporary community housing centres mainly in the south and south-west suburbs. The flats were seen as a temporary solution to ease an immediate problem of housing shortage. They were not intended to be a permanent feature of the Commission's work. Two of the largest ex war-time centres were at Herne Bay, a former service hospital built for US forces and Hargrave Park, a former Navy depot. Both were later cleared and developed as permanent Commission estates though such were the unfavourable associations at Herne Bay that in the early sixties it was renamed Riverwood (Spearritt 1978, 101). By 1947, 2207 temporary flats were completed, 1096 at Herne Bay and 740 at Hargrave Park in the Liverpool municipality (NSWHC Annual Report 1947, 27). The Commission estimated the cost of converting the huts to four

flats to be between £150 and £200 for which it received rentals of £1 2s 6d per week for a three bedroom flat at £1. 5s 0d per week for a four bedroom flat, including gas and electric light charges. Each flat had one, two, three or four bedrooms, a kitchen and living room and bathroom (in some cases external) with electric light and fuel stove provided (NSWHC Annual Report 1946, 20-22). The Commission in its staff bulletin *Know Your Department* (1950) acknowledged that the settlements 'retained the somewhat uniform appearance necessarily associated with temporary military quarters' but dismissed complaints by residents (many with families) of inadequate soundproofing and lack of privacy with the comment 'to see the true picture, it is necessary to place oneself in the position of the families so housed and to have some knowledge of the conditions under which they were previously accommodated' (NSWHC 1950, 1-2).

Ruth Park, in her novel *A Poor Man's Orange*, first published in 1949, described the fear and loathing that Hargrave Park inspired in Mr and Mrs Casement who for 35 years had lived in the corner shop of an inner city 'slum' now due for demolition. Receiving his eviction notice Mr Casement

didn't know what he'd do if they sent him to Hargrave Park. For this was the terror of most of the evicted people, that they would be sent to the squalid housing settlements where worse slums had been created than any the Council had pulled down.

'Them little army huts,' thought Mr Casement in panic, 'and people fighting and screaming and banging on walls, and pinching the washing, and Jessie expecting me to go in and tell 'em off. I just ain't up to it these days.' (Park 1983, 316).

The Commission saw slum clearance and the rehousing of slum dwellers as its most urgent task. In its major report on a planning scheme for the development of Sydney's suburbs in the post-war era, the Cumberland County Council (established by Labor in 1945) indicated that 40 000 inner suburban dwellings, or one third of the stock, required immediate replacement, with

three quarters in need of replacement within 25 years. It identified some 3000 acres, mainly in the inner city areas of Redfern, Surry Hills, Paddington (almost 80 per cent), Glebe and Balmain, that needed urgent clearance (CHC 1948, 7). An additional 67 000 dwellings were needed to house the city's 1½ million population (NSWHC Annual Report 1947,7). Ten years after publication of the Report, the Commission had cleared only 31 acres. Part of the shortfall may be explained by recent studies of slum areas which record the rise in the level of owner occupation in designated redevelopment zones. In 1952 only 10 per cent of families declined public housing offered but in Waterloo in the mid sixties, approximately one third sought private housing (Jones 1972, 82; Neutze 1973, 76).

The Commission viewed flats as the most economical dwelling to construct on the slum sites, allowing maximum land utilisation while taking account of existing infrastructure and the availability of manpower and materials. Prevailing opinion favoured three storey walk-up flats specifically designed to include an area of open space. The Commission told staff that increasing emphasis on the erection of multi-unit buildings on suitable sites in metropolitan areas was necessary 'to make the best use of building sites suited to this type of construction, particularly where essential services such as water, gas, electricity and sewerage have been readily available' (NSWHC 1950, 2).

Aware that flats had earned a reputation as dark, cramped living spaces, the Commission tried to forestall criticism of their decision by pointing out the merits of well-designed flats.

Bad conditions are not necessarily related to the height of a building or the number of families it houses. It is the space

between buildings that matters and consequently as buildings are made bigger, so the space between them should be made greater. In other words, there is no sound reason why a building should not be high provided the open space around it is sufficient (NSWHC 1950, 1).

The Commission justified the relative smallness of each flat in terms of the rental capacity of its tenants. Small flats, as long as they had a 'feeling' of spaciousness and made the best use of what space there was, were no disadvantage. Apparently innovations such as picture theatres, cheaper travel, the playing and watching of games out of doors, careers for women and day nurseries meant that the average family no longer spent as much time in the home. Consequently 'it is not now so desirable ... that a dwelling should be large in area and should provide a wide variety of rooms' (NSWHC 1950, 3).

The first Commission slum project commenced in 1947 in conjunction with the Sydney City Council on the area bounded by Devonshire, Marlborough, Clisdell and Belvoir Streets, Surry Hills. Prominent Sydney architects, Morrow and Gordon, drew up plans for eight blocks of three storey flats based on the 'star plan' popular in Sweden. Three flats grouped around a staircase on each floor allowed for courtyards on each side of the flats. The 184 two bedroom flats and 57 with one bedroom were to house the same number of families as they displaced, but by 1949 only 27 of the 241 flats were completed. Integral to the plan was the central courtyard, 150 yards by 50 yards, containing a community centre, tennis, volley and basket ball courts. Other amenities included a kindergarten, day nursery and children's play area. Land resumption costs reached £220 000, representing one third of the total cost, a figure not covered by commonwealth subsidies. The SCC was expected to share in the cost of providing recreational facilities and constructing perimeter streets but the financial arrangements were so

tenuous that by 1949 the Commission was pressing for 'clear cut arrangements with local authorities in regard to the sharing of costs and the provision of essential engineering services' (NSWHC Annual Report 1949, 8-9, SMH 29 April 1948).

Clearance of the first section of the Commission's second major scheme in Redfern, a total area of 109 acres bounded by Cleveland, Dowling, Phillip and Elizabeth Streets, began in 1947. Residents from the initial 200 demolished dwellings moved to the two and three bedroom flats recently completed in Erskineville. Two years later the first 42 flats out of a projected total of over 1400 were ready for occupation. In accordance with CCC proposals, population density dropped from 80 to 50 persons per gross acre. The flats were intended to accommodate a maximum of 3.8 persons per unit in contrast to the 4.3 persons the existing dwellings housed (NSWHC Annual Report 1949, 8).

The Commission concentrated its flat building in designated slum areas (Balmain, Redfern, Erskineville and Surry Hills) or in municipalities like North Sydney, Manly and Randwick (encompassing the suburbs of Maroubra and Kingsford) which already had many flats as a result of the 1930s explosion. (Table 3.1). The only new area it opened up was Parramatta. A small pocket of 50 flats (not listed in Table 3.1) at Narwee, on undeveloped land including an old quarry in the Canterbury municipality, foreshadowed the late 1950s when the Commission joined private developers in promoting suburban expansion along the Canterbury-Bankstown railway (cf. Cardew 1980, 86-7). By 1959 it had built 81 flats at Punchbowl and a further 50 flats at Villawood at the East Hills line, forming part of a housing estate begun in the 1940s.

Table 3.1 Principal Sydney suburbs for NSWHC flats at 1954

Suburb	Number completed by 1954
North Sydney	368
Balmain	263
Redfern	195
Manly	124
Maroubra	99
Parramatta	95
Kingsford	87
Surry Hills	83
Erskineville	72
Randwick	72

Source: NSWHC Annual Report 1954, 43

Commission flats generated both praise and criticism. Those built as part of slum clearance programmes represented the post war ideal in housing for inner city workers and few objected to the eradication of what were popularly regarded as unsightly rows of dilapidated, substandard terraces and cottages. Residents delighted in their sparkling new homes; parliamentarians on both sides of the House found it politically expedient to support the schemes while local councils and suburban dwellers were safely isolated from any adverse effects. Yet as soon as the Housing Commission planned to make inroads into middle ring suburbia and build flats alongside existing houses, an increasing proportion of which were owner occupied, suburban councils and rate/payers went on the offensive.

The Greenway Flats in North Sydney, named after the colony's first

government architect, proved the most controversial Commission flat project of the period and certainly one of the most visible. Critics seized on Greenway's unsympathetic appearance and its unprecedented and ever escalating cost to attack the scheme. Equally important were the unstated reasons. Greenway represented one of only two 1940s flat schemes not designed as part of a slum clearance programme and the first to be sited in a predominantly middle class suburb albeit one which also housed many working class tenants in decayed boarding houses. Moreover it was the first high rise block of flats ever contemplated by a public housing instrumentality and reflected a tentative move towards a policy utterly opposed to the demonstrated Australian preference for suburban cottages. Clive Evatt, Minister for Housing, attempted to brush aside this fear when he assured Australians that despite the North Sydney high rise flats, such flats 'would not be a permanent feature of Government policy' (SMH 28 October, 1947).

North Sydney council complained bitterly that the plans were not in accordance with local government regulations. The Commission ignored council, secure in the knowledge that the Local Government Act could not be used to obstruct it. Turning the attack back on council, the Commission stated 'the council apparently proposes to waste its rate-payers's money in a futile attempt to obstruct the Commission ... North Sydney Council will receive little public sympathy in its desire to have erected flats of a more ornate appearance than the Commission proposes' (SMH 18 Dec 1947).

The four connecting blocks, two of 11 storeys with lifts, one of three storeys and one of five storeys (without lifts) designed by Morrow and Gordon, took five years to build, three years longer than anticipated. The last tenants did not move in until 1954 by which time cost of the 309 flats (192 one bedroom and 117 two bedroom) had reached £1 m. The President of the

NSW Real Estate Institute called the figure 'fantastic'. 'For a Government pledged to house the average working man and his family the expenditure of such a colossal amount of money for a privileged few is beyond comprehension' (SMH 22 March 1951). The average cost per flat, £3236, compared unfavourably with the average cost of a new Commission brick veneer house which was £2500 (NSWHC Annual Report 1954, 18).

The 'privileged few' were originally selected by ballot. They paid £3 10s weekly for a one bedroom flat, £4 10s for a two bedroom flat with views of the harbour. The figures were comparable with average weekly rentals for private unfurnished flats in Woollahra (Census 1954). Allegations of corruption over the ballot abounded. Labor members were accused of vote-catching to safeguard the swinging seat of North Sydney and loading the ballot with their nominees. It certainly seems strange that for the 309 flats available, only 320 names went into the hat. Evatt strongly denied the accusations. During parliamentary question time he stated 'The Government has never countenanced political considerations in the allocation of dwellings. Housing Commission homes are allocated by ballot ... there is nothing more democratic than the ballot system, which is the foundation of democracy' (NSWPD, 21 Aug 1952, 161). The Sun Herald in a front page article headed 'Unrest Over Ballots. Housing Minister Evades The Sun-Herald's Questions on Tenancies', sought clarification from Evatt and a number of tenants. The Minister refused to comment but Greenway residents, Mr T C Birch, Evatt's car driver, a Mr and Mrs Haycock who knew Mr Evatt 'slightly' and Mr S A Lloyd, a former colleague in Parliament, all denied that Mr Evatt had used his influence on their behalf (SMH 8 March 1954).

The position of accountant S A Lloyd caused particular concern. Former alderman for Enfield (1928-38) and UAP Member for Concord (1932-1941), Lloyd

formed a close association with Evatt through his parliamentary activities and work with the RSPCA (Evatt was president in 1952). Lloyd secured a seventh floor flat in Greenway and enjoyed panoramic harbour views at a modest rental though whether he qualified on a means test basis is dubious. He also founded, apparently with Evatt's blessing, the Greenway Tenants' Association, an organisation which one newspaper alleged was 'obstructing Housing Commission officers in their endeavours to ensure good management of those establishments (Herne Bay and Greenway)' (SMH 8 Mar 1954). Lloyd claimed that the Association 'wasn't formed to petition the Government for better conditions ... It is purely an organisation of people with pride who want to beautify their surroundings.' (Australasian Post 8 Apr 1954, 16). Mrs McAviney, widow of Greenway's first Resident Manager, former Housing Officer Henry 'Bill' McAviney, disagreed. The Association harrassed her husband, calling on him to resign so that Lloyd, whom she described as 'Evatt's man' could take his place (McAviney interview 1983).

Homco, the staff journal of the Commission, confirmed her statement when it paid tribute to McAviney on his retirement in 1970 after seventeen years at Greenway.

Some three hundred residents of Greenway gathered on the lawn in the courtyard to convey their expressions of goodwill and to say farewell to the retiring Resident Manager, Mr H (Bill) McAviney ... This scene was in marked contrast to other gatherings which had taken place in the early years at Greenway where a small number of residents, aided and abetted by some non-residents, actively and selfishly campaigned and demonstrated against the Commission and its Manager (Homco Vol 3 no 7 Mar 1970, 5).

Undercurrents of mistrust between public service officials and the politicians made life difficult for the McAvineys.

It was like a wild west show. No one knew what sort of a life it'd be like. We had all sorts of trouble ... wild parties, drinking,

neighbours quarrelling ... There were 28 evictions in those first three years, including one SP bookie. (McAviney interview, 1 Feb 1983).

Commission staff expressed their dissatisfaction with Evatt's administration and what they perceived as his interference in Commission affairs. Chairman J M Bourke resigned three times in the first six months of Greenway. When Evatt himself resigned in April 1954, Mrs McAviney recollects her husband returning to their flat and saying 'He's gone. I can now start to manage' (McAviney interview 1983).

North Sydney council also came into conflict with the Commission over its decision in 1949 to refuse permission for three storey blocks of flats at Atchison Street, Crows Nest and Lavender Street, North Sydney. In what came to be regarded as a test case, the Commission appealed against the decision under Section 12A of the Local Government Act (interim development plan) and the Court held that the Crown was not bound by building ordinances. The 3 one bedroom and 15 two bedroom flats at 59 Atchison Street were completed later in the year and the 6 two bedroom flats at 62 Lavender Street were completed in 1950. The decision had widespread ramifications for Sydney's suburban councils in the late forties and early fifties.

Commission flats on the Archbold Estate, Roseville, in an area set aside as flat-free went ahead despite Kuringai council's objections and complaints in Parliament by the member for Gordon (SMH 11 Nov 1949). Waverley council found itself powerless to prevent the erection of Commission flats on half an acre of land on the corner of Ramsgate Avenue and Wairoa Avenue, Bondi, in what was already a dense flat area. Aldermen opposed the four blocks (three of three storeys and one of five storeys), arguing that with no incinerators, bathrooms of below standard size, walls not the required

thickness and no back stairway in case of fire, the flats failed to comply with building regulations (SMH 5 October 1951). Building went ahead regardless, at a cost of £200 000.

With no hope of preventing the constructing of Commission flats, residents resorted to expressing their dissatisfaction by protest boycotts. The Henley Ratepayers' and Progress Association organised a successful walk out from a ceremony to mark the opening of 30 Commission one bedroom flats overlooking Glades Bay, situated in the wealthy suburb of Hunters Hill. Only 25 attended the unveiling, presided over by Evatt, Minister for Housing. H R Lambert, a Henley resident and council alderman echoed residents' fears that one bedroom flats would attract a doubtful element. 'The sociological impact of thirty childless couples residing temporarily in a locality where practically every house contains children, will not be in the best interests of the district.' (SMH 25 Apr 1949).

The Sydney City Council was the only local council to undertake its own flat projects, in part because the majority of 'slum' areas were found within its boundaries. In addition to those built in conjunction with the Commission, the SCC completed four main projects by 1958. All consisted of three storey walk up flats. The largest project of 76 flats in 12 blocks in Surry Hills was built as part of the Commission scheme on a site bounded by Riley, Devonshire, Marlborough and Lansdowne Streets. Other projects at Glebe (38 flats), Camperdown (62 flats) and Pyrmont (44 flats) cost between £100 000 and £158 000 and were mainly financed from the sale of council owned properties. The first of numerous schemes for the chequered Woolloomooloo project came before council in the early 1950s. The area under debate consisted of 82 acres bounded by Sir John Young Crescent, William

Street, Riley Street, Lincoln Crescent, Brougham Street and Cowper Wharf Road. It housed upwards of 5500 people. One of the early plans comprised 38 three storey blocks of flats but opposition from Civic Reform Alderman led to the first high rise proposal for 70 blocks of seven and eight storeys each with 28 flats to be built at an estimated cost of £8 m (SMH 23 Sept 1951). More than twenty years elapsed before an acceptable compromise emerged. No other slum clearance scheme in Sydney had such a long and turbulent history.

The Commission made a significant contribution to flat building throughout the fifties but particularly prior to 1954 and the relaxation of rent control legislation. By 1954 the Commission built 2358 flats in Sydney accounting for nearly half of all new flats constructed between 1949 and 1954. Yet the overall effect on the cityscape of both the Commission flats and the private flats was negligible. Numerically they were insignificant compared to the number of new houses built and physically they were mostly discreet, if unimaginative three storey walk-ups, which lacked the dominant presence of later high rise blocks. Row upon row of terra cotta tiled bungalows, 60 000 of them in all, attracted far more attention than 4000 new flats.

The bungalow ethic that took hold in the twenties was reinforced in the fifties but with a significant difference. The ideal of house ownership was now an affordable reality for almost all of the middle class and much of the working class. The 1950s was a tempting time to buy a house, even for tenants on low rents. Neutze notes that the average number of years of average male earnings needed to buy a house in Redfern was 1.6 years in 1947

but only 1.1 years in 1956 (Neutze 1973, 110). Up to 1947 home ownership in Sydney remained virtually static at around 40 per cent. By 1954 nearly 60 per cent of all private dwellings were owned or were in the process of being purchased. Nearly all of them were houses. By 1961 71 per cent of all dwellings were owned or purchased, again nearly 96 per cent of them were houses (Census).

All levels of government actively reinforced the cult for house ownership: local government by turning a blind eye to building regulation infringements, especially from owner-builders; the state government by releasing land on the urban fringe for house development and offering low interest loans; and the federal government by regulating bank interest rates, by allowing tenants to buy their Commission houses on a minimum cash deposit and by offering cheap housing loans for ex-servicemen. The generous terms of the 1956 Commonwealth/State Housing Agreement did not apply to tenants who wanted to buy their Commission flats. This decision meant that Commission flats have never been able to shed their tawdry image.

Throughout the 1950s the Commission remained firmly committed to the ideal of house and garden. Flats were only built as part of slum clearance schemes or in high land value areas. Despite the fact that the blocks were solidly built, substantial affairs, better constructed than thousands of the mass-produced weatherboard houses and galvanised iron roofed fibro cottages typical of the era, Commission flats never lost their stigma. The fact that they were all occupied by tenants confirmed their low status while the unconsciously apologetic attitudes of the Commission merely fuelled the notion that flats were second rate dwellings occupied by second rate people.