

14 Terrace houses - townhouses of the 19th century

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In the early colonies settlers built small versions of what later became famous as the Australian bungalow. With the prosperity of the Gold Rush, the growth of towns into cities and before the advent of suburban trains, trams and private cars, the new middle class of the 1870s moved into the townhouses we now call terrace houses. They became a distinctive Australian style.

THEY'RE FAMOUS FOR THEIR CHARM

Australian terrace houses are famous for their charm which results from the elegant proportions of their windows and doors, the cast iron decoration, the interior plaster mouldings, and because we have streets and streets of them, resulting in some of the finest residential urban streetscape Australians have built. There are good reasons to be proud of them, to preserve them, to enjoy them, and if they suit your lifestyle, and your pocket, to live in them.

LIVING WITH HISTORY

The Victorian terrace houses, along with the Victorian mansions, the Federation style villas, the Colonial farmhouses, and the Queensland verandah style, represent the most distinctive historic residential architectural heritage we possess.

Architecture, for those not interested in biographies of governors, politicians, union bosses and other erstwhile local heroes, is the easiest and one of the most pleasant ways of reading the history of our nation. How we built and today build, tells us much about who we are and were, and how we try and tried to impress others and ourselves.

Buying a terrace house is a step backwards in time to the standards, preferences and lifestyles of the 1870s and 1880s, to the wealth that came from gold and wool, to Australia as part of the British Empire, and to a world dominated by the first flush of successful prefabricated cast iron and plaster mouldings. The last made possible rich decoration at a cost the newly emerging middle class could afford.

RESPECTING THE PAST

The decision to buy a terrace house is, consciously or unconsciously, a decision to live with history. It requires respect for and acceptance of the decisions made a hundred or so years ago about size, shape and arrangements of rooms, windows and doors, the design and detail of verandahs, columns, skirtings, architraves, cornices and ceilings.

It may mean, if you live in Sydney, that the bathroom and the laundry have the best view. There can be few cities in the world where more 19th century houses turned their backs on so many million dollar views.

CAN YOU PARK THE CAR?

Parking the car on the street because the Victorians didn't have cars to worry about will be the norm. Of course, as households have moved to two and three cars, it also involves the difficulties finding any place to park at all.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION ORDERS

It could mean living with an historic preservation order imposed by the local Council or State Government. This will often severely restrict the way you can alter the house. These orders are the concrete expression of coming face to face with the bureaucracy of living with history. They should be checked carefully if you have any intentions of altering the house. Better to know the limitations before buying than run into the restrictions when trying to reshape the house to suit your own 20th century ideas. It is sometimes difficult to find a marriage of the two, acceptable both architecturally, and to the local Council. You may need an architect's help to sort out the stylistic issues and the Council's concerns over site coverage, height lines, setback lines, building envelopes, and the like. All of which are quite technical and often complicated.

POCKET-SIZE GARDENS

Buying Victorian terraces means buying Victorian ideas about back alleys, tiny backyards and miniscule front gardens. The back alleys were, of course, to deliver coal, take away night soil and provide places for street urchins to play. Today they are leftover space of marginal use to anybody, unless they are wide enough to drive a car along, and allow you to turn into your backyard. Of course, the carparking space may take up half the yard.

These yards in the 'good old days', were used for drying clothes. They can, with some rearrangement of internal rooms, be made accessible to the living room, and thus turned into a courtyard suiting our modern urban lifestyle. We tend to like our family-living room to face away from the street into the backyard. The Victorians tended to want the parlour to be next to the front door. We are more open in our lifestyle and take our friends into the heart of our house, and on a sunny day, into our backyard. This change in lifestyle and values can often require some simple but ingenious juggling to adapt the house to 20th century preferences.

If you're into front gardens, the terrace house is not really going to give you much opportunity to express yourself. In fact, it is not possible to garden on anything other than a vest-pocket size, in the spaces the Victorians chose to keep as private townhouse gardens. Possibly, because they put much of their energy into creating the great urban parks that spread across the older parts of our cities, they felt less need to have gardens around their townhouses. We, of course, often feel quite differently, and in a terrace house, have to approach gardening in the way of the Japanese, making a little go a long way.

Your lifestyle will not only be constrained by all this history, but also by the fact that you are buying into medium-density housing, where the basic design issues are no different from those set out in Chapter 15 'Townhouses and villas'. In that chapter you will find check lists for the problems of sunlight, privacy, ventilation and views; security, noise and neighbours; and how to prepare yourself in order to make the decisions necessary in adjusting to living at a higher density.

While terrace houses are, in some ways, quite different from the modern townhouse, the basic issues covered in Chapter 15 concerning good design, also apply to terrace houses. In some ways, terrace houses meet many of these design criteria better than our contemporary townhouses. This is possibly one of the reasons why they have been so eagerly sought after.

HOW WELL BUILT IS IT?

If we believe the stories, things were always better built in the old days. Don't you believe it. If you have seen enough buildings during alterations, you know that there were good, average, bad and terrible constructions in the 'good old days'.

So how will you know if this 100-year-old terrace you are contemplating buying is as well-built as the agent and the fresh coat of paint seems to suggest? The answer is that you may not be able to find out unless you are a builder or architect. So seek their advice in checking the quality of that expensive piece of history you have just fallen in love with. Also read Chapter 13, 'Buying to Alter', especially the section 'Hidden Problems'.

RESTORATION

Over the decades, buildings decay, and are altered by generations of owners and occupiers. Many of these alterations are often unsympathetic to the original quality and character of the architecture.

To restore a building to its original standard is often time-consuming, costly, requiring special architectural skill, and sometimes contradictory to present building regulations and lifestyle preferences. It is not a job that an amateur can easily take on. Fortunately, there are now architects who have specialised and established a reputation in just such restoration work. They are well known through historic trust circles, and the various State Chapters of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects.

If your aspirations are towards historic restoration, it is wise to contact such architects and seek their advice.

IF YOU PLAN TO ALTER

A terrace house is no different to any other house if you plan to alter it. Chapter 13, 'Buying To Alter' applies as equally to terrace houses as to the 1950s' triple-fronted bungalow.