

Learning from the past 100 years

Presentation by Dr Alan Roberts to the Canberra Museum+Gallery panel discussion '2013-2113 – the next great 100 Canberra Houses'(in association with the exhibition 'Home in Time'), 4 March 2016

I thought it would be helpful, in this discussion of the next 100 great Canberra Houses, if I review briefly the prehistory of the architecture to come. In our book *100 Canberra Houses. A Century of Capital Architecture*, Tim Reeves and I identified two phases which are particularly relevant to the architecture to come.

The first began around 1965, after the enormous push to expedite house construction that was initiated by the National Capital Development Commission. Between 1965 and 1982 – and these were boom years - the emphasis began to change away from building houses as quickly and cheaply as possible for the thousands of people coming to Canberra and needing a home.

While the bulk of suburban construction continued to be conventional, driven by developers who felt little need for architects, a number of significant innovations in subdivision and housing design were tried in this period.

The quest for affordable housing became a recurrent theme of the Canberra experience. Robert Warren experimented with a system of prefabrication by designing standard construction elements of new materials that could be made in a factory and assembled on site in a variety of configurations. The sole example was the famous circular Shipard House in Watson. But his design raised questions: did it 'look like a real house'? Would it be as durable as a house made of conventional materials and systems? Most potential customers were unconvinced, and archaic building practices continued. The industrialisation of domestic building remains an objective for the future.

Other innovations proved more popular. 'Merchant builders' became major players in housing construction. Pettit + Sevitt, for example, provided project houses that were standardised and affordable but a cut above the usual offerings, being clean-lined, functional and elegant. Another designer-developer was Gary Willemsen, Canberra born and bred, who focused on clustered townhouses that were light, open and optimised passive solar heating.

With the introduction of unit or strata titles, Swinger Hill was designed in 1961 as an integrated medium density development of terraces and courtyard houses. It was the first in Australia to achieve a density of 16 persons per hectare and in a manner that won wide public acceptance. The success of 'alternative lifestyle housing' at Swinger Hill led to people developing medium density cooperative projects in which they

would be closely involved in both planning and subsequent management. Urambi Village and Wybalena Grove were the two outstanding examples.

The development of environmentally sustainable low energy housing took a step forward with the Coward House in Waramanga in 1969. The publication in 1972 of the Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* and the 1973 oil scare highlighted the importance of environmental issues in house design. Many of Coward's strategies have become standard practice.

There was a notable trend to architect-designed houses that were more responsive to the natural environment, which has come to be known as the Organic style. Alastair Knox, the doyen of mud brick architecture, designed an outstanding example at Wallaroo overlooking the Murrumbidgee River. Similarly, Bert Read and Laurie Virr are both highly individual Canberra architects whose houses make extensive use of natural materials, blend with their environments, and do not obtrude.

A change was discernible in the second period that Tim and I discerned, from 1983 up to the time when we finished our book - 2013. During that time, the nation became increasingly wealthy, which was reflected in the housing of Canberra as elsewhere. At the same time, the size of the average block in new subdivisions shrank markedly and a substantial market arose for dense townhouse development. Australian houses gained the distinction of being on average the biggest in the world, fuelled by a desire for extra bedrooms, a study, a media or games room – rooms devoted to more specialised purposes than in the past. Canberra has many of these houses, yet the average size of Canberra houses has declined since 2000.

I particularly want to stress one outstanding feature of housing of this period: a growing divergence, between houses that are growing ever larger and more opulent, and houses that seek greater environmental sustainability by being smaller, better adapted to the environment, with better solar orientation, and making better use of less land. This, I think, will be the major issue of the future, and a point of major difference between architects and builder-developers.

High rise apartment living in the inner city and inner town centres has increased since the early 2000s but the relative costs of servicing high rise and outer suburban block living is an issue. A compromise has been the trend to dual occupancy of inner city blocks. The quest continues for energy efficient and affordable houses, especially for first home buyers, making good house design accessible to everyone, not just for the elite. Houses continue to be built that are 'organic' in their materials and responsiveness to their natural environment. These are not mutually exclusive aims; they are frequently present in the one residence.

Bryan Dowling designed the 15 storey Kingston Tower in Kingston, completed in 1986, the first high rise residential development in Canberra since the Currong Flats of 1959. The Canberra market was not then ready for high rise living. But the construction of Space: The Residence in Turner, constructed in 2005-07, heralded a boom in medium density apartment living for owner-occupiers wanting to downsize

from their cottages and backyards. Being built close to shopping centres, they are fulfilling NCDC objectives of the 1960s that had been sacrificed to developer demands.

The construction of Harry Seidler's *Lakeview* apartments at Yarralumla, 1982-84, was another indication of Canberra building to meet the high end of the property market. They were spacious and stylish, described as the 'finest townhouses in Canberra'. The Pepper Houses in Fadden and Yarralumla, the Blue House in Fadden Hills, the Griffith House in Forrest and the Harvey House in Griffith are a few of the many large, fine and expensive houses, some replacing government housing of the 1950s and '60s.

The Hendry Taylor and Chandler Spinks Houses illustrate the trend towards dual occupancy developments behind older houses in inner city blocks. Typically they are at least partially two-storey to make more intensive use of the building footprint and lessen its impact on the garden.

The Hanley House of 1987 in Wanniasa was a thoroughgoing attempt to achieve energy efficiency in an earth-sheltered house. The owner-designer-builder, Paul Hanley, is an expert in his field. He and Laurie Virr have made a strenuous effort to influence government policy on energy efficiency in house design though with limited success to date.

The Coward and Hanley initiatives have been followed in different ways by other Canberra architects: Geoff Lovie's minimalist house, Ric Butt emphasised energy efficiency with his Platypus and e-House exhibition homes, and Andrew Verri and his partners in their Franklin exhibition home. Derek Wrigley similarly crusades to promote retrofitting of existing houses and has developed a design for new houses that incorporates an integrated system of water conservation, electricity and hot water generation, buoyancy ventilation, heating and cooling, with a predicted energy efficiency rating of 9.3 out of 10 compared to less than 5 for most houses.

The quest for low cost housing continues with increasing sophistication. Many of the houses in the final section of our book show that the joy of living in a well-designed house is as great as ever. The Lovie House in Jerrabomberra shows the potential for an engaging idiosyncrasy. Lovie wanted to do his own thing, to make his home a fun living environment that would satisfy his taste for whimsy and flamboyance. And three of the organic houses we look at made a point of connection with the night sky.

The next 100 great Canberra houses, whatever they are, will continue to build on the trends I have outlined here.