

15 Townhouses and villas

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In the latter half of the 20th century, Australians adopted a new form of housing called townhouses and villa units. Or so they thought. Actually what really happened is terrace houses were put on top of, or behind car parking spaces and the back alleys turned into driveways. Nobody knew it at the time, but a good old Australian tradition was re-invented.

CONTINUING A 19TH CENTURY TRADITION

Townhouses and villa units are becoming increasingly common in Australian cities and towns. In many respects, they are contemporary versions of the 19th century terrace house.

Unlike home units and high-rise apartment buildings, where it is often difficult to tell where one unit starts and another ends, townhouses and villas still retain some recognisable individuality. Usually they do not contain lifts. Often they have wide balconies, decks, small gardens and dividing walls which are similar to the 19th century terrace house.

ADVANTAGES OF TOWNHOUSES AND VILLAS

The primary advantage of townhouses and villas are similar to those of terrace houses:

- Each unit is easily identified.
- The living room has access to a deck, balcony, small garden or terrace.
- They are generally closer to ground level than many flats or home units.
- Often a fragmented arrangement of walls and roofs, makes the total building seem less bulky.
- To sum up, they are more like a house than a flat.

DENSITY

In choosing to buy a townhouse or villa unit, you are choosing to live at five to ten times the density of suburban housing.

This is the one single factor which will impact more than anything else on your residential amenity and lifestyle.

As a consequence you will have more neighbours living closer to you. There is a likelihood of increased noise, less privacy, more cars, smaller private gardens, more people coming and going at odd hours. There is also less likelihood that all of

your neighbours will have lifestyles similar to your own, more of a risk that young children will get on older neighbours' nerves, less storage outside the interior of your home, more restrictions on any alterations you may want to make to the exterior, and so on.

This is simply the way it has to be. Increased density has those kinds of impacts on lifestyle and amenity. In checking out town-houses and villa units, you need to pay special attention to these sorts of issues, otherwise you may find yourself disappointed and frustrated.

PREPARING YOURSELF

If you've never lived in townhouses, flats or home units, which many Australians haven't, it is important to think carefully about the differences you may find.

SMALLNESS

Townhouses and villa units tend to be smaller than suburban houses. This usually arises from the developer's desire to take maximum advantage of the number of units the Council's planning codes allow on the site. Council codes often set minimum sizes for one, two and three bedroom units, and developers try to keep the size down to the code limits to increase the number of units on the site. You'll generally be buying somewhat smaller rooms, and somewhat tighter planning than you would expect in the typical suburban house. It's important to check the minimum space your furnishing arrangements require.

GARDENS

You will obviously have less, or next to no garden to look after. Even if the total complex has a lot of common garden, it will be maintained by the Body Corporate, the management organisation of all the owners. If you're a keen gardener, you'll have to change your interests to pot plants, indoor plants and planting beds, or find other hobbies.

STORAGE

When it comes to storage you need to measure your needs carefully. There is no attic, area under the house, garden shed, back verandah or spare room in a townhouse. Make a list of all your current storage areas, their size and capacity, and see how much you can do without. While there may be lock up storage associated with the garages, it may be three flights of stairs and 50 metres from your front door.

ALTERING IT

If you like fiddling with your house, adding a pergola here, a trellis there, a new doorway between rooms, laying tiles on the terrace, repainting the windows, you can forget it. Anything to do with alterations to the exterior, or to structural walls or floors, will be subject to approval by the Body Corporate, which means all your property-owning neighbours. It's unlikely they'll agree to significant alterations or additions.

CHILDREN

Children will find it quite different living in townhouses or villa units and so will their parents. In the suburban house there is always the backyard in which children can play. In the townhouse or villa unit, there is either the balcony or small garden, or the common grounds. The latter may be down a flight of stairs, around a corner, and next to a neighbour's living room, all of which can be annoying. For parents with small babies, or older teenagers, it probably doesn't matter much. For those with children from toddler to teen-age years, it can make for some adjustments in family life, and affect the relationships between parents and children.

YOUR OWN CHECKLIST OF PRIORITIES

Make yourself a checklist of priorities and needs. Re-read Chapter 12, 'Buying housing—a chapter for everybody', especially the section— 'Your Own Check List'. Use the same approach.

Also review the rules in Chapter 12 for 'Inspecting the Property'. They apply equally to checking out townhouses and villas.

FEATURES YOU SHOULD CHECK

ENTRIES, DRIVES, GARAGES, VISITOR CARPARKING, STORAGE, GARBAGE, NIGHT LIGHTING, SIGNS AND RAIN SHELTER

It may seem strange to lump these all together, but they are the front side of your prospective home, and involve some important questions.

Check the following:

- How easy is it to drive in and out?
- Is the street busy?
- Can you see oncoming traffic as you drive out?
- Will it be difficult to manoeuvre your car on the driveway and into your garage or carport?
- Do you have to get out of the car to open the garage door?
- Is the garage big enough?
- Does it contain lockable storage?
- Where do you wash your car?
- Where do visitors park? How many can park there?
- If you have a trailer, windsurfer, catamaran, boat, bicycle, motorcycle, where do you park or store it?
- What is the night lighting like? Obviously you'll have to come back at night to check, but can you see well enough for safety and security?
- Where are the garbage cans kept, and how far will you have to carry garbage from your unit?
- Are the signs easy to find and follow, especially at night? Remember, your friends will want to find you in your new unit.
- Can you get from the garage to your entry without going out in the rain?
- How far will you have to carry shopping from the car to the unit entry, and up how many steps?

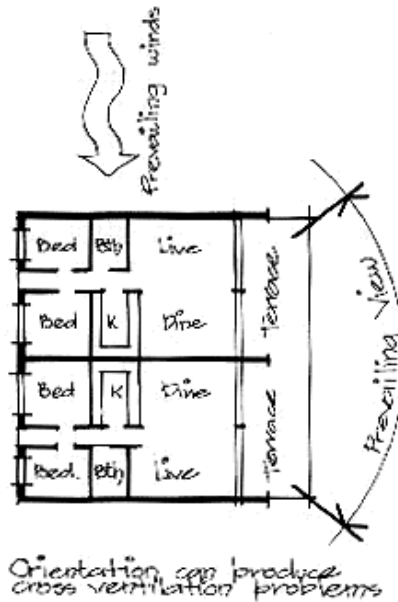
SUNLIGHT

When you're shown into the unit, walk out onto the balcony, or terrace, and check the direction of north, east and west (remember your compass). Have a look at the shadows cast by the eaves or deck above. How much sun is coming into the living room, or is likely to, in winter, and on a hot summer afternoon.

Remember this balcony or terrace, and the living room, are the only places you will be able to enjoy the sun. You also don't want to bake on a hot summer afternoon.

Unless you like winter chill, or summer afternoon heat, try to get this primary solar relationship right. It makes the world of difference to life lived at the density of townhouses or units.

Check to see if the terrace or living room are going to be overshadowed by neighbouring parts of the building. You'll be living with those shadows for a long time.



PRIVACY

Privacy is something that is easily invaded when living at the density of townhouses or villas.

Look to see whose windows, doors, decks and gardens you can look into, and figure out if they can look back into this unit. If neighbours can easily look into the unit are you going to mind keeping the curtains pulled and the blinds down to maintain privacy?

VENTILATION

With only two external walls, cross ventilation is not always as good as in suburban houses.

If you have done your homework, discovering from which direction the winds blow, you should be able to check the likelihood of good cross-ventilation.

If the building is side on to the prevailing winds, cross-ventilation may be lessened.

VIEWS

Are you being sold the glory of the views? If so, will a new building opposite block them out, or will trees grow to screen it.

The possibility of a new building being built can be checked by taking the addresses of the adjoining properties, and talking with the Council planning department to see if the land is zoned for town-houses or high-rise flats, or could be rezoned. If so, it is best to assume that sooner or later the view may be built out unless your unit is well up the hill or elevated.

SECURITY, NOISE AND NEIGHBOURS

SECURITY

Unfortunately security is becoming a pressing concern in many areas, including around townhouses and villas. Designing buildings for security is often difficult, and the methods of criminals and surveillance systems regularly change and evolve.

If security is a real concern, seek advice from a commercial security company.

But to begin with, check the following:

- Is the night lighting in public areas adequate?
- Are these areas overlooked by many neighbours? The possibility of being seen is some deterrent.
- Is it easy to climb onto or into your balconies, terraces, decks or gardens?
- Are there deadlocks on external doors, effective windows locks and a chain bolt on the front door?
- Is there a spy lens in the front door?
- Is the locality known for burglary or assault?

We don't want to live in a fortress but at the same time we want to feel safe in our own home.

NOISE

Unwelcome noise is one of the most frequently heard complaints from people living in higher density housing.

Unfortunately you may not hear annoying noises during an ordinary inspection.

There are two kinds of noise problems, external and internal.

Adjoining roads may be heavily trafficked, the building may be near a railway line, under a flight path, just near traffic lights from which vehicles will be accelerating, or adjoining commercial premises that are open late at night. All of these may be sources of unwelcome noise, and can usually be observed at time of inspection.

Internal noise is less easy to predict but some things can be checked:

- Are bathrooms in adjoining units back to back, or under or above each other, so that plumbing noises are at least concentrated together? Likewise for kitchens.
- Do any windows of bedrooms open opposite other units' living rooms? If so, loud music may directly affect your sleep.
- Are the buildings in the complex very close to each other? If so, noise may echo more strongly off walls.
- Are driveways, in particular those climbing to exits, under your windows, especially bedroom windows? If so, car noise may bother you.

You should expect it to be noisier. The density simply makes for more noise. But check the above, and if noise bothers you, be careful about looking at these details.

You won't be able to avoid hearing some of what your neighbours are up to. Some of us actually like to listen in, as long as it doesn't get so loud as to annoy us.

NEIGHBOURS AND THE BODY CORPORATE

Probably, your neighbours will be your Body Corporate, the management organisation for the building. Those who are renting, of course, are not members of the Body Corporate, but the owners of rented units are.

As a result of corporate title, you will be required to have formal, if not informal, relations concerning property maintenance, rates, etc. You should seek legal advice concerning the Body Corporate's management before deciding to buy. The issues are complex involving such things as voting rights, and financial management. They can affect your use of common property and the amount you may have to contribute for periodic maintenance. Find a solicitor experienced in strata title contracts before you consider buying, and seek his/her advice on what to look for. Also re-read Chapter 5 on contracts.

Not only will you have more neighbours, they may be more varied. There can be singles, young couples with, and without, young children, middle-aged couples with teenagers, older couples and individuals. You may all have legal relations to each other through Body Corporate, and differing lifestyles and preferences.

It can add up to a richer diversity of social relations, or to heightened tensions, depending how you approach it. It is for such reasons that checking the design for privacy can be critical.

INTERNAL FURNISHINGS, LIGHT AND POWER POINTS

Can you fit your furniture into the rooms, move it in through the various stairs and corridors, and does your furnishing style go with the style of the building? Most townhouses, and villa units, tend to be built in what could be called 'the bland modern style'. If your furnishing style is out of keeping with this, you may have some interesting decorating challenges.

Pay special attention to light and power points as they are hard to change. The electrical conduits will be cast into concrete floors, and brick or concrete block walls. Note how many there are, their location and if there are sufficient for your needs. Adding new ones may not be easy.

GARDENS, BALCONIES AND TERRACES

While you might own your share of the common gardens through the Body Corporate, you may not feel comfortable using the lawn for your private barbecue in sight of many of your neighbours.

How big is the unit's private garden, balcony or terrace? Pace it out. Can you do what you want to on it, or in it? Will the garden table, chairs, pot plants, baby's water bath, sun lounge, barbecue and clothes drying rack, all fit on it, and still give you room to walk around? Does it drain properly? The last thing you want is flooding on the deck or in the courtyard overflowing into the living room.

As a guide, 3.5 x 1.8 metres is the smallest balcony or deck which can reasonably accommodate tables and chairs. Anything narrower than 1.8 metres is hard to use for an outdoor table setting.

Remember, this is your only private outdoor space. Is it large enough?

FIRST, AND PROFESSIONAL INSPECTIONS

Use the checklist 'Immediate Things You Should Check' in Chapter 12 'Buying Housing', when inspecting the property.

If you are seriously interested in buying consider the Royal Australian Institute of Architect's Residential Property Inspection Service.

GOOD DESIGN AND MEDIUM-DENSITY HOUSING

Townhouses and villas are relatively new forms of housing in Australia, and often difficult to design well. Developers, their designers, and architects, are still learning. Often the Council planning codes complicate rather than help the matter.

The margin for error is not as great as with the design of suburban houses, where, if it is not quite right, the owner can alter it later to improve things, or grow a tree to hide it. As townhouses are more complicated structures, and because of the fire safety requirements of building regulations as well as the limitations of Body Corporate organisations, it is rare that individual owners can do much about built-in design faults.

It is important that you pay special attention to the design when inspecting the property. Once you have bought, there may be little, if anything, you can do about things you didn't notice and now don't like.

Townhouses and villas can be great ways of living, and because they are often built closer to the centre of things, provide you with greater access to urban opportunities. But make certain you like the way it's been designed and built. It is unlikely that you will be able to alter it very much after you move in.