

16 Home Units

FLATS BY ANOTHER NAME	173
LITTLE REAL CHANGE	173
BASIC DESIGN RULES	174
CHEAPNESS VERSUS LIFESTYLE	174
THREE STOREYS UP	176
HOME UNIT OR TOWNHOUSE — DIFFERENCES	176

This is the one housing tradition that does not fit the Great Australian Dream. Australians voted with their feet when they could, and moved to the suburbs, leaving the flats behind in the inner city. But cities have a way of their own and units are now found everywhere. Whether we like it or not, home units are part of our heritage.

FLATS BY ANOTHER NAME

Australians have been building home units since the 1920s, but only figured out in the late 1950s and early 1960s that people would buy, as well as rent 'flats'. To distinguish the two, a new name 'home unit' was coined, and a new legal form of ownership, 'strata title' invented. This allowed individual owners to hold both separate and joint titles within the one building and property.

Little else changed. Instead of renters having financial and legal relationships to a landlord, home unit owners now had such relationships to each other. This introduced some new variations on squabbles between neighbours, and necessitated that the State Governments which introduced Strata Title laws also had to establish Strata Title Commissioners to act as arbitrators. In strata title disputes neither party could terminate the other's title to the home unit. It was a whole new learning experience for Australians finding out how to manage property held in common and also separately, for the benefit of all, as well as privately for oneself. Mostly, we have done a good job of it.

LITTLE REAL CHANGE

However, while they renamed flats and called them home units, little else changed. The buildings are still designed on the same principles of the three-storey walk-up flats of 19th century England and Europe, adapted to the fire, light and ventilation requirements of the Australian building codes. It also seems Australians have, in the 20th century, a preference for such residential flat or home unit buildings to stand apart, rather than be joined together in one long building as is the case with 19th century terrace houses. Planning and fire safety regulations, as well as sizes of properties, have also played their part in separating buildings.

While these building forms grew out of early building regulations, they also represent an economical method of building the maximum number of housing units on the one suburban-sized block of land. Limiting the height to three storeys eliminated the need for an expensive lift. Separating the buildings from one another allowed light and air on four sides instead of two. These principles still

apply today, and home units, whether rented or owned, are often the cheapest form of medium-density housing available.

BASIC DESIGN RULES

The basic design rules are quite simple. The illustration opposite shows a typical layout.

The problems come when we put a number of the same buildings side by side along the street.

Such an arrangement results in most flats looking out to the flats next door only 8 or 12 metres away, and at least half overlook the driveway.

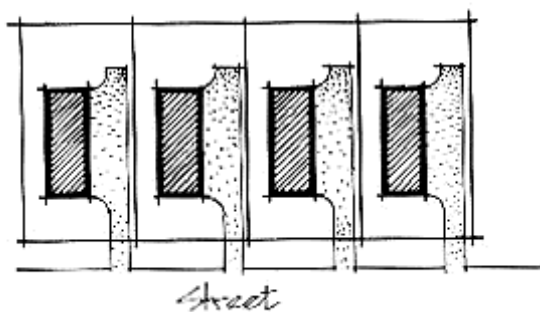
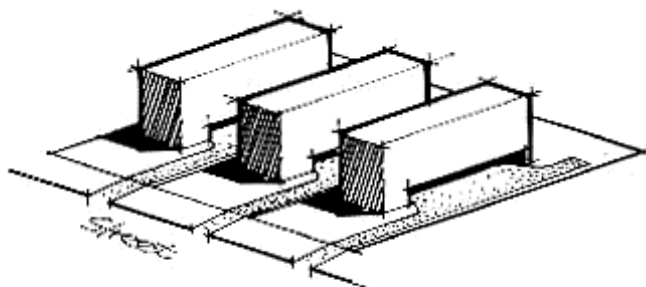
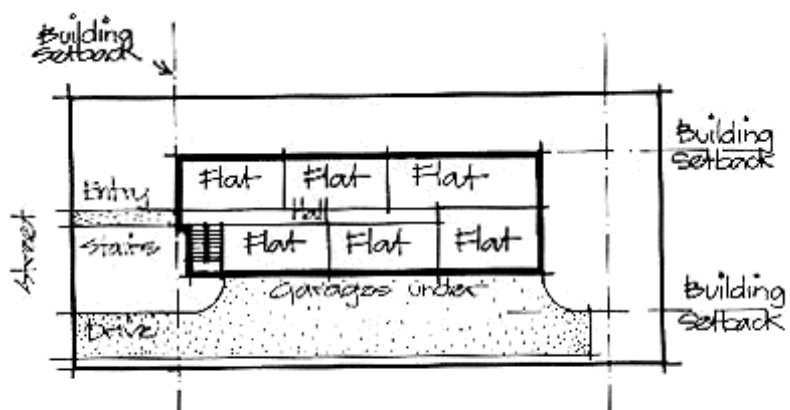
The restrictive size of the building block, usually an old suburban house site, often makes it next to impossible to provide good solar orientation to more than a small percentage of the units. It would seem that many home unit developers appear to be unaware of the occupants' needs for access to winter sun, or shade from hot summer sun. To be fair, the planning codes of many Councils give little incentive to design better units. The minimum standards they set often encapsulate past attitudes when flats were regarded as second-class housing.

CHEAPNESS VERSUS LIFESTYLE

All in all, the major advantage of flats and home units is that they represent the cheapest form of medium-density living that Australian society has been able to develop. As housing suitable for Australians in the latter half of the 20th century, they leave much to be desired, especially for families.

Australians have, for a long time, regarded flats and their latter day cousins, home units, as second best to the suburban house, and more recently, to the rediscovered terrace house and townhouse. Our reasons are not hard to fathom. The flat or home unit generally provides little, if any, private outdoor garden (a balcony or deck hardly compares), is often a noisier building to live in, has poorer outlooks (the neighbours' living room 12 metres or less away), and is often on a noisy street. At best, they have been seen as a stepping stone to the equity necessary to build a suburban home.

Yet, as our larger cities spread more and more, home units are likely to become the long-term residence of an increasing number of Australians. They have the advantage that they are often as cheap as the traditional suburban land-house package, and are also generally located closer to shops, transport, and the inner city.



If you're setting out to buy a flat or home unit, it pays to look carefully at how long you may end up living in it. Will it be for only a few years as a means of building up equity, or longer because of the reasons outlined in Chapter 2 'First, Choose Where to Live'. If it is for reasons of location you may be living there for many years. Your children may grow up in a 'unit'. Consequently, you need to think very carefully before choosing the actual unit. Australian flats or home units provide the least amenity of all our forms of housing.

THREE STOREYS UP

Traditionally, flats or home units were three-storey's walk up, with garages or carports under. This is still the case for the majority of home unit buildings, simply because lifts are expensive to build and to maintain.

Consequently, you can expect to get plenty of exercise bringing the groceries up from the car, and putting the garbage out, especially if you live on the top floor.

Unlike townhouses, or villas, you can expect your children when playing out of doors, to be out of sight, and a number of storeys below as well.

If the unit is not equipped with a dryer, or is an older style building containing a communal laundry, you will be walking up and down with the washing, and your clothes will be on a public line accessible to all. Theft of clothes is sometimes a complaint in home unit buildings.

It all adds up to more climbing, carrying, and possible running after, or worrying about, the whereabouts of children, or coping with their frustrations being cooped up in a unit.

HOME UNIT OR TOWNHOUSE—DIFFERENCES

The rules set out in Chapter 15 'Townhouses and Villas', apply equally to choosing a home unit and should be re-read carefully.

Home units, usually being three-storey, are simply blocky larger buildings. They look nothing like a traditional house. In combination with the adjoining home unit buildings, they may contain more residents, at a higher density, than townhouses. All this can mean more neighbours, cars, noise, and less privacy. It all depends on the design of the individual building unit and neighbouring buildings.

The essential trade-off is usually between cheaper accommodation in a home unit versus townhousing which can be more expensive, but provides you with your own garden, fewer neighbours and less climbing. In broad terms, we always get what we pay for, though within either type, there are better or worse designs. The rules described in Chapter 15 will, if applied carefully, buy you a better designed home unit if it's available in the area you are looking, and the price range you can afford. It will, of course, make the looking that much more frustrating and tedious. Hopefully, the outcome will be a more comfortable and livable 'home' unit.